

VERONICA BRENNER *freestyle*


STEVE OMISCHL

WON MORE
WORLD CUP
HARDWARE THAN
ANY OTHER CANADIAN
ATHLETE LAST SEASON.
SO HOW COME NO ONE
KNOWS HIM?

AERIALIST STEVE OMISCHL MAY WELL BE ONE OF THE BEST athletes to ever wear the Maple Leaf, yet few Canadians have heard of him. The 26-year-old North Bay, Ontario, native dominated the World Cup aerial circuit last season, winning six events standing on the podium a total of nine times in the 12 events on the 2003-04 calendar. After finishing 2nd on the aerial Grand Prix in 2003, Omischl (pronounced Oh-michelle) handily won the aerial title, along with the World Cup Overall title in 2004. Most athletes of his calibre would find this lack of recognition extremely frustrating, but not Omischl. But then he's no

Photo: MIKE RIDEWOOD

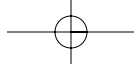


Photo: JIM FORSYTH

typical jock. Omischl's story is one that deserves a forum, which is why I spoke with him about his feelings on his anonymity, as well as what makes him such a powerful role model in a time when we are all searching for heroes.

SC: You're one of the most successful freestyle skiers in history, perhaps one of the most talented athletes Canada has ever produced, yet few Canadians have ever heard of you. Even young freestylers don't know the kind of incredible season you had. How do you feel about that?

OMISCHL: You know what, it's good and bad. I'm kind of disappointed I haven't received that kind of recognition, not that I'm in it for respect or being known, but you work hard and want to be respected for what you do and the accomplishments that you have...at the same time I feed off of that. I love it when people totally ignore who I am and I can sort of stick it to them in the competition.

know, you just have to deal with it.

SC: You mentioned that alpine gets more media coverage and people pay more attention to it. How would you make freestyle more popular to the masses?

OMISCHL: It's a tough sell. It's a fringe sport. Anyone can go and rent some skis and ski some gates and have respect for alpine skiers. And any kid can get into a local racing program and train gates. But with freestyle, we don't have the facilities, number one, to get kids started. Number two, it's a sport that unless you have a gymnastics, diving or trampoline background, or you're a little bit nutty, you're not really into trying flips and twists. Alpine, golf, any of the mainstream sports, any idiot can go and rent a tennis racquet and go and have respect for the players, but in aerials, you know, nobody even has a clue what tricks we're doing, let alone how difficult they are, let alone how much work we put in...we're basically left

SC: Why do you think it is that no one knows who you are?

OMISCHL: You've got to win a major. If you're not going to win an Olympics or a World Championships then forget about it. You can win as many World Cups as you want. If it was alpine skiing and I won that many WCs, people would definitely know me. But this is freestyle, we have a history of people dominating and you

like circus freaks who only get noticed every four years at the Olympics when we're the number-one ticket to sell out. Maybe they want to see the crashes, not the nice jumps.

SC: Maybe you should crash more so you'd get more attention.

OMISCHL: Hey, if that's the case I would have been a hero after Salt Lake. [Steve crashed and placed 11th in the 2002 Olympics.]

SC: Who were your role models growing up? Did you have any heroes?

OMISCHL: No, I was a derelict kid. Maybe Homer Simpson. I wasn't into anything. No sports, I wasn't into school. I was into hanging out with my friends, watching TV and eating Mum's apple pie. I was a bit of an overweight kid with no goals, no ambition. All I liked to do was ski in the wintertime and that was it. It was only once I got involved in the freestyle program in North Bay that I started to see how when I set goals for myself, when I worked for it, I saw that I could achieve it. I first started doing it in sport and then I realized I could probably do the same thing in school, and my marks went from 60 per cent to 85 per cent by the time I graduated.

SC: You talk about being a little overweight as a kid. That's not something elite athletes admit to very often.

OMISCHL: When I say overweight, I think I was 15-20 pounds overweight. I was overweight for probably a year, two years of my childhood. That was grades 7 and 8, when I was at the height of my laziness. As soon as I got to high school, that's when it all changed.

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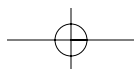
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SC: When you got to high school, was it a conscious decision on your part to get involved in sport?

OMISCHL: I was just sick of getting teased by my peers for being overweight. That was my main motivation to go running every day in the summer.

SC: It's been recognized in Canada that childhood obesity has now reached epic proportions. For parents who see their kids heading along that same path you were on—the couch, the TV, the apple pie—what do you suggest they do? How can they motivate their kids, how can they get them to become active and lose weight like you did?

OMISCHL: There's no formula to motivate kids. What's the saying? You can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink, right? It was a decision on my part to not get teased anymore for being overweight. I thank people now who made fun of me when I was younger. I guess I was lucky that my mum, a single parent, was such a hard worker. I saw the hours she put in at work, then around the home and the effort she put in with us to make sure that we turned out okay. When I knew I wanted to get good in sport, get good in school, lose weight, it was like, well, work is the only way to do it. I guess I was lucky in that regard, but some other kid, I can't answer that question. I think I'd get into teaching if I knew the answer to that. I think you really have to know the kid, know what they're interested in.

