

The Little SWIMMER



That Could

Sheila Taormina Takes on Big Challenges (and Succeeds)

By Jim Harper

Her best day at the Olympics was also her worst, and the disappointment almost broke the athlete who had broken so many barriers.

The first U.S. Masters swimmer to win Olympic gold. The first woman to qualify and compete in three different Olympic sports. And this year, she is among the first class inducted into the triathlete Hall of Fame. At just under 5 feet, 3 inches tall, Sheila Taormina towers as one of the most versatile athletes ever.

But last year in Beijing, at her fourth Olympics and just shy of her 40th birthday, she hit a wall.

“I was three hours into a 12-hour day, and literally I just wanted to crawl into a hole,” recalls Taormina of competing in the modern pentathlon. “It was the most humiliating Olympic performance I could have ever had. If you had told me, ‘this is how badly you would do in the Olympics,’ I would have said, ‘It’s impossible for me to do that badly.’”

The challenge that almost broke this consummate fighter was fencing. It was the second of five events in the modern pentathlon, a one-day marathon of shooting, fencing, swimming, equestrian show jumping and running.

[Note: In Beijing, the pentathlon started with athletes shooting 20 shots at a range, competing in a round-robin fencing tournament, swimming 200 meters, then competing in a show jump ride. The final event, a 3,000-meter run, was staggered based on points from the first four sports. The winner of the footrace was the winner of the competition. Recently the international governing body for pentathlons has made rule changes.]

What went wrong in that event, where she placed “dead last,” is unimportant to Taormina compared to what went right afterwards.

When she told her older sister in the stands that she wanted to quit, sister Sudee simply said, “You shall not want.” That simple phrase triggered a reaction in Taormina about what motivated her to compete in the first place. Before her was an opportunity, no matter what, to reach her potential. Action is more important than desire.

“It’s not the spirit of an athlete is to fight,” says Taormina.

What happened after her humiliation in fencing demonstrates that Sheila Taormina knows how to fight back. She easily won the 200-meter swim – the event that brought





TAORMINA (above right) with her twin brother, **STEVE**, at a swim practice around 1978. In the picture below, Taormina poses with Greg Phill, her swim coach for 30 years.

her relay gold in Atlanta in 1996 – and then faced a sport as challenging to her as fencing: show jumping.

Just a few years before Beijing, Taormina did not even know how to saddle a horse. Unlike other world-class pentathletes, who typically spend only a few days a month in the saddle, she had to ride several days a week trying to catch up.

As if the odds were not difficult enough, the horse she drew that day in Beijing, named Liangliang, had already been ridden four times

and had not been a strong performer. But with her sister's words of encouragement, and her coach's advice to ride with "compassion and an understanding of basic principles," she decided to give the fourth event everything she had.

Liangliang also gave 100 percent, and Taormina won the event. Of all the moments gathered over competitions in three different sports contested in four separate Olympics – Atlanta, Sydney, Athens, Beijing – this moment was the greatest for Sheila Taormina.

"It's the spirit of not giving up," reflects Taormina on experiencing this victory, just hours after her agonizing defeat.

If her pentathlon performance that day had not included

fencing, then she would have won the silver medal. With it, she placed 19th. But finishes are less important to Taormina than the journey to get there.

Most people don't understand this view, and journalists especially have misinterpreted her pentathlon performance.

"Through my Beijing experience, so many writers have made me feel bad about myself," she says, adding that the media tended to emphasize her failure to achieve a medal that day. "It wasn't my journey. I told the local daily newspaper, maybe if I was making millions, maybe you could rip on me then," says the Michigan native. "But I had to sell my house to do the pentathlon. I went broke. I didn't get anything out of that, other than my human spirit, as a journey. So next time, consider what positive things you could say."

The Brighter Side

There are many positive things that can be said about the athletic career of Taormina. Her mental stamina must also be exceptional. The age at which she took on new challenges speaks highly of her determination to overcome preconceived limitations on what can be learned and at what stage in life.

