

Groves
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She doesn't drink coffee on competition day anymore. She doesn't need the buzz like she used to. She tries to be calm and relaxed on the line and tries not to think about her opponent while she's on the ice.

Don't get the wrong impression. Her head is still in the race. She's definitely focused. But on herself, her technique and executing the race how she wants to. There's still the same element of excitement and she still wants to skate the best race she can.

Kristina Groves had been setting goals for herself throughout her entire long track speed skating career which began almost 20 years ago. Gradually and logically, she would set new goals each season and strive to do better than the season before. She would set out to achieve a particular place or time in a particular race. It seemed to be working for her. She improved steadily and continued this goal setting strategy, thinking it was important to see a lower number beside her name each year.

Groves placed fourth overall at the 2003 world speed skating championships and consequently set out to get on the podium the following year.

It wasn't achieving this goal that made her relax a little. It was failing.

In 2004, she ended up thinking too much about the podium and skated poorly. That year, she placed seventeenth overall – certainly not making the podium like she had hoped. Groves realized then that the mindset she'd used through her career thus far was no longer working and decided to seek out a more internal evaluation.

Speed skating is Groves' full-time job and she is dedicated to everything that comes with being an Olympic athlete. She trains hard six days a week and competes in national-level competitions from November to April, but has relaxed over the past few years to enjoy the sport and to balance training with the other things in life.

Groves first tried speed skating when she was eleven years old. Watching the 1988 Calgary Olympics on television, she saw Gaetan Bouchard race. Even though he didn't win a medal, "she just sort of fell in love with the sport," said her brother Erik, 31.

Her mom, Else, borrowed a pair of old speed skates, too small for Groves' feet, from a friend and took her daughter to the Rideau Canal. She stood to the side in the freezing Ottawa winter and watched Groves on speed skates for the first time. "I'm pretty sure I wiped out a couple times," said Groves. "I think I must have liked it though because after I was like, 'Yeah mom, I want to do this.'" She went home and called the Ottawa Pacers, a club that trains out of Kanata and joined the following season.

Leaving her Ottawa home after high school, Groves moved to Calgary to train on the Olympic Oval, Canada's only covered speed skating oval. She has been on the national team for ten years, has competed twice in the Olympics and hopes to race in the Vancouver Olympics in 2010.

Groves won two silver medals at the Torino Olympics this past February for the 1500-metre and team pursuit races. She is a medalist of multiple national championships and won silver in the 3000-metre race at a world cup competition last month.

Groves' close-knit family always supported her dream to be a speed skater. "They never pushed me too hard. They let me do my own thing," she said. They've always been happy to see her doing something she loves.

The family often went cross-country skiing together through Gatineau Park as she was growing up. Like her brother, Groves was on skis as a toddler and raced as a youth. It was her brother's sport though and he kept skiing when she stopped to focus on speed skating.

On a conscious level, Groves didn't set out to distinguish herself from her skiing family. "I think looking back maybe I wanted to have something that was my own thing," said Groves, who celebrates her thirtieth birthday today.

Groves still lives in Calgary and shares a home with her brother. She spends a good part of her weekdays at the Oval training and typically races on Saturdays. When she's not at the Oval, she deals with the other responsibilities of her job, like talking with schoolchildren and dealing with e-mails. Sunday is a day off. "I love Sunday," she said. "Sometimes I do absolutely nothing and sometimes I get a lot done – groceries, laundry, that kind of stuff."

When Sunday is over, Groves gets back to work. Both her brother and her coach can describe her in one word: focus. "Sometimes it is a bit too much focus," said Xiuli Wang, 39, Groves' coach.

But focus seems to be a key ingredient in Groves' success as an athlete and Wang is the first to admit the improvements she's seen. Wang said she's witnessed a big change in Groves since she started coaching her after the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics.

“During the last four years she has developed a lot,” Wang said. “She is willing to do the work. She trains hard.” Wang enjoys working with Groves because she knows what she wants as an athlete, is straightforward, open-minded and willing to accept and perfect any suggestions from her coach. “As a coach, I am really happy to work with that kind of athlete,” Wang said.

Even her childhood coach agrees. “Kristina was always willing to work hard and she enjoyed training,” said Dave Morrison, 47. He said that if he told the athletes to skate more laps, she’d do it without hesitation. “She enjoyed training, even though success didn’t come easily for her,” Morrison said.

Hard work paid off and success came in Torino after working hard. “Winning a silver medal was a culmination of all those years [of training],” Groves said. “It represents how hard I worked to get there.”

