

Middlebury

MAGAZINE

Why is This Woman Smiling?

Her dreams
of Olympic
gold shattered,
Tara McMenamy
Sheahan '82
should be devastated.

So why is she so happy?
For starters, she's alive.





For so long,
her life
was a
living nightmare,
but it was
the dream
that haunted her.

And it was time
to lay it to rest.

Requiem for a Dream

 BY DEVON O'NEIL '01

PHOTOGRAPH BY TED WOOD





UTSIDE, THE WIND HISSES and snowflakes drift through the dark mountain air as Tara Sheahan '82 gets ready for bed at 6,600 feet.

It is 10:30 on a frigid November evening in West Yellowstone, Montana, and Tara pads around a rented log cabin. Tomorrow is the

biggest Nordic ski race of her life.

While her husband Casey slumbers alongside their youngest son, 13-year-old Aidan, in one of the cabin's two beds, and 14-year-old Caelin nestles under a blanket of coats on the floor, Tara finishes the journal entry she has been working on, turns off the light and walks over to the sink to brush her teeth. She puts her arms on a windowsill and stares pensively into the blackness. An air purifier hums below the drone of Casey and Caelin's snoring. She hears none of it.

At 45, Tara had always been a long shot to make the Olympic Nordic team. But then again, if we were talking about a conventional story, she would have been gunning for gold in '84, when she was in her prime. She wouldn't have had to wait thirty years to pursue her dream.

But Tara Sheahan's life has been anything but conventional.

And so here she is in West Yellowstone.

Only now, on the eve of the race, she has another thought. Tomorrow, she won't be racing for a spot on the Olympic team or for the dream of Olympic gold. No, she will race to "honor her body." And also to honor her soul.

She brushes her teeth and slips under the covers. The room is hot and her mind is swirling; rest doesn't come easily. She gets about four hours of spotty sleep before waking at dawn. She meditates on her bed for 10 minutes, like she does every morning, then eats her breakfast in silence.

After donning her bright red Swix uniform and gathering her skis, Tara kisses her sons goodbye and jumps into the car with Casey for the five-minute ride to the race site. They say little, and then Tara blurts out "What the hell am I doing? I'm 45 years old!" They both laugh.

At the venue, Tara hops out of the car, says goodbye to Casey, and begins mapping out her strategy. Usually it would be, "bust your ass at the start, then survive," though today she plans on letting her body drive the pace. "You just tell me what you want," she tells herself. "You just tell me what you can do."

She narrows her ski quiver to two, and then takes each on a quick test run before selecting the set she will use in the race. The previous night, she had applied a glide wax base to the tips and heels, but now that she knows the conditions, she adds a kick wax underfoot. It is still snowy and blustery, meaning the grooved tracks could be stickier than usual.

The other racers hover near the start around Tara, and despite the strategy she has tailored, she can't escape the tense pre-race atmosphere.

Just when the pressure begins to creep into her psyche, "the clowns show up." Casey, Aidan, Caelin, and Casey's sister and nephew all shuffle clumsily over toward the start on cross country skis. For Tara, a tense, somber scene had turned comical, hilarious.

With her mind at ease, she prepares for the start. The starter tells her she can go "any time after five," and as he begins his

countdown, Tara rockets out of the chute before he gets to "three." She goes out harder than she had planned, but at the same time is conscious of what her body is telling her. She feels her heart and lungs, and tries to stay relaxed while winding through the undulating, tree-lined course.

She is racing well. Her transitions from one track to the next are smooth, and her efforts to "flow like water" correspond with fast skiing. Right at the end of the first of two 5-kilometer laps, a much younger racer from the University of Colorado passes her. Yet instead of freaking out, she marvels at the burly skier's technique. "That's beautiful," she says to herself.

Moments later, the voice in her head pipes up. "OK, this is the time. This is where you go. This is where you start to lay it down." Yet, for the first time in years, Tara ignores it. Instead, she continues skiing the way she planned: relaxed, at peace, intuitively. "I knew that if I listened to that voice," she said later, "I would've been doing it for somebody else."

