



GRIT AND DETERMINATION

– SARAH SAUVEY'S STORY

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Sarah Sauvey knows what it's like to fight for what she wants. A year ago, Sarah was recovering from surgery, unable to use her arms or her legs. Today she sits 12th in the world for skier-cross, coming off her best season yet, now eyeing the 2010 Olympics.

From hospital to the World Championships in less than year is Sarah's story of grit and determination. The 23-year-old's passion for skier-cross is only two years old; she has no team, no coach and little funding. But what Sarah lacks she makes up in having the courage to challenge herself both mentally and physically.

With a background in alpine racing, Sarah's chance discovery of skier-cross came at the 2005 World University Games in Innsbruck, Austria. At the time, she held a national-title in slalom and was competing successfully on the American circuit, but something was missing from Sarah's skiing career. "I had lost my passion," she recalls. "I went to the Games, believing it could be my last time competing on skis."

At the World University Games, Sarah was scheduled to race the alpine events, but as a

last minute request from team organizers, Sarah found herself entered in the skier-cross. With no experience and no expectations, Sarah jumped into the event, unaware she was making a life changing decision. Up against seasoned professionals and some of the best in the world, Sarah managed a 14th place result, but more importantly, her first ever attempt to race skier-cross had ignited a fire that had long gone out. "Skiing was fun again. I loved the adrenaline, standing in the start gate with people next to me. I loved the jumps and the element of chance. If someone crashes a dark horse goes through and it adds another element to the event," she says. "I have never looked back."

Sarah made the decision to train full-time for skier-cross. She began conditioning herself for the event with a plan to compete on the European circuit during the Northern Hemisphere winter. But all of her determination wasn't enough to stop an illness that would soon creep over her. That year, Sarah began to suffer terrible abdominal pain combined with fatigue, light headedness and collapsing. Doctors could not explain her symptoms and the mystery

surrounding her sickness. Feeling helpless, Sarah began to struggle, physiologically as well as physically. "I'd seen a number of doctors and general blood tests weren't showing any abnormalities. Some of the doctors questioned depression, and although I couldn't explain what was going on, I didn't think that prognosis was right," Sarah says, while remembering the painful time in her life. "I started to blame my fitness because I was struggling and feeling faint when training. This made me attempt to train harder as I wanted to be competitive in my sport. There were times I would collapse while running."

Just prior to heading to Europe for her first season of skier-cross, doctors diagnosed Sarah with celiac artery compression syndrome. The disease caused ligaments to compress her aorta, the large artery that pumps blood from the heart, resulting in the immense stomach pain and fainting spells she was suffering from. Doctors scheduled corrective surgery for later that year. Awaiting her operation and with nothing to lose, Sarah decided to continue as planned and head to Europe for her first season of skier-cross. Although competing with her condition was questionable, Sarah says it made her



realize her passion and was something that would later fuel her recovery. "I had been feeling like crap for so long, I was used to it," she says. I thought, 'I want to do this' and I knew if I didn't go over then, I might never have the guts to do it."

In Europe, Sarah describes her first season as a learning experience. "I was literally turning up to events saying I don't know how this works, but I know I want to be here," she laughs. "I had no idea what I was doing, but I was loving it." Sarah's best result that year, a fourth at the Austrian National Championships, made her believe she could compete with best.

She remembered the result and the joy she felt while competing when she went for surgery later that year. "It was a really hard recovery and it was good to have that in the back of my mind," she says. "I don't know if I would have done the hard yards to get back to competing if I hadn't known what it was like."

In autumn that year, a 22-year-old Sarah underwent major open vascular surgery. Doctors made an incision that went from her sternum down to her belly button, cutting her core in half

to reach her aorta artery. With her stomach muscles that had severed down the middle, Sarah had to learn to walk and use her arms again. She used yoga, pilates and a basic strength training to re-align her body. Amazingly, six months later Sarah was back on snow.

Returning to the European skier-cross circuit Sarah says she felt strong and for the first time in a year, healthy. "It was great racing without the pain," she says, excitement flashing in her eyes. "I finally felt like I could be my best." Sarah had a fifth place result in the European Cup, which earned her a spot at the 2007 FIS Freestyle World Ski Championships in Madonna di Campiglio, Italy. She would be the only Australian, male or female, competing in the skier-cross. "In March, I drove by myself in a hire car to the Worlds," she says. "I had no idea what to expect, but I ended up skiing the fastest I think I have ever skied."

With no team, coach or support, Sarah raced to a 12th position in the world. Facing the world's number one in her final heat, Sarah ended up short in qualifying for the finals, but not of realizing her difficult recovery was worth it. "I

didn't go on to the finals, but coming back from where I was nine months prior, lying in hospital, just made me feel really good," she says smiling. Sarah's sponsors are Blizzard, GodzSugar, Predatorwear, Stoeckli Demo Shop and Sun Valley Ski Tools (Mt Hotham) but is seeking financial sponsorship as well.

Today Sarah is still working on improving her physical condition and increasing her core strength. While the sport is still fairly new to Australia, professional coaching has finally come her way with an invitation to train with the Swiss National Team this November. Looking towards next season, Sarah says she will have higher expectations in terms of results, as she works towards fulfilling her life long dream to compete at the Olympics. Skier-cross will debut as an event at the 2010 Games in Vancouver, Canada and Sarah hopes to be there.

But, at the end of the day, Sarah says her biggest joy is the fact she is able to compete at all. "I am absolutely loving it. I am having so much fun skiing and as long as my body will let me keep doing this, I'm happy. The Olympics would be a bonus."