

Dendritic snowflakes land on the cold fiberglass of the old bleachers where I sit and I can tell by the way in which they slide off of the surface without melting that we'll be skiing on hard wax today. It has been sixteen years since I last sat on these old bleachers lining the ski trails of Black Mountain, ME. A sophomore in high school, I had just completed my third Junior Nationals and like the year prior I was devastated by my performance. Wiping a steady stream of tears from my face, I felt worthless and could practically feel my dreams of college slipping away from me. Why did I continually fail to perform at these most important competitions? How is it that girls I had beat by minutes at State just seemed to fly by me now?

I am brought back from my reminiscence by a shout from the ski trail and I look up to see my men's team skiing by, "Ohw, who's the hottie; that is one fine coach!" Yanked from painful memories, I am happy to see them and I feel a tiny tear of joy collect at the edge of my eye when I realize what a different place I am in my life now. Interestingly my return to the present comes with a realization that my two trips to this Nordic venue perfectly bisect my life. At thirty-two years of age, I have volunteered (along with Christi Boggs) as the co-coach of University of Wyoming's growing Club team for nine years now. Even a quick reflection on the team's cohesiveness and passion for each others' success wraps around me like a warm blanket and the pain of my memories seems to dull.

As my men's team skis out of sight, my eyes wonder past the flagpoles to the parking lot where I see a Colorado Mountain College van pull into a parking space. Stepping out of the driver's side is the current coach, Ben Dudley, and another thread to my memories. It seems serendipitous that I should greet my high school teammate here again sixteen years after competing together. I see a smile on Ben's face and realize that his memories of the venue are very different than my own. Winning his age division by more than a minute and a half, it was on these very trails that Ben became the talk of the Nordic ski community and a new Nordic hero of our small hometown of Leadville. Though this would bring future strain to Ben's love of the sport, I'm sure that those memories seem somehow divorced of his success here. But my memories of Ben's success are transient and in fact my mind lands solidly on other memories from that 1992 Nationals. It was late one night, after dinner when a group of us had run from our small motel to the neighboring truck stop to get a large slice of warm blueberry pie. I can still feel the cold, humid air on my face as we ran through the wet snow and the contrasting warmth of the fresh pie.

But I have work to do. The first race of the USCSA Nationals is tomorrow; it is a classic sprint and I have to be ready to help kick wax fourteen pairs of skis with the perfect combination. As I throw myself into my volunteer work, memories fade to mere feelings and throughout the evening and next day, I scarcely have time to remember my name. With an overnight warm-up followed by snow and then rain, we are faced with a challenge. Questions about possible klister combinations swim through my head: Should I try a Toko Viola / Rode Rossa combination? How about Rode Multigrade? Or would it be best to go with something fluorinated? Does it need

to be covered? Our day had begun at 5:30 am and we had definitely won the coaches' race, arriving before the fearless leaders of all the other teams. And with about three hours of concentrated testing, we had identified the combination (Rode Multigrade fluor covered with Start Black Magic) that I hoped would make the athletes' have a little mini orgasm on their skis. I was not disappointed and as the first skiers finished their qualifying round, one after another found us and in the dry, almost monotone words of Fitz told us that they liked the wax, "Coach, that is the fastest wax I have ever had in my life."

But even after qualifying eight athletes for the final rounds, the work is far from done with the final not starting until after dark. Designed to be a race of excitement under the lights and kicking off the opening ceremonies, we will have to continue our wax testing for four more hours. And for three hours and fifty-five minutes, all seems well. A magic combination is identified, applied and is running great. But then as the athletes collect their race skis and head to the starting gate, the sun goes down and immediately the wax begins to grab. Terror rises from the pit of my stomach and finalizes in a spell of dizziness. We have five minutes to re-wax eight pairs of skis. For one second my head swims; I am that sixteen year old girl caressing my \$40 Karhu skis before the classic race and watching my coaches apply gobs of blue and purple Klister in excess in a vain attempt to remedy my wax. I feel frozen, my confidence drained until through the second's silence a loud and humorous voice pierces, "I ain't afraid coach, I ain't afraid; that shit'll buff out!" Jacob's voice is like a knife cutting me away from my fear and fueled by not only his undying faith in us but by his humor and love; I spring into action. In a blur of wild motion, Christi, Joe, Kelly and anyone with a spare hand begins removing and re-applying Klister. Even in the start gate we are still making the last little changes and the race is off!!