Groves credits some of her success to Wang. When Wang came from China to Canada, she brought with her a sense of discipline Groves didn’t know before. “She is constantly working on those little technical things. She’ll tell you over and over again in practice,” Groves said. Speed skating is a hugely technical sport and Wang’s eye for technique helped Groves to the podium this year. “There is no way I could’ve come half as far as I have, if I didn’t have her as a coach,” she said.

Her brother says that doing well in a race is an added bonus for Groves. “She’s taken a step back from making it the be all and end all of life,” Erik Groves said. Being a graduate student studying in sports physiology, he thinks that her new approach is one more athletes should adopt. “She’s still prepared to race on the days she has to race,” he said.

Groves herself said her internal evaluation takes the pressure off and that she's skated a lot better since. She knows how she wants a race to feel. "I should know the second I cross the line if I am happy with myself," said Groves. Even the numbers beside her name have lowered.

Groves gives back to the communities that have supported her career. "I think that's what athletes see is important, to give back," she said. She promotes Right to Play, a humanitarian organization that, with help from elite athletes, offers sport and health programs to underdeveloped countries. The programs that Right to Play offers are currently implemented in 22 nations, most of which are in Africa. She occasionally gives speeches to promote the organization and raise funds. "A lot of kids don't even know what it's like to play. We take it for granted that we know how to play," Groves said. Groves wears the Right to Play logo on her suit as a way to promote awareness about the organization.

Another program she is involved in is Youth Education through Sport (YES) which is based in Calgary. Through talks in schools, elite athletes act as a role model for fair play, dedication, commitment, health and self-esteem in sport. "She is a good speaker," said Wang. Groves does the talks so that kids will know they can set and achieve high goals. "YES is great way to be involved in the community and talk to the future," she said.

Groves' brother says she is a good role model for the children she speaks to. "In our world where we tend to focus on winning and money, she brings a fresh perspective," he said. "Just working hard and accomplishing something that very few people get to do

can be very rewarding.” Groves is happy with her life and wouldn’t change anything. “I don’t make a lot of money, I can’t buy a house or anything like that,” she said. “It’s worth it to me to not have any of that stuff right now to be able to do what I’m able to do.”

Getting involved in programs and giving back to the community is just one way Groves has balanced her life on and off the ice. “Over the last two or three years I’ve chilled out about [training],” she said. “I would say training still comes first, but I still seek out other experiences and hobbies.” She has taken guitar lessons, woodworking lessons and this fall, is taking a CPR course. She graduated from the University of Calgary in 2004 with a degree in kinesiology. “It’s really important to have those other things to do,” Groves said.

There is a spark in Groves life, much the same as speed skating was a spark in 1988. She wants to build a straw bail house that is environmentally sustainable and “off the grid” as much as possible. The project in her mind, she sometimes looks at land around Gatineau Park and Wakefield, Que. on the internet. “I just have to do something about it because it’s in the back of my mind,” said Groves.

Besides doing something about the straw bail house, Groves is not sure what she’ll do after speed skating. “I think maybe I’m one percent scared that I won’t [find another passion],” Groves said. “There’s probably nothing that will be quite the same as skating.” She has tossed around ideas of what she’d like to pursue when her speed skating career is over. She’s thought about working with people to help them keep fit as

they age. She's thought about teaching and about coaching kids. The one thing she knows for sure is that she'd love to move back to Ottawa.

Even though Groves might not know what will come next, everyone around her is sure she'll succeed in anything she pursues. "I think she is there to set her own limits and there really aren't any limits for her, her personality [or] her success as an athlete," said Mark Mathies, the national team manager, 31. "I think she could do whatever she wants to do essentially." Her former coach, Morrison, agrees. "I think she could do about anything she wants, to be honest," he said. "In anything that she does, whether it's working with young people or older people, she'll do well."

She doesn't have to find another passion quite yet. Groves hopes to train at least until 2010 and compete in the Vancouver Olympics. "I feel like I have room to get better. I'm not ready to quit right now," she said, "and to be able to skate a games in your home country, it's like no other thing you could imagine." She said it seems like a good place to end her career, but still doesn't know if she'll be able to give it up. Ultimately, she'll have to ask herself if there's room to improve and if she's having fun. In four years, if she can still answer yes to those questions, who knows when she'll stop.

And why give it up? "It's a pretty good way to live your life. To have that drive for something that makes you happy to be alive."

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