The conditions worsen on the second lap, as the racers start slipping on the uphill sections and struggling to maintain speed on the downhills. Tara passes two women during the race and, save for the skier from CU, holds her position against those who started after her. As she crests the final hill, she feels strong, and when she coasts across the finish line, the clowns hurry to congratulate her. When they arrive, they flop around like ducks, stepping on her skis and making something of a scene. Tara chuckles at the sight, then proudly introduces her family, in particular her sons, to the other skiers as they mill around the finish area.

After the race, Tara checks the results sheet. She finished 25th overall, 16th among American women. It is slightly lower than where she has placed during her Olympic pursuit, but she doesn't care. She scarfs down a donut and a cup of hot cocoa, an indulgence she rarely allowed herself during the three-year run leading up to this race, and then returns to the log cabin. The next morning she drives 12 hours back to her home in Boulder, Colorado.

Later, she says, "I wanted to come out of that race and feel like my body was resilient and strong." She pauses, then adds: "And I knew that it was my last race."



HE HAD FELT THIS ONCE BEFORE. Just days after graduating from Middlebury in the spring of 1982, Tara—then named Tara McMenamy—believed she had left skiing for good. She grew up all but possessed by the sport, held hostage by the longing to be the best cross country racer in the world—and the fear that she could fail. But at 22, with two NCAA team championships and more All-American plaques than she knew what to do with, she despised everything about it. So she moved to New York City and left it behind, in her past, where it could do nothing more than haunt her.

She was raised in Breckenridge, Colorado, a town at 9,600 feet that is home to a nationally renowned Nordic youth program. Under the direction of Gary Giberson, a no-nonsense guru and virtual legend within the sport, the Summit County club produced more than 20 Colorado ski championships and fed athletes



Tara, flanked by sons Aidan (left) and Caelin (right), endured an almost unfathomable amount of physical and emotional suffering over the years—and ended up thriving in spite of it.

to the national team almost annually. Within two short years, Tara went from a first-time racer to U.S. Ski Team member.

As a fourth-generation Coloradan and the daughter of the local ski resort manager, Tara's success did not come as a total surprise. In fact, she was one of seven kids on her high school squad who eventually made the U.S. team. Yet she was different. She played in the school band, served as an officer on the student council, ranked near the top of her class. Giberson, her famously stern-faced coach, described Tara as someone who made everyone around her happier, including him. "She had a bubbly personality," he said.

One evening, in the spring of 1978—just days after deciding to attend to Middlebury—the gregarious 17-year-old left her house on the Blue River to go out with her boyfriend. He was a boxer, an arrogant older guy whom her parents did not approve of. That night, he raped her.

The experience—"date rape," before the term was invented—devastated Tara's self-esteem and robbed her of the control on which she thrived. No longer a kid who lit up the room, she became "down, dark," she says. She stopped seeing her boyfriend—who never faced legal repercussions—and told almost nobody about the rape.

Three months later, Tara left Breckenridge for Middlebury. She liked the relative anonymity she found in Vermont, and didn't tell any of her classmates she was on the U.S. Ski Team.

Neither did she tell anyone that she had been raped. On the outside she played the cool, collected kid. On the inside, she recalls, "There was a part of me that was completely freaking out. The rape was always on my mind."

Despite the two NCAA titles and All-American honors she earned in Nordic skiing and cross-country running while at Middlebury, Tara's success met only a fraction of her potential, and for the first time in her life she doubted herself. By fleeing to New York—away from the ski trails that had been her life—she thought she would be leaving all her problems behind. She had no idea how wrong she was.



AT FIRST GLANCE, it appears that Tara's life turned around after her move to New York. In 1988, she married Casey Sheahan, a Stanford-educated, Grateful Dead-following outdoorsman who would eventually become the editor and publisher of *Powder* magazine. She would have two kids (Caelin and Aidan, born in 1990 and 1992, respectively) and even started to ski recreationally again. In 1995, though, she blew out her knee while skiing in Breckenridge. A month after reconstructive surgery, the madness began.