Taormina was 27 at her first Olympics, where she won gold as part of the 800 freestyle relay. Getting there was not easy for the University of Georgia swimmer. She attempted to make the residential national training team but was rejected, so to make ends meet she worked as a quality representative for a parts supplier to the auto industry. Her goal was to place in the top six and thus qualify for the relay, and she says that she had no delusions about qualifying as an individual. To her, it was the opportunity that mattered.

"I don't ever say my goal is to make it. I always talk in terms of opportunities,"

Taormina says. "I know the opportunity that is in front of me. To give the opportunity the best possible chance, what does my plan include? I want to see that plan through to 100 percent. This is why I exhaust myself. If I don't give that plan 100 percent, the opportunity should have gone to someone else," she concludes.

At age 31, she reached her next Olympic opportunity in the debut triathlon in Sydney, where she placed sixth. Four years later in Athens in 2004, she placed 23rd in the triathlon, but that same year, at age 35, she claimed the world title.

During these triathlon years, Taormina was highly involved in Masters swimming until a personal tragedy derailed her. In the late 90s, she founded the Livonia and Larger Area Masters, known as "LaLa Masters," which included many triathletes. Unfortunately, her work as a coach attracted a stalker, and by 2002 she fled to Florida. Her stalker, James Conyers, spent five years in prison.

The stalking caused post-traumatic stress disorder, and Taormina needed regular counseling to readjust to social situations. She worries that her reticence has been misinterpreted as snobbery, and she is still re-learning how to trust people. But sports has remained her refuge.

Not a Natural

A few years after retiring from triathlons, at 38, Taormina became the 2007 World Cup Standings leader in her newly acquired sport of modern pentathlon. All this from a petite woman who claims that she is "not a natural athlete."

If she was not a natural, then why did Taormina try to learn three completely new sports in a very short time? And in her late 30s? Perhaps even she cannot fully explain her determination, but there is one question that only she can answer: Is any sport as difficult as swim-



ming? The answer may surprise you.

“People think that, ‘Oh, riding a horse is easy,’ or ‘Shooting a gun is easy.’ But if you’re trying to shoot under Olympic pressure or the pressure of trying to make an Olympic team, it’s just as difficult as swimming a 400 IM. I’m the only person on the planet who can say that because I’m the only person who has done something like that. Each sport is equally as difficult as the next and equally as beautiful.”

These are strong words indeed, especially for anyone who has tackled the Olympic 400 IM. But the message of equality and beauty is clear. Every sport offers challenges, and learning a new sport at any age demands concentration and discipline.

Another motivating factor for Taormina was the novelty of breaking through barriers. Who says that it can’t be done, and why not? She had the opportunity to become the first woman to compete in three Olympic sports and to do so as a mature athlete – beyond the whims of youth, but also moving away from its resilience. Could she reach her potential?

Before switching to the pentathlon, Taormina trained for the winter Olympic sport of cross-country skiing, but the sport’s solitude drove her to reconsider an offer from the U.S. Pentathlon Team. She realized,

TAORMINA crosses the finish line first (above) at the 2004 ITU World Triathlon Championships in Madeira, Portugal. On horseback (right) for the 2007 World Pentathlon Championship in Berlin, where she finished ninth. Cycling leg of Madeira race (below, right).

too, that she needed full-time coaching, and she spent 2006 at the Colorado Springs Olympic Training Center in full commitment to her new sport.

More than a decade had passed since she had been rejected for Olympic training by her lifelong sport of swimming, but at 37, she was welcomed by a sport in which she had yet to prove herself. Everyone knew her as a great swimmer and runner, but what about the other three elements of pentathlon? She had a grueling year.

“I was at ground zero, learning them from zero, zero, zero,” says Taormina. “It was extremely frustrating.” She felt bombarded by the three new sports of shooting, fencing and riding, and she had to allow her running and swimming practice to wane. “You try to train for five sports and see how your swim times are,” she laments.

