



FINISH LINE by bill mccollom

An inspiring eye-opener

PARALYMPIAN'S PERSPECTIVE OFFERS HOPE TO REHABBING MIDDLEBURY SKIER

"Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve" – fortune cookie message discovered by Kelly Brush on March 3, 2006

I've never been good at dealing with bad news. I certainly empathize with those caught in tragic circumstances, but I fumble for words and then pull the blankets over my head in the hopes that it will go away. When the daughter of one of my best friends was paralyzed from the chest down in a skiing accident in February, however, it was time to open my eyes and take notice.

I was initially too scared to look, but the closer I got to this situation, the more convinced I was that this story would have a happy ending. It's not the story line that all of us had envisioned for Kelly Brush, a cheery, athletic Middlebury College sophomore who will probably spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair, but given the fight in this particular Panther, there's no reason why her future won't be a tale of love, challenge and achievement – the best any of us could hope for.

Optimism was tough to come by upon first hearing the news. Kelly's parents, Charlie and Mary, started keeping a journal immediately after the accident. The first entry conveyed the bare facts: "Kelly was involved in a ski racing accident on February 18th during the Williams Carnival. ... Her list of injuries included a punctured lung, four cracked ribs and a spinal fracture at T 7-8."

Three days later, the next journal entry was even starker: "Kelly's prognosis is unknown at this time, but all indications are that she will be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life."

That's when the blankets went over my head.

Kelly's family groped for any and all sources of hope. As they joined Kelly at Craig Hospital in Colorado, the only certainty in their new lives was that things would never be the same, but they sensed that patience and positivism would be the keys to unlocking a productive future for their daughter. Mary's journal entry read: "Once there [Craig Hospital], her life will become

centered around what she can do in the future, not what she can't do – doors opening, not closing – and that goes for the whole family."

Upon reading this, I pulled the blankets back, opened one eye and, acting on the recommendation of a friend, I contacted U.S. Paralympian Nick Catanzarite to gain some insight as to what Kelly might be going through.

Nick was a 17-year-old able-bodied ski racer from the Midwest who was paralyzed from the waist down in a ski racing accident on Jan. 15, 1995. His road to recovery took him all the way to Torino, Italy, where he finished fourth in the 2006 Paralympic super G event. Recalling those first few weeks after his accident, Nick said, "It's not an enviable place. Lots of people came to visit ... but there's not much anyone could say or do. You just have to try as hard as you can to be patient."

The thought of spending the rest of his life in a wheelchair was too grim for Nick to contemplate, but it was a corner that had to be turned. "Being an athlete is how you identify yourself, as well as how others relate to you," Nick explained. "It took a while before I

could accept that this was what I had – this was my new life."

But Nick also remembered that being an athlete ultimately was a huge bonus in accelerating the rehab process. I then recalled a journal entry where Charlie proudly conveyed that Kelly had popped her first wheelchair "wheelie," and I finally felt the stirrings of hope.

When I stopped in to visit Kelly and her parents at the end of March, she looked pale and had lost weight, but there was no place for doom and gloom in this hospital room. She boasted that this was the first day she was able to sit up in her wheelchair for most of the day, and she was still doing the exercises that had been assigned for the day, despite being sore and ready to retreat to her bed. My jaw dropped as she even spoke of getting up to Winter Park next November to learn to ski on a mono-ski.

Nick noted, "Kelly's facing an enormous challenge, but being an athlete makes it easier. You have to learn to do so many new

