Photo by Sam Arendt **Barely alive, nearly paralyzed after a bicycle accident, Cristin Van Driel of Grafton has come back as an elite athlete with the help of a machine that lets her run without the debilitating force of gravity.**

Despite three back surgeries and four knee operations in the past 2-1/2 years, Cristin Van Driel of Grafton is training as if she was competing in the Olympics.

Van Driel took up running after a horrific July 2, 2000, bicycle accident in which she sustained a concussion, numerous fractures to her spine, broken ribs, fractured ankles, cuts and bruises.

An equestrian at the time, Van Driel, then a senior at Concordia College of Wisconsin in Mequon, planned a career in the field and also wanted to be a world class runner.

But the accident changed her focus.

Van Driel was riding her bicycle on North Avenue near Elmbook Hospital in Wauwatosa when a

16-year-old girl swerved into her bicycle, hitting the rear tire.

“I was thrown into her windshield and tossed 20 feet, landing on the asphalt,” Van Driel said. “I had no feeling from my waist down for three hours and wondered if I would ever walk again. It was a very dark moment.

“That’s when it occurred to me I wanted to motivate others to be physically fit because being fit and healthy is the reason I wasn’t paralyzed. That’s why I wanted to use my gift of health to motivate others.”

She was in critical condition for several days at Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital in Wauwatosa. Her parents were told if she survived, she might be paralyzed from the waist down.

“My neurosurgeon said he has no explanation for why my spinal cord wasn’t severed, except that I was in such good physical shape and health,” Van Driel said.

Van Driel said she always loved to run barefoot in the grass as fast as she could.

“I love to run fast. It makes me feel free,” Van Driel said. “It makes me feel I can escape all the adversity when I’m out running, and that’s what helps me get through all these surgeries. Running is part of who I am.”

Van Driel started Ultimate Stamina after her accident to help athletes train smarter and others achieve whatever goal they set. She is a certified personal trainer, track-and-field coach and motivational speaker, but said her current training seems like a full-time job.

To compete with her injuries, Van Driel, now 32, pounds the pavement only during a race.

She does strength-training and works out on the anti-gravity treadmill, called the AlterG, three days a week at Froedtert Memorial Hospital’s Sports Medicine Center in Wauwatosa.

The machine, which looks like a treadmill encased in a plastic bag, uses air in a pressure-controlled chamber to lift the user. Van Driel can adjust the pressure to take anywhere from 10% to 100% of her weight off her spine and joints.

The device is based on technology developed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The machine, Ribar said, is good for rehabilitating most injuries and building up strength after surgery in people of all ages.

“This machine is perfect for Cristin,” said Mike Ribar, the center’s head athletic trainer and performance-endurance coordinator.

“It’s a hard, cold fact that she can’t put on the mileage training as most runners. If she didn’t have a piece of equipment like this, her running career would be over.

“I enjoy working with her. It requires every inch of my skill set to figure out how to get her through this.

“It helps that she’s a good person. She’s extremely grateful for the support we’re giving her.”

Ribar said he constantly reminds her to slow down and work smarter, not harder.

“She has the makeup of an elite athlete and recovers quickly, but some things you can’t rush,” he said.

Van Driel said she focuses on building her core strength, stamina, energy and general health. She recommends athletes eat a plant-based diet supplemented occasionally with fish.

“I tell them to think of food as fuel to provide energy and stamina,” she said.

“The night before a marathon, I suggest they eat a lot of sushi.”

Van Driel grew up in Cedarburg and attended private schools. Shortly after her accident, her parents moved to the Southwest.

Van Driel lived in several states before returning to the Grafton-Cedarburg area where she works with local professionals, athletes and friends.

When her pain became unbearable and her leg numb, surgery was needed.

In January 2010, a spinal fusion operation was performed in Wisconsin.

Her back pain was less and her leg felt almost normal, Van Driel said.

In October 2010, she qualified for the Boston Marathon. By November she was experiencing pain again and two more surgeries were performed. The last one was April 26.

“I look at each one of these rehabs as training for a race because it keeps me thinking positive. There were times I wanted to throw in the towel because it was too hard, too much pain,” Van Driel said.

“It’s been such a huge journey. I’ve had some great times, and I’ve had some very dark moments. Before each surgery, I wonder if I will walk again or have feeling in my leg.”

Van Driel now only cycles on trails.

“I’m very nervous on roads,” she said. “Just last week, I had two close calls that were almost identical to the accident.”

Van Driel has earned many medals, but she’s kept only the ribbons.

“At the end of each year, I pack them all up and donate them to ‘Medals4Mettle.’ It’s such a cool program. They give them to children and adults who have cancer or debilitating injuries,” she said.

“They can’t physically run, but they’re in the race for their life.”

Cristin says she prefers training alone or walking with friends for motivation. However, she encourages people to work out under the guidance of a trainer and join running, hiking or walking clubs.