

A Defining Moment

By Zoe Hickel

I ran up the stairs and jerked open the heavy doors. My breath was caught in my throat. It was just as I imagined. The bright lights beamed down on the busy ice. The empty bleachers released an athletic secret that only I could hear. The Herb Brooks Ice Arena; this is where the magic happened in 1980 when the Americans stunned the world and brought home the gold – a “Miracle on Ice.”

The U.S. Women’s national team skated below in a flurry of color. Twenty of the best hopefuls from around the nation were gunning for spot on the team and a chance to be the next Olympian.

I inhaled the smell of fresh ice and suddenly my vision of competing on the 2010 Olympic team took solid shape. In one defining moment I knew with all of my heart that this is where I needed to be, blasting pucks, crunching ice in a mind bending drive for the net, snaking around skaters, head up, hunting for the goal or the perfect pass. Olympic Gold; I imagined how awesome it would feel.

I can always remember having a love for sports and competition. I enjoy the sound of snapping gates as I snake my way through a tight slalom course in an alpine ski race and the adrenalin rush when kicking hard in the last kilometer of a 5k running race searching for that 20 minute time. I adore pushing myself up mountains and freewheeling down like in my favorite mountain race, Mountain Marathon. I even fancy competing in triathlons, playing and coaching soccer and many other activities. But nothing has ever made me as happy as ice hockey. I love the feel of the stick in my hand, arcing a perfect cut in the ice and in one coordinated movement, rifling a fierce shot into the back of the net.

My friends call me “beast” but I consider myself a pretty normal looking, pony-tailed, 14-year-old girl sporting a full smile of braces who just happens to play on a boys midget team; my teammates have been my best friends. We train, fish and camp together and we also enjoyed winning the state hockey championships this year. Sometimes I get to skate with girl teams too and was invited to the National development Camp last summer. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know that hockey will be in my future,

but how and when took on a whole new picture when I was lucky enough to see the home of the “Miracle” and stay at the Olympic Training Center (OTC).

I had traveled to New York to meet the U19 Alaska girl’s team where I was invited to join them for the Lake Placid tournament. My coach, Pam Dreyer, a former Olympian, worked out a deal with the Olympic Training Center Staff to allow us to stay there. Little did we know that the U.S. National Women’s Hockey team tryouts were going on at the same rink and they were staying at the OTC as well.

I crept around the facility exploring and marveling at the way these athletes lived. The cozy entry area had memorabilia from past Olympians which included the 1980 gold medal bike ride of my uncle Steve and the 1994 Gold and 1992 silver medal efforts of my hometown skier friends, Tommy Moe and Hilary Lindh. I crawled into the 2 man bobsled mounted in the hallway and imagined cutting down the icy track. I gazed at the photos of past stars lining the halls. Then I saw something really amazing: The cafeteria.

Seated at tables, were huge U.S. bobsled team members eating trays of delicious food. In another corner, I spotted the hockey team eating chicken, pasta and giant, wonderful salads. I slid my pass to enter and heavenly smells wafted around my head. I gathered my tray and headed toward an empty table when I was stopped by my coach and introduced to one of the greatest female hockey players ever, US Team Captain, Krissy Wendell. I was thinking to myself “wow. Cool” and then in my next mind bubble I thought “I’m going to be skating with you soon, hmmm,” while I said, “Hello, nice to meet you” and sat down to gobble my chow. We later became breakfast buddies but I confess I was still a little in awe.

In the mornings before our games, I would scamper around the facility peeking through the glass door slots, spying on the team members as they were put through their conditioning paces in the giant gym. I filed away the drills to practice later.

Throughout the days, there was always something interesting going on in the “state of the art” weight room or Gym. The Bobsledders ran sprints pushing heavily weighted roller carts and the Men’s Handball team furiously tried to take each others’ heads off with rocket throws. I sat on the bike, spinning out my legs between games, while staring at some of the world’s best athletes and dreaming of the day I could be truly among them.