The intricacies of each new sport, however, compensated for her lack of attention to old loves. Holding the gun steady. Dancing with the épée (one of a fencer’s choice of weapons). Gauging a horse’s strength. She learned to appreciate each one.



Taormina believes in the saying, “The more we learn, the more we appreciate; the more we appreciate, the more we love.” She learned to love the pentathlon as she had loved the triathlon and swimming.

More Olympic Moments

While the pentathlon brought

the highest drama to her Olympic experience, swimming provided Taormina with two other favorite memories. The first is of competing in front of the home crowd in Atlanta and actually being able to hear them while in the water. She dramatically recalls how, during her freestyle leg,



Throughout her athletic career, whenever she was at home in Livonia, Mich., **TAORMINA** has trained with her age group swim team – the Clarenceville Swim Team – coached by **GREG PHILL**. In this photo, taken in 1996 shortly before she left for the Atlanta Olympics, she hangs out with her teammates while at a swim meet in Findlay, Ohio.

she heard a distinct “U.” Then “S.” And “A.” She felt like the crowd was “pumping me up and out of the water.” In the usually solitary and subdued world of swimming, it doesn’t get much better than that.

The second memory involves a van ride in Beijing, when she reconnected with a swimmer who told her a story about when they had first met at the Olympic Training Center in 1997. A visiting speaker

that year at the center in Colorado Springs, Taormina had noticed the swimmer struggling with altitude adjustment, and she challenged her with a “workout” of drinking glasses of water. This creative form of encouragement from Taormina made a strong impression and helped this swimmer to persevere.

The swimmer telling the story was none other than Olympic champion Megan Quann Jendrick. “It meant the world to me that she felt something,” recalls Taormina.

Taormina now shares these experiences and the meaning they hold as a motivational speaker. But don’t expect her to reveal any plans for a fourth Olympic sport. She has no plans to pursue future competitions.

Her typical week involves a few endurance workouts that might include a mix of swimming, running and weight training.

What remain intense, however, are her convictions. When asked about the athlete she admires the most, she launches into a eulogy for Eric Liddell. Liddell, a 1924 Olympic athlete who was portrayed in the film “Chariots of Fire,” refused to run on the Sabbath. This type of deep conviction inspires Sheila Taormina more than any athletic achievement. (As she sings his praises, you can practically cue the music of the movie’s indelible soundtrack.)

When Liddell finished with sports, he became a missionary in China, where he died as a prisoner of war.

“Missionary of the Possible” might be Taormina’s other life’s work. It could be summed up as making the most of every opportunity that life offers, and it was demonstrated powerfully at swimming’s recent World Championships in Rome.

United States swimmer Ariana Kukors had placed a dis-

appointing third in the 200 IM at trials, but one of the top two qualifiers dropped out of the race at Worlds to concentrate on other swims. It gave Kukors an unexpected gift, and she grabbed it. She smashed the world record twice and won the gold medal. When asked about the gift, she framed it simply as an opportunity. And she made the most of it.

This mindset is the message that Taormina wants people to appreciate. Each opportunity is a blessing and a gift. You could fail miserably, or you could triumph. Some days are certainly better than others. But opportunities must be seized, because they are not distributed equally.

She recalls seeing street kids in Mexico who exhibited natural athleticism but did not have the opportunity to develop it. With so many people limited by their circumstances, she recognizes that “we simply don’t know who the greatest athletes in the world are.”

We do know that one of the fiercest living world-class competitors, Sheila Taormina, has tried and accomplished athletic feats that no one else has. She has felt the rush of Olympic gold and the crush of Olympic embarrassment. She fought the good fight and did not give up.

Although her story may be Olympian, she will probably never become a household name. She is not the world’s most gifted athlete, and she will never be known as the best swimmer, or the best triathlete, or the best pentathlete.

But she has guts, guts, guts. Little Sheila Taormina is not the most decorated athlete, but she might just be the most determined. She is, like the title of her favorite book, “The Little Engine That Could.”

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