I literally crumple into the snow next to Christi and feel a bone-numbing exhaustion sweep over me. I feel far away, like I'm floating above the scene and I'm only partly aware as Jacob finishes sixth, Katie fourth, John third.... I am not the little girl of sixteen years ago; I feel, at the same time, both powerful and insignificant, neither sensation familiar to that little girl. I allow myself to rest in the snow for only a minute after the races have finished as I know that we must turn around and wax all of the athletes for tomorrow's mass start, 15 kilometer classic race. When exhaustion finally claims us all at near 11:30 pm, we return to our vacation rental. And as we pull into the driveway I appreciate anew the character of the place. Complete with Maine's most characteristic front house, middle house, back house and barn, it is such a comfortable and oddly familiar accommodation. We stumble into the house, wash and fall into bed. I lie there, knowing that we must wake in only five hours to complete our waxing job. The tingle of peppermint soap on my face, I feel happy. The circle connecting me to my youth is so strong here...

With the lack of sleep comes a numbness that in the face of the anxiety to wax for another classic race is oddly welcome. And while our wax combination of the day is not orgasmic, it does get our athletes around the course and like any day as a coach

heart-wrenching sorrow for some athletes is countered by the sheer joy of others. Brian Sabade, our team captain, a true team leader and the heart of the men's team is unable to perform as he had hoped. Devastated I see traces of tears in his eyes as he says, "This was my race coach and I, I just didn't have it." I don't know if I can ever tell Brian how much I understand. It would be hard to relate to him that sixteen years ago, I felt the same way in our mass start race. After getting an amazing start, amongst skiers the likes of Amy Crawford, I tangled my pole and I stuttered and I just lost it. Somehow I don't think these sad memories would help Brian now. Best to just give him a hug and tell him that I'll always be proud. But on the other hand, there is Kinner and his sheer joy as he skied by us in the second lap yelling, "I love classic skiing coach!" After battling with technique this revelation is like hearing oil say it loves water. It fills me up inside and helps me realize again why I am a coach. Or May, as she runs up to Christi after the race hardly able to control her excitement. As a high school senior, May couldn't even begin a race without throwing up from nerves. How far she has come with her eighth place finish today. Good and bad alike, I realize that I am proud to be even a small part of my athletes' lives.

My sleep that night is dreamless and I wake with a childish excitement rooting, at least in part, in the idea that Ben agreed to join us for our off day that we've chosen to spend making a trip to the coast. Our hopes of seafood will not be deterred even by a overnight ice storm that appears to have closed all the schools in the area and covered trees, power lines and roads with a shimmery layer of frozen water. As we load the vans and bounce down the dirt road, I find myself hoping for the opportunity to speak with Ben that day, to somehow close a door on my own negativity and, yes, resentment of sixteen years past. We round the last corner where the dirt road changes to pavement and soon see the CMC rented vehicle with Ben at the wheel. My motivation and excitement is admittedly two-fold because I learned just hours earlier that Glenn Randall had won the previous day's race at NCAA Nationals. This only adds an almost eerie meaning to our reunion as one of our coaches sixteen years ago was Glenn's father. At that time Glenn had been a small boy with a lisp and difficulty remembering whether to speak Norwegian, his mother's tongue, or English when we visited his house. I hop out of the van to welcome Ben to our convoy and excitedly share the news. In his soft-spoken, reserved way Ben gets as excited as I've ever seen him. "You're kidding me?" he says and his genuine pride is transparent. With few words needed we both realize how proud we are to be from Leadville, how amazing it is that so many amazing skiers, remarkable people really, can claim their roots in such a small, poor town. I smile at Ben and somehow I know that we are both visualizing days of borrowed \$20 skis, riding five abreast in the back of Quinny's pickup and riling our skis with a \$2 True Value barbeque brush. I think the memories of the simplicity, the fun seem beautiful to both of us that morning.