The pain started in her forearms and knees, a searing, *electric* pain that soon radiated throughout her body. She visited eight doctors in search of a diagnosis, each time coming up empty; most thought she was suffering from tendonitis. Soon, she began walking backwards down stairs to relieve the strain on her joints.

A doting, intelligent parent, Tara would forget the names of

her children and where she lived; her hair started falling out in clumps. Then one day while attempting to give her three-year-old son a piggyback ride, Tara's body went limp, and she crumpled to the floor of her garage. With her children shrieking in fear, Tara lay prone on the cold, salty concrete, unable to move, as still as a corpse. A grim reality set in: She knew she was dying.

The family moved from Vermont (where they had settled) to Colorado, so Tara could be closer to her parents, and Casey quietly started to wonder what he would do if he lost his wife. Still desperately in search of answers and clinging to a thread of hope, Tara finally got the diagnosis that had been missing for so many months: she had Lyme disease.

Her recovery took more than three years—the tick that introduced the Lyme disease had also transferred a malaria-like parasite that ravaged her red blood cells—yet just when she began to feel better, a routine exam exposed another horrifying condition: a tumor the size of a grapefruit had grown on Tara's ovary.

During the operation to remove the non-cancerous growth, doctors noticed disturbing scars from endometriosis, a common condition in women that causes tissue to grow and shed where it should not. One doctor told Casey, "Your wife is full of wounds." It was, in this case, a fateful way of describing the effects of endometriosis. For when Tara heard the doctor's observations, she realized somebody else had articulated what she had carried around for so long—through her marriage, through motherhood, through debilitating illness—and it helped to liberate her. For 23 years, she had ignored her life's first catastrophe—the rape—and she knew, she *knew*, that everything that followed had incubated and festered and thrived in the well of stress and fear that was her inner being. Finally, she decided, it was time to deal with it.

While undergoing concentrated therapy, Tara and her family attended the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, and while watching the female cross country racers, Tara had a surreal feeling she couldn't fully explain. She couldn't take her eyes off the way the racers' bodies moved; she was mesmerized by the way their arms and legs worked in concert, by the fluidity of their muscles. During the 30K classic race, she wept. "There was this feeling," she would later say, "like, 'That's what I do. I'm a ski racer.' It was like my heart was pushing out of my chest, just like, 'I have to finish this. I have to finish this.' My mind was not the boss, it was my heart. I was ready." She realized then that while the terror of her living nightmare had been resolved, her long-dormant dream of Olympic gold continued to haunt her. Within days, she



It was said that no one's technique was as fluid as Tara's. "I always thought that out of all of us, she'd be the one to do it. It seemed like she was so on track, and then...it was like, *What happened?*" says three-time Olympian Ingrid Butts.

announced to Casey that, at the age of 41, she was going to get back in the game.

The summer after the 2002 Olympics, while getting her body back in the shape it had not known since 1982, Tara attended a camp in Park City, Utah, home to the U.S. Ski Team. She once belonged to this team, but now she looked more like an athlete's mother than a potential team member. She nervously walked up to a group of athletes to join them in their workout, and, remembers Aubrey Smith, one of the skiers present that day, "We just thought she was some older lady who wanted to be around kids. I didn't know she was serious about it." The next day, Tara beat many of the younger women in a trail running time trial at Soldier Hollow. Heads turned. "You don't expect somebody like her to be with the front pack," Smith said.

Tara began her comeback at the local level that winter and continued to climb the U.S. rankings the following two years. The

Subaru Factory Team, the most prestigious professional cross country ski team in North America, picked her up for the 2004-05 season, and her results were good enough that the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association included her on the list of potential Olympians that it sent to the U.S. Olympic Committee, in anticipation of the 2006 Winter Games in Turin, Italy.



LAST FALL, as Tara prepared for what promised to be a frenzied push toward the 2006 Games, another obstacle loomed in her path. On Labor Day weekend, while visiting the tiny mountain town of Salida, Colorado, Tara was jogging along a mountain trail when a rattlesnake shot from the brush at her feet and sank its fangs into her ankle. She spent 24 hours in the intensive care unit and her leg swelled to five times its normal size; two days later she was training again, and within two weeks she was skiing on an Austrian glacier.

Tara's first race of the season, a 10K pursuit in Alaska, was supposed to be a step forward. It was the one that would reflect all her summer training, all the intervals she ran up those 13,000-foot mountains, all the pain she endured. Instead, it was a letdown. Sub-zero temperatures and an unexpectedly weak response by her muscles—"My body was mad at me," Tara swears—led to a disappointing result despite her draining effort. She went home demoralized and suddenly wondered whether she should continue.

The next day, she talked over her doubts and fears with her family. Though her oldest son liked the idea of having her around more, her youngest, Aidan, quietly said: "Mom, you ended on a really bad note. It was cold, and it was at sea level. You can't end like that."

"And I heard that," Tara says.

So she drove to the SuperTour race in West Yellowstone. In the back of her mind she still harbored the dream. She still believed, on some level, that this race could be the one to get her back on track. But that night she made her decision. And it brought her peace.



ALITTLE AFTER FOUR O'CLOCK on a blustery winter afternoon in Breckenridge, the sun sets over the jutting beauty of the Ten Mile Range. Tara Sheahan is huddled in the cozy upstairs gear room of a local ski shop, trying on telemark boots. It is early December, a few weeks since the race at West Yellowstone.

She has come to Breckenridge to ski with her kids, not to compete in the elite-level cross country races taking place on the north end of town. She bought a season ski pass yesterday. Today she is getting equipped for her unexpected return to what she calls "leisure mode."

Long gone is the "fantasy happy ending" possibility that Tara believed for so long would finish her story. Instead she is just a mother and a wife. But she is full. In fact, she says she is happier now than she has ever been in her life. Skiing, once and for all, set her free.

"Racing became more about fulfillment," she says in the

philosophical, enlightening tone that reflects her rare perspective on life. "Fulfillment's a feeling. It's not something you get from a race or a medal or a lot of money. I was coming to that conclusion, that in order to get what I wanted, I had to desire something outside of myself. And what I really desire is myself, in a really healthy way. I want to have fulfillment just by nature of being here. It's prana, it's chi. It goes out and goes in. Fulfillment is all in here. You don't get it by getting something. I think that's what I realized about this journey, is that that's what I was initially trying to get, some fulfillment. Fulfillment in completion of attaining a spot on the Olympic team, or winning a gold medal. There's validation in there. There's self-worth issues in there. And as I started to get whole myself, I realized, I don't need this, I really don't need this."

As word of her story has circulated within the nation's Lyme community, Tara has become something of a legend, a mythical

She spent 24 hours in the intensive care unit and her leg swelled to five times its normal size; two days later she was training again.

figure who not only beat the deadly disease, but flourished physically in spite of it. Every month or two, she receives a letter in the mail from a Lyme sufferer. She doesn't know how they find her, but their words move her. They tell her she is a hero, that she gives them hope. She talks to others on the phone, lending optimism and strength to patients of all ages, from California to Boston. "People kind of amaze me," is how she describes the conversations.

Here in the ski shop, Tara says she is OK with coming oh-so-close to her dream, then watching it slip away forever. Part of her, at least.

"In my healthy, enlightened way, I'm a thousand percent OK with it," she says. "But we always have that little dysfunctional person in us. I have that 17-year-old that's, like, so bummed. And she exists in my body sort of like kicking my butt around going, 'God dammit. Why did you give me this 45-year-old body to do this? Why did you do this? You've got kids, your husband got a new job—now look! You're so complicated! Why couldn't you have just been 17 and done it when you were 17? Or 18, or 20?' But the 45-year-old says, 'This is the best I could do.' That person is completely happy with it."

For a moment, Tara is quiet. She stares at the floor and then looks up.

"We are trained to think that it's not the process, it's the end result," she says. "But if you're always pushing toward that end, I feel like you're missing what the messages are along the way." 🌸

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