On the morning of our first games, I went out for a run in the sunny, snowy, New York neighborhood. On the way back to the OTC, a man in a car idling in the parking lot, rolled down his window and said, “Hi Zoe.” I was stunned. It was none other than Olympic Team coach, Ben Smith. How did he know my name? I was a little tongue tied and barely remember that he said he was on his way to Dartmouth to watch a University game and would be back to watch my game that evening. I made a mental note, shivering with anticipation to get to the rink. I couldn’t wait to skate.

We won our first game and I was happy with my two goals and an assist. I could feel the eyes of “big man Ben” when I stepped on the ice for the second game. We were tired with only a team of 11 and shifts came hard and fast. I was a little nervous skating in front of National team and College coaching staffs, but I skated my heart out and our team did well coming up just one point short in the final tally against a nationally ranked team. We later spent time at the OTC playing ping pong with our team mates and visiting with other “permanent residents” as they are called when they live and train there. The women’s handball team showed up to stay and the ski jumpers were also on hand.

I wanted to absorb the whole Olympic experience and really enjoyed my unique opportunity to ride the Olympic 4-man bobsled on the actual Olympic track. It was bumpier and rougher than I thought. Our driver flew into turns that smashed our arms into the sides and made our heads feel like fishing bobbers. We took in the Herb Brooks Museum and the hairs stood up on the back of my neck when I watched actual footage of the players hugging in jubilation during the final 1980 Olympic hockey game while sitting right there in the basement of the famed arena.

The equipment and pads of Jim Craig, the amazing goalie and the gear from Mark Johnson who scored 2 goals for team USA and who is now the women’s national team coach, hung from the walls. I shivered when I thought, “I could be skating for him someday.” We visited the 120m ski jumps, riding the chairlift up to the base of the jumps where we took an elevator over 20 stories to the step out landing. After climbing another couple of stories, I stood where the jumpers begin -almost 200m away from the finish area... and way up there! The butterflies in my stomach flapped when I dared to look down and imagine myself launching off of that sky-high ramp.

Finally, my last Olympic experience was strapping on the long bladed speed skates that clicked and came apart with each stroke. As I skated the iced oval in the crisp night air, I imagined myself as Eric Heiden, six-time gold medalist, slicing through the corners with grace and speed hearing nothing but swish, click, swish, click, breathe....and for just a moment I felt I was there, the crowds, the roar, the excitement.

Armed with a bunch of great new friends and spectacular memories, we got on a plane back to Alaska. The next morning, I marched into my mom's office and proclaimed "I have a plan." My mother stopped what she was doing and listened as I explained, "You see being in 8th grade takes so much time. I spend 10 hours a day doing the school/homework thing, then there are chores and working on my shoes business, training, and I am just out of time and I need more of it to train like I want to, so may I home school?"

My mom decided this would be a fun thing and arranged it within 3 days. As a member of Frontier Charter School, I can still be part of the school district doing the sports and taking classes, but I can organize my day the way I like. So now I do school in the mornings while my mom works on her business at home and at noon we jet to the rink where we both get to play pond hockey with the men. It is my favorite time of day. I have time now, to go to the gym and get to spend hours in my garage shooting pucks and working on my stick handling. I love my life and school is so much more fun for me. I still get to see all my friends at Track and other events while getting to spend time doing what I love.

The other day, my mom came down to the office waving a front page sport article from the April 11, Anchorage Daily News, "They need you," She said. "Who needs me?" I answered. And she dropped the article on my desk. I read, "*Canadians crush the U.S. for world title.*" The US Women's hockey team lost to Canada five to one in the 2007 World Championships. This was just not acceptable. I got up and headed out of the office. My mom asked, "Where are you going?" I said, "I've got to go train for the 2010 Olympics. Krissy and the team are waiting for me".

My name is Zoe Hickel, I am in eighth grade. I love hockey and hope to compete in the 2010 Winter Olympics, Vancouver, Canada. I have a sister Tori that plays hockey and ski races. My dad runs a construction business and used to play for the Aces and my mom was a competitive bike and ski racer. She coaches, teaches and runs youth programs now. I have a black lab lily and two cats. I am lucky. I have a great life!