Our day on the coast does come with seafood and shopping and most importantly for the athletes a day away from the ski trails. With some much needed R&R we are ready to load the vans and begin the drive back. However, the athletes are giddy with excitement about the possibility of seeing a lighthouse on the way home and

we realize that we will have to split up because the coaches meeting is at 6:00 pm and necessitates Christi, Ben and I heading back immediately. We agree that the best course will be for Christi and I to ride to the meeting with Ben and afford the athletes time to visit the lighthouse. I feel a wave of excitement at the prospect of having a conversation with Ben and Christi as we pile into the car. Christi encourages me to take the front seat so that I can visit with Ben. And as he settles into the driver's seat, his usual relaxed actions are interrupted by an abrupt motion to close the door on the glove compartment where I just catch a glimpse of some chew out of the corner of my eye. I wonder at Ben's concerns and think that by now he must know that I'm a liberal Hippie Mo. And yet again I am pulled back in time to sixteen years ago as I remember how much I hated my image as a "goodie two-shoes". They would say, "What are you going to become a nun?". With this memory my throat temporarily tightens and my childhood shyness returns. However as I sense Christi in the seat behind us, I take strength in her. I am not that shy, innocent girl of sixteen years ago.

With Christi navigating, the three of us somehow manage to clumsily find our way out of the city. On the open road again, I breath a sigh and conversation begins to come easily. We talk about everything. First, the subjects are trivial: the team, the races and then we settle on Maine. Ben expresses a love of the state and I look around anew. The sun is just starting to set. It is what Christi loves to call "Snowy River Time". It is beautiful and just at that moment we pass the most classic Maine farmhouse that I have ever seen. White, with a grandiose front house, the barn is majestic enough that I would be proud to call it home. The fading light catches the eaves and window pains and everything is soft. Unlike the crisp beauty of the Colorado Rockies, the beauty of Maine is gentle, attenuated, filtered. I realize with a sudden passion that it is just this kind of beauty that I see in Ben. He is gentle, soft...

And finally as we become increasingly comfortable with each other, our conversation turns to our past. Ben talks first of his success, of the amazing feeling of not just being a champion but being so far ahead that no other Junior compared. His face then turns sad as he recounts the events that followed from his success. "Somewhere in the mess of it all I just lost the love of the sport; I lost the fun." After years of World Junior competitions, camps and even a school transfer to CRMS, Ben graduated High School and attempted a year of college skiing at Western State. Struggles with academics and a realization that he had lost all love for the sport that had once defined him, sent him to the wilds of Alaska to all but disappear in four years of work aboard a fishing boat and in other odd jobs. With his gentle words it is clear that he shoulders the blame for "flaking out". I say, "I think that the system is at least as much to blame as you are Ben." Christi echoes my sentiments in her no-nonsense way and informs us that, "of course it does." I pause and then continue saying that if only we had already been coaching at Wyoming during that time. He could have come and skied with us and re-found the love of skiing. He says, "Yeah, but you know, you couldn't have worked with me. I was just an asshole kid. You couldn't have helped me when I didn't know what I wanted."

Our talk proceeds on and we agree that the system has flaws. The National Team tries to recruit athletes before they are old enough to know what's happening. They burn through them like Kleenex, hang them out to dry if they don't live up to expectations. And how can they? They are kids. They are kids who love skiing and at some point in their lives all they wanted to do was ski. It's hard to figure out how this can end for so many the same way it ended for Ben. I think about George Cartwright, a Junior from Lander, WY who, like Ben, won Nationals and got noticed. I wonder if he will somehow be able to hold on to the love of the sport, to the fun as he heads into what will inevitably be a whirlwind of fame and propositions. We realize that as coaches we can never lose sight of what this is really about: creating a safe place where athletes can continue to love the sport. We laugh as all three of us recall the words of Quinny, "Yeah, you know, it's a lifetime sport." This is what we have to foster as coaches. Ben adds, "You know, I've always remembered something that Rick Copalla said when I was training with the Sun Valley team, "We're going to go out there today and some of us will ski well and others will not but the most important thing is that we're doing it together." And for a moment it is quiet in the car as we all think about this. This seems to resonate for all of us. I realize that long after I have forgotten my results, I have remembered my teammates.

The next day, after preparing skis for the interval start skate race, I sit again on the fiberglass bleachers. It is hard to explain the warmth that I feel in a place where I had felt so cold only half a life earlier. I look over and see the crying little girl that I was sixteen years ago. I reach over to her and give her a hug. I tell her that it will all be okay. She will make it to college; in fact she will graduate from the University of Denver, Phi Beta Kappa and Summa Cum Laude with a degree in chemistry. She will go on to be a professor of biochemistry and microbiology. But more importantly she will become a volunteer coach and she will spend a lifetime hugging other crying skiers and telling them that really everything will be okay if they just continue to love the sport that they do.