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Sue Palmer-Komar: A Professional Cyclist

An athlete may technically only be defined as a person trained or gifted in exercises involving physical agility, stamina, and strength. However, being an athlete is so much more than that simple definition. It is a lifestyle. A lifestyle that bears many daily sacrifices. A lifestyle that survives solely from personal motivation. A lifestyle that pushes one to their maximum. A lifestyle that few people can commit to.

Throughout Sue Palmer-Komar's life she has demonstrated these qualities with excellence.

Sue Palmer-Komar has been a professional cyclist for around twenty years. She was born on January 27, 1967 in Collingwood Ontario (1). Sue Palmer-Komar began cycling in her later years of high school as summer training for the cross-country skiing team (7). She slowly transitioned into exclusively pursuing cycling as she entered McMaster University in the fall of 1986 (7). In an interview, Sue said, "By the time I was in first year of university I was still skiing a bit but at that point I knew it was cycling all the way." (5) She worked hard throughout university at improving both her academics and athletics. She excelled at both, seeing as she was on the Dean's List for three years. After graduating in 1992 with a degree in Physical Education she moved to attend the University of Windsor to attain her Bachelor of Education (7). She lived in Windsor for a year, and then moved back to Hamilton where she still resides today. Throughout those

years in university, Sue's passion and love for cycling continued to grow. By the time she graduated, Sue was driven to pursue a career as a cyclist.

Following the completion of Sue Palmer-Komar's university degree, she was able to accomplish a lot in her athletic career. She became a full time cyclist as soon as she was finished university in 1993 (7). She participated in the Canadian National Road Race many times. Some of these include the years; 1992 and 1995 where she finished as a second place champion, 1996 she placed first and the years 2003 and 2005 she placed third (8). She also participated in the Canadian National Time Trial. In 1995, she placed second and in 2004 and 2005 she ranked as a first place champion (8). Sue did her first World Championship in Oslo, Norway and placed 12th in the road race. Out of the thirteen times she participated in the World Championships, she only placed higher twice: 11th in 2000 in Plouay, France and 10th in 2001 in Lisbon, Portugal. In October 2003 when they were held in Hamilton she placed 13th. Over the years Sue has finished 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 18th and 20th in the World Championships. There are typically about 140-150 competitors on the start line at the World Championships (5). In the year 1996, Sue was able to attend the Summer Olympics in Atlanta. She was twenty-nine years old at this time, and she competed in the Women's Road Race Individual. It was on July 21 and she finished in tenth place (2). In 2000, Sue took a full year break when she had her first daughter Trinity (7). In 2002, Sue was able to compete in the Commonwealth Games in Rivington. At this race she won a silver medal and was truly recognized for her climbing ability (1). Also, in this same year, she won the 'Golden Horseshoe Athlete of the Year' award for being a cyclist (3). In 2003, she placed second while she was on the Canadian National Team in the Waalse Pijl (6). During this year,

she also placed as a finalist for the “Golden Horseshoe Athlete of the Year’ award (3). During 2004, Sue entered the Olympics for the second time in Athens. To be eligible for the Olympics, she had to win a time trial, in which she finished forty-one seconds in front of the defending Champion, Lyne Bessette. In the summer Athens Olympics, Sue competed in two events. The first was the Women’s Road Race, where she finished in eleventh place. The second event was the Women’s Individual Time Trial, in which she finished in seventeenth place (2). Also in that year, she ended as third in prologue and second in stage three at the Redlands Bicycle Classic on Mt. Ruidoux. She received first place at the Circuit National Feminin de Saint-Amand-Montrond and she became part of the Genesis Scuba Team (8). During the year of 2006, Sue participated in the UCI Road World Championships cycling event. This took place in September in Madrid, Spain. Sue Palmer-Komar finished in fourteenth place (5). Overall, this includes some of the events that Sue has participated in, and that have increased Sue’s skills as professional cyclist.