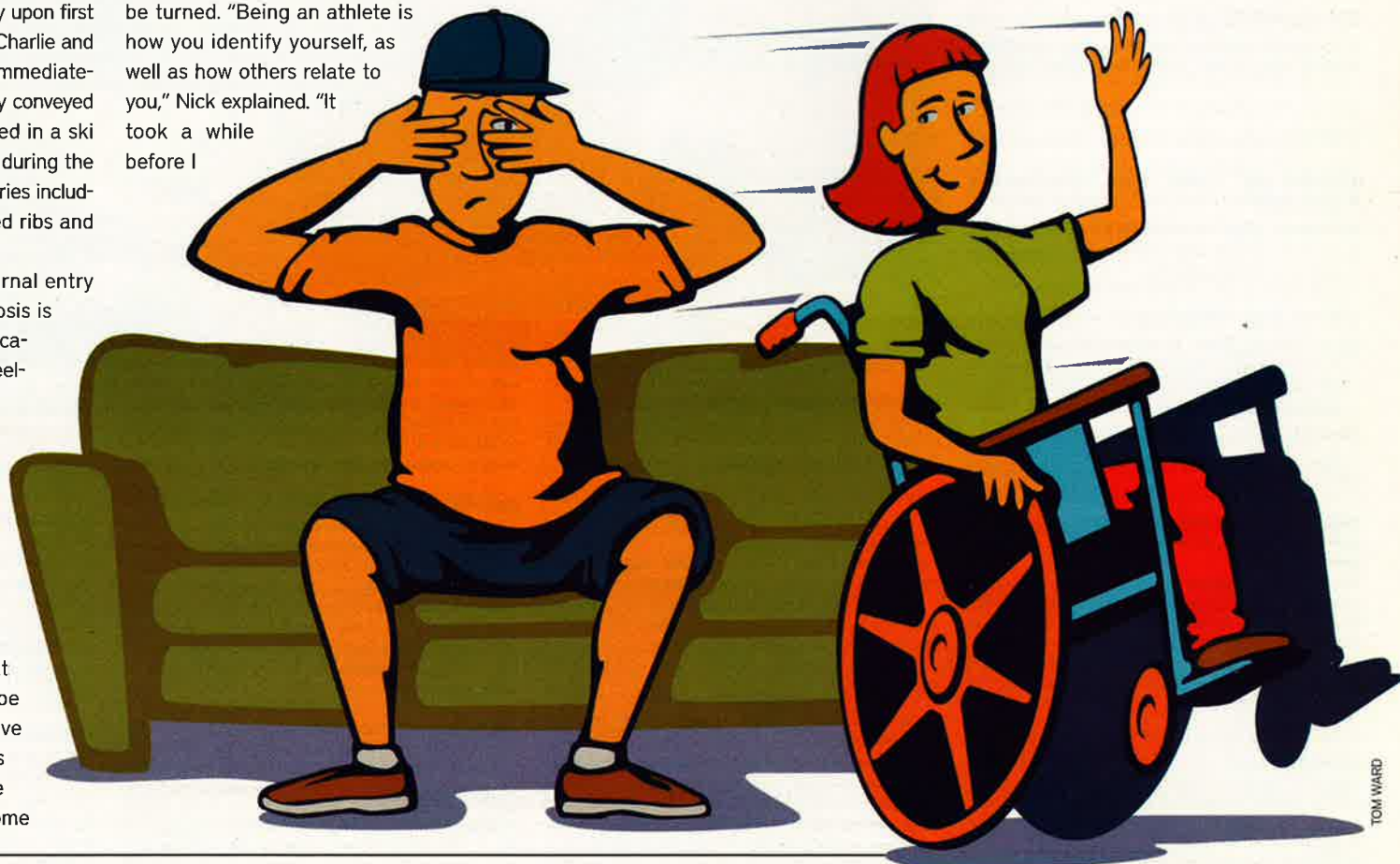
things, but as an athlete you know what it takes to set goals and learn new skills. There are so many challenges, but athletes are not so afraid to take the chances to tackle them."

Still, Nick didn't pull any punches. "Any time you see people walking around, you're aware of what's been lost," he said, "but when I'm competing, my disability is the last thing on my mind. My life is changed forever, but I've had opportunities I never would have experienced as an able-bodied person."

Now that Kelly and Nick, as well as Charlie and Mary, have pried both my eyes wide open, I too can see a light burning brightly at the end of this dark tunnel. In the journal, Charlie noted: "Some things are different for sure, but more are the same, and we will discover new adventures one day at a time with love, compassion and understanding that we do not yet understand."

It's amazing what you can see, if you just open your eyes. You just might find a source of inspiration.

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TOM WARD