

Battling a case of mono

LEARNING FROM SCRATCH, KELLY BRUSH SETS OUT TO TAME THE SIT-SKI BY BILL MCCOLLOM

KELLY BRUSH WAS frustrated. She had been skiing all her life, but the beginner trail at Vail looked more like the Streif at Kitzbühel, as she kept falling and falling. With every mishap, she dusted herself off and readjusted her gear, only to go a few feet more and tip over again. She knew it wasn't going to be easy, but this ... this bore no semblance to skiing as she knew it. Still, she went back up the lift for run after run after run, hopeful that her ample supply of determination would not give out before mastering this fiendish device — the sit-down mono-ski.

The end of last March, I stopped by the Craig Hospital in Denver to see Kelly, a bubbly Middlebury College freshman. It was one month after the ski racing accident that had left her paralyzed from just below her shoulder blades down. Predictably enough, she was pale, weak, and was just recently able to sit up in a chair, but my head started spinning when she started talking about traveling back to Colorado in November to learn to ski on a mono-ski. I quickly did the math (eight fingers = eight months) and wondered if Kelly was setting the bar a tad too high — such as just over seven feet, when seven inches might have been more appropriate — but for once, I kept my mouth shut.

I followed her progress over the spring and summer as she struggled her way to independence. Buoyed by the support of her parents, friends and Middlebury ski team members, it wasn't long before she was getting in and out of the car, driving, attending summer school, rehabbing, returning to classes at Middlebury and riding a hand-powered bicycle in a ski team bike-a-thon fundraiser for her foundation. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when I heard the news that she was back on skis — or ski, in this case — in November.

The conditions at Vail couldn't have been better, and after an hour of stationary instruction, Kelly was on the lift with her heart in her throat. "I was prepared psychologically, but on our first run with the instructor holding the bar, it seemed we were going 100 and I thought, 'Oh-my-gosh, this is really scary,' but then I got used to it," said Kelly. Soon she was on a tether, but instead of leaving clean arcs in the snow, she was leaving a succession of craters. "It's really hard to balance all that weight on one skinny little ski. I'd start the turn with the tip and then roll the hip, and then just tip over. It was frustrating, all right. I just wanted to ski like I used to."

Finally on her fourth day, the light at the end of the tunnel appeared in the form of four-time Paralympic gold medalist Sarah Will. After retiring from competition in 2002, Will turned her attention to the AXS Vail Valley Foundation, which is dedicated to improving recreational services in the Vail Valley for those with disabilities.

Will recalled her own love-hate experience with mastering the mono-ski. "It was so difficult, I broke down and cried. It was a sport I wanted to hate for a while. The problem is your ego is a lot bigger than your ability at that stage," she remembered. But Will persevered, and after only 10 practice sessions, raced in her first national championship. Will sees a lot of herself in Kelly. "This type of accident usually amplifies who you are," noted Will. "Kelly's driven in the same way that I was. I still remember the first time I felt the ski go out and then snap back underneath me, and I thought, 'So this is it.' Those things will come to Kelly in time."

In the meantime, Kelly is taking full advantage of every moment she has to continue to learn how to tame the beast, and she now has the tools to start gaining traction. Will has provided an image of what can be accomplished, Kelly now has her own mono-ski (a Christmas gift from the proceeds of the bike-a-thon), and she's now fully aware of the difficulty of the battle ahead. She was even able to laugh about a recent hard crash she took with her mother at the helm.

Brush also has been bolstered by an abundance of what Will describes as the other key ingredient in the learning process, "a willingness to take the leap to independence." Will explained: "You can't coddle the athletes. Kids who are striving for independence are much more successful on and off the hill. But it takes courage and commitment."

Those relentless motivational forces to get back on the hill run deeper than conscious thought, and Kelly stumbled a bit in giving them shape. She has no immediate goal of jumping back into competition, but hopes to achieve a high degree of proficiency and enjoy the resulting rewards. "I just want to go up and watch ski racing, to continue to be a part of the team. It's been such an important part of my life — the whole culture of it, going out with my family and friends, going fast, everything about it is fulfilling. I want to remain a part of this."

Sarah Will had the final word. "You know, there are those who are content to sit on the couch, and others who feel there's just more to life." **SR**