SC: You're known to be one of the hardest-working athletes on tour. Do you think your mum instilled that work ethic in you?

OMISCHL: Definitely. You look around today and you see people who are lazy. They don't work, they just think that things are going to fall into their lap. In my opinion there is only one way to get something and that's to work hard. I watched video the other day of me in the beginning and I was laughing out loud at how bad I was. Somebody should have stopped me. If it wasn't for just putting in the hours and doing more jumps than anyone else, there's no way, no matter how much "talent" I may or may not have, the only thing that's put me in the position I'm in now is hard work. And I think anyone who's truly successful in life will say the same thing, whether they're a doctor, an engineer, a marathon runner or an aerialist. Hard work is the only way to truly be the best in whatever field you're in.

SC: Day in, day out, aerials is a tough

sport. You do the same thing over and over again in training, and you're looking for tiny improvements, especially at the level you're at. You already mentioned that the one thing that motivates you to work so hard is the fact that nobody knows who you are, but what else motivates you?

OMISCHL: What motivates me is the Olympics. Truly, I want to win the big one, when it matters, and I guess then it will be gravy train time. It will be payoff for all the hard work. This is a job and any job done well should be recognized. If I were at a company that had an incentive program for results in sales, and if I met those sales figures, I'd be compensated, as simple as that.

SC: So are you just in it for the money?

OMISCHL: First and foremost I want to win. After winning, I guess I would like the comfort of knowing that I can relax a bit before entering "the real world", i.e. school and workforce. Money doesn't make that happen alone. The confidence of being an Olympic champion would help me along with the rest of my life, whatever avenue I choose.

SC: We've already discussed some of the challenges you've faced, but there's also another one: you're a severe asthmatic.

OMISCHL: I was, growing up, but now I'm a managed asthmatic and I haven't had a problem in years. Through training I've been able to strengthen my immune system and my lung capacity. But growing up I was in and out of the hospital. I said that I was overweight in grades 7 and 8, but from when I was born until grade 6 I was in the hospital two or three times a year. I've probably spent, no lie, about six months of my life in the hospital, either having pneumonia or bronchitis or something else related to asthma. I wasn't overweight then because I was such a sickly kid. Then when I started to get older and grew out of it a bit, that's when I was lazy and overweight. Then when I got into sport, that's when I lost the weight and started being healthy and now I'm in super shape. When I get off the phone with you, I'm going for a run before I go to bed. Not many asthmatics do that. I feel great now, totally managed.

[Author's note: Although Steve is considered a "managed" asthmatic, due to his illness he only uses 45 per cent of his lung capacity. The average athlete uses up to 95 per cent.]

SC: Now that you've experienced such great success, how are you going to stay hungry?

OMISCHL: I gave my World Cup globe away to my high school and I don't look at any trophies or care about results from last season, and this summer I've actually worked harder than I ever have in my entire life. I'm going to pretend like I'm a guy still coming up, hunting like everyone else.

SC: Tell me about going back to your old school.

OMISCHL: After this season I went into my old school...I didn't really want to do it because I really wanted to have something big to go there with, I didn't want to go in with just a few World Cup medals, but I did go and I spoke to all the students. I told them that I felt really bad that when I was a student I didn't participate in any of the extracurricular activities and I didn't help win any of the trophies that are in the trophy case, so I told them I would give them my Overall globe. They could display the globe and hopefully some of them will get motivated from that to do whatever they wanted to do in life.

SC: Do you consider yourself a role model?

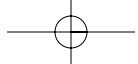
OMISCHL: No...I do, but I don't. I do, I absolutely do, but I don't want to get caught up in that scene until after I have the big ones. I don't want to start patting myself on the back, I don't want to relax, I don't want to think, oh, I'm a role model, and blah, blah, blah. I want to stay hungry and keep going.

SC: Who are your role models now?

OMISCHL: I've always been a fan of Tiger Woods. He's a grinder and I respect that. Even after all that's going on with him now, he's under a lot of stress. Everyone's giving him a hard time because he doesn't win tournaments anymore, but you know what, he's in the top-10 every week in a sport that is super hard to dominate every week. Anyone can get a bad break and be out of the tournament. Tiger takes a bad break but he keeps himself in the tournament when most players would crumble. You have to respect the effort that he puts in. I look up to him the most. If I could meet anyone in the world, it would probably be him. If I could play one round with him...if I were on the golf course by myself and Tiger Woods strolled up to me and asked if he could play a round with me, that would be the coolest thing on the face of the Earth.

SC: Is there anything else you want Canadians to know about Steve Omischl?

OMISCHL: I kind of like being an unknown. ☹



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