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## Counting on Keely

### Martin Bell

contributor

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Local athlete's Olympic aspirations

“Killy” is one of the most prestigious names in skiing - as in Jean-Claude Killy, winner of three gold medals at the 1968 Olympics. But for those of us in the community of Big Sky, the similarly-pronounced “Keely,” as in Keely Kelleher, is perhaps an even bigger name. Many long-time locals have watched this talented and personable young athlete grow up and mature into a world-class ski-racer. Unfortunately, they have also seen her battle through some terrible injury tribulations.

Although we're in the middle of a hot and smoky Montana summer, Keely's preparations are already well underway for the 07/08 competitive ski-racing season, which could be a crucial winter for her. Recently, I had a chance to catch up with her, to talk about her life, career, and her recent progress toward her goals.

Keely grew up in Big Sky, and learned to ski because her parents had no access to daycare. Instead they dropped her off at ski school. From a very early age, she skied from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily as a member of Big Sky's “Mad Wolf Ski Club,” with Austrian instructors like Hans Schernthaler, Robert Kirchschrager and Peter Kummerer.

The progression from skiing to ski-racing came naturally. “I don't remember when I started to like racing, I just remember I always liked to go really fast on my skis. Probably just being around racing all the time makes you love it, and so I started getting into racing when I was six or seven. My sister Brenna is seventeen months older than me, so we were very competitive in everything we did! I remember when I started beating her in races was when she started to not be as serious as I was in racing!”

However, Keely was a “late bloomer,” and her early performances gave no indication of her future national team status. “I was really skinny and small and I would make these sweet angles and arc so sweetly, but I had no weight and no muscle to get me down the mountain. It wasn't until I started to mature – and that wasn't until fifteen or sixteen – that I was able to show people that I was a good ski-racer.”

One significant step in Keely's early career was her arrival at Rowmark Ski Academy, in Park City, Utah, at the age of 14. “I was there for four years and had a lot of really good mentors there. I went there because Montana didn't have the real competitiveness that I needed and I knew what I wanted to do at

a very young age was ski-race, and be on the US Ski Team, because I loved it. I was winning races here in Montana by twelve seconds. Then I went to Utah, and I was getting my butt kicked by twelve seconds! It made me realize that if want to make this my career until I'm 30, I needed to go somewhere that was going to get me to that level."

As a little girl, Keely was such a ski-racing fan that she named her pet bunny "Picabo" (after 1998 Olympic Super G champion Picabo Street, from Sun Valley, Idaho). Incidentally, Street is an alumnus of Rowmark, along with 1997 World Champion Hilary Lindh, and former ski-racer turned cyclist Levi Leipheimer, who recently competed impressively at the Tour de France.

As she reached the important stage of her development as a ski-racer, Keely developed other role models, like the Austrian racer Anita Wachter. "When I met her, I thought she's little like me, that means I can do it too." Keely was also a big fan of Sonia Nef, the graceful Swiss GS specialist, who was World Champion in 2001.

After graduating from high school in 2003, Keely made the US Ski Team, and the future looked bright. She had already competed in Europe, achieving a notable second place in a Europa Cup downhill, beating girls like Tina Maze and Elisabeth Goergl, who have since gone on to reach World Cup podiums.

In her words, Keely was "On fire, doing really well in training, ready to race in a lot of World Cups." Then, in November pre-season training at Beaver Creek, Colorado, came the crash that would swing a huge wrecking ball at her young career. "I remember that run – of course you remember the run where you break your leg. It was the afternoon, and all the World Cup men (Austrians, US and Germans) had been training on the course, which was on Centennial. I was just all over the place because the ruts were huge. I wasn't warmed up; I was just trying to feel it out. On the final pitch, one gate from the finish, I hit this rut, like a hole in the ground, going 60mph. My leg went into the rut and twisted really fast backwards and my body flew forwards, and my leg broke – tibia and fibula. But I didn't know it was broken until they unbuckled my boot and I heard it snap."

At this time, Keely had no way of knowing how serious the consequences of this injury would be. "They said it would take six months to heal, but it ended up being way longer because I had so many different things go wrong with it. Over a period of three years I had surgery seven times."

Six months after the initial injury, Keely's first venture back on to the snow, at Mount Hood, Oregon was bitterly dispiriting. "I was in so much pain that I couldn't make one run without being in tears. An MRI scan of my ankle then showed that my fibula was still broken – it hadn't healed at all. So in the fall of 2004 they had to go in and put a plate on my fibula. They also had to dissect all the nerves and tendons off of my fibula because they had scarred down to my unhealed bone. They pretty much had to scrape all that stuff off my fibula to get my ankle to move again. And then they re-broke my ankle, so I was out for a second year."

So Keely's comeback season was not until 05/06. "It was like a rollercoaster ride, but I had some really good things happen." These included four podium finishes in Nor-Am Cup events, including a victory on home Montana snow at Whitefish. But these achievements did not come easily. "I was still in a lot of pain because I had a rod in my tibia and a plate and six screws on my fibula."

So in spring 2006, Keely went back into the operating theater, at the Steadman Hawkins Clinic in Vail, Colorado. "I told them I would like to get the rod and plates removed. They told me it was really minimal surgery and I would be skiing again after three months, which was perfect because this was May."

But Keely's run of bad luck was still far from over. "It was like shooting myself in the foot, because they couldn't get the rod out of my tibia; the bone had grown into it and over it. I wish they had just left it alone, but they ended up pounding on it for an hour and a half, yanking on it and trying to get it out – without success. When I got out of surgery my leg looked like it had been beaten with a baseball bat." After this ordeal, Keely's leg had been made worse for the 06/07 season. "I had more pain than ever before, and it was another really trying season for me."

One year later, Keely feels 100% healthy, but the rod is still in there, and will remain so. (The only way they could get it out would be to re-break her leg.) Her indomitable brightness continues to shine. "It just teaches you to be tough. I did once set off a metal detector at an airport; it was in Bulgaria this year. Maybe the Bulgarian security system is stronger than others because they didn't speak English and were hassling me. I said 'there's a rod in my leg, there's nothing I can do'. I should carry around an X-

ray to show people all the metal in my leg, like the Bionic Woman.”

With Keely’s injury worries now hopefully behind her, another challenge has reared its head like an ugly monster from the swamp. The US Ski Association has had major cutbacks, because it is not an Olympic or World Championship season and many sponsors, including Chevy Trucks, have dropped out. Keely is now one of the US Ski Team’s “self-funded” athletes, which means she has to come up with \$20,000 of her sponsorship, just to keep participating in the team’s program. “It’s a bummer but it’s kind of a blessing in disguise because I get to get out there and talk to people, and see who really wants to support me and believe in me. So far I’ve already raised \$12,000 and I only started in June, so I’m on my way.”

Keely has an ongoing sponsorship through The Yellowstone Club, which places their logo on the front of her ski helmet. “They’re amazing and Hank Kashiwa (the club’s vice-president of marketing) is so supportive of ski-racing, since he was an Olympic skier himself. It’s so cool to have the privilege to go up to the club and meet all the cool people and enjoy no lift-lines,” she enthuses. No doubt many Club members feel it’s a privilege to ski with a current US Ski Team racer.

Ever optimistic, Keely assumes her fundraising will be successful, and looks forward to the coming season with speed events (downhill and Super G) as her focus. “I have my work cut out for me,” she says noting that, “The team has always stressed four-event skiers in the past. So I have to focus on the events I can do the best in. Last season I was ranked in the world’s top 100 in GS, but I finally got my guts back in downhill and now I am ranked 82nd in the world in downhill.”

It’s obvious that Keely senses how close she is to World Cup, “If you’re ranked top 100 in the world, you can race in any World Cup that you want, but you may have to do a time-trial to get a spot. Last year I did two time-trials for a GS spot, and I was very close. One of them I did qualify, but they decided to take the other girl because she beat me in more runs than I beat her.”

For now, the goal is downhill which means working on gaining strength – and weight. “I’ve gained seven pounds since June; I’m trying to get to 150 and I’m 147 right now. I’m not your average girly girl, I have to say,” Keely confides with a giggle. “I can out-eat any boy! I have to eat every two hours and I have to eat a lot of protein and a lot of carbs, because I work out three or four times a day. I’m always on the go: road biking, mountain biking, kayaking, running. I do a lot of lifting because I’m a small girl and I need mass; lifting is the best way to get that.”

Keely’s next on-snow training camp with the team starts on August 27th, at La Parva, Chile and will last two weeks. Then on October 5th, she travels to Europe for another two week camp, on the Austrian glaciers of Sölden and Pitztal. If she skis fast in the training camp and the time trials, Keely’s first race will be the World Cup giant slalom in Sölden on October 27th. She is hoping that the weather will cooperate. “Because of global warming, we didn’t get to have the Sölden race last year, and last season was tough because there was no snow in Europe. We would drive eleven hours to France and then find out the race was cancelled. It was 50 degrees in the middle of the winter. We only had one Europa Cup downhill last year.”

For Keely, the real early season focus will be the World Cup downhill at Lake Louise, Canada, on December 1st, and the super G on the following day. “I’m shooting for Lake Louise more than Sölden. I know the track, and I’ve done really well there before. I just want to go into that race really ready to kick some a\*\* – if I may say that,” she laughs unashamedly.

Internal competition within the team is intense. The best US female downhillers are Julia Mancuso and Lindsey Kildow, ranked second and third in the world. Then there are eight more US girls ranked ahead of Keely, who remains undaunted. “I’m not the kind of person who looks at who’s around me; I look at what I need to do. What I want to do is get into the top 30 in the World Cup, and however I do that is up to me.”

Of course, as an ex-downhiller myself, I was quick to remind Keely that it’s not entirely up her. Fast skis are also an absolute necessity in downhill. This led to the revelation from Keely that she has recently switched from Fischer, whose skis she had used since she was eleven years old, to Atomic. “I’m the only girl on the US Ski Team on Atomic. Their boots are the best boots I’ve ever been in. I’m so psyched for this season because of my new equipment. The Austrian women are dominating on Atomic so hopefully I’ll get some good service.”

Keely's proud to call Big Sky home. "I've always liked Snake Pit; that was my favorite backcountry area for freeskiing, there's always a surprise around every corner. I love going into Lone Mountain Sports because they've supported me (Scott and Kerry Foster) since I was born."

But the ski-racing life certainly makes it difficult for her to do much freeskiing. "When I come back home I have just a week to go see everyone I want to see, and it's a little draining because I just want to kick back and take a breather. But I love seeing all my buddies and ripping up the tram. And going to the Yellowstone Club and eating all their cookies!"

For other young ski-racers growing up at Big Sky, Keely has some sage advice: "Whenever you're having a bad day ski-racing – and I'm sure many young kids get frustrated – if you go out and make a free run you're going to feel better about it, because it reminds you of what you love to do. If I'm having a bad day, I'll go out there and just rip up some freeskiing turns and I'll have a smile on my face at the end of the day!"

Keely has had more bad days than most, but has not lost sight of her long-term goals. "I've had so many setbacks. Ever since I made the team I knew I could do it – it's just a matter of when now. The timing is right for me, I feel. This season is going to be a make-or-break season; I'm working hard. I knew what I wanted to do since I was seven years old. I feel like I'm finally to the point where I was before I got hurt, that I can be a force on the World Cup, make the Olympic team in Vancouver 2010 and go another Olympics in Russia after that. I've always been dreaming of when I can be an Olympian."

As another competitive ski season looms on the horizon, there is no doubt that everyone in Big Sky has their fingers crossed for Keely, with hopes that she can finally have the chance to fulfill the undoubted potential of her talent, and reap the benefits that she deserves after so many years of struggle.

Those wishing to make tax-deductible donations to Keely's fundraising effort can do so via her athlete account with the US Ski and Snowboard Foundation (at <http://foundation.ussskiteam.com> ) or send her a check directly. More details will be available on her website (<http://www.keelykelleher.com> ), launching August 2007. Keely's additional sponsors include: her parents, grandmother, Gold's Gym, the Shamirs and Kraig Kempt. Watch for Keely's diary starting next week in The Big Sky Weekly.

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