Sue retired from professional cycling in 2006 after the birth of her second daughter, Jade. Although she is not still participating in professional races, she is still remembered for her accomplishments. In an article about her retirement it states, “...thirty nine year old Palmer-Komar was renowned worldwide for her consistency and sportsmanship” (4, p.3). When asked if being a professional athlete was worth the lifestyle, Sue states, “Yes, I have no regrets” (5).

The journey as an elite athlete has definitely shaped the life that Sue Palmer-Komar now lives. She is currently teaching French part time in elementary schools. This, to a certain extent, is due to the language that Sue learned while traveling around the world for competitions (5). For many years, Sue had to balance the life of

motherhood and that of racing. It has not been until after her retirement in 2006 that she has been able to enjoy spending long periods of time at home with her family. She and her husband, Chris, have two daughters, Trinity who is nine and Jade who is two. Sue is also still involved in coaching and mentoring some younger cyclists. This is her way of giving back to the community of Hamilton, for all of the support they have given her in pursuing her dreams. Although she no longer a full time athlete, she still plans on participating in local events. In an interview with Sue, she stressed, “It [cycling] is a life long sport”.

In conclusion, Sue Palmer-Komar strongly depicted the role of being a professional cyclist. As Sue said, “At the teenage age you are looking for your identity, and I remember thinking that in grade school my friends were heading in the wrong way. I remember thinking that high school would be a fresh start for me and that I wanted to find a different crowd or something else” (5). This ‘something else’ was found in playing sports, starting with cross country skiing, and then ending with cycling. Athletes participating in sports means more than just winning and succeeding, the sport they play becomes their identity. Sue Palmer-Komar has achieved this identity as a cyclist. One who bears many daily sacrifices, exercises personal motivation, and pushes herself to the maximum.

Interview with Sue Palmer-Komar

Friday, March 13, 2009

How did you start into the sports world?

“I was always active as a kid, but then I was diagnosed at the age of eleven with asthma and I wasn’t given an inhaler. This decreased my participation in sports at a young age. In grade eight, I had a gym teacher who wasn’t very helpful in developing my skills and I received a bad mark. This was another negative experience that affected my view of athletics. In grade nine, there was a teacher who knew my dad and knew that I had a pair of skis. He sent a note to my homeroom class and asked for me to come see him in a classroom after school. When I met with him, he suggested that I should come out for the cross-country ski team. This was the only sport that I participated in throughout grade nine. In grade 10, I added track and field and then in the fall of grade eleven I did cross country running. Every year I participated in more and more sports. Around grade twelve one of my ski teammate’s fathers, who ran the local cycling team, asked me to join them for the summer. I thought it sounded fun so I decided to join. Once I joined, I just kept going with the flow of cycling. My mom bought me a bike and equipment, and I started cycling. Then I took the next step, and began to compete in races to keep a competitive edge. Next thing I knew it was my sport. By the time I was in first year university I was still skiing a bit but at that point I knew it was cycling all the way.”

Do you still ski?

“Yes, but not really racing. My skiing is more for fun, and not as serious. My family and I ski every weekend. My oldest daughter participates in a jackrabbit program running in Collingwood every weekend for eight weeks of the season. I grew up in Collingwood so I am used to all the skiing.”

What was your main motivation for starting sports?

“You know when you are at that teenage age when you are looking for your identity, and you don’t know what that is yet. I do remember consciously thinking that my friends in grade 7-8 were heading the wrong way. I remember thinking that high school would be kind of a fresh start for me and that I wanted to find a different crowd or something else. Then that teacher sent me the note asking me to participate in the cross-country ski team. This was my `something else`, and it allowed me to make new friends. Even now, some of the friends I made through skiing I am still good friends with. One only lives five kilometers away from me now. Sports, in general, are a way to find your identity or a way to identify yourself. After joining the ski team, I was able to find my identity. Initially, skiing allowed me to identify myself as athletic. This led to me being able to truly realize my identity as a professional cycling athlete. For me, my motivation was not as much about winning the races, but about how much I could improve from year to year. It was an internal challenge more than anything for me.”

Did you have any main goals when you first started being an athlete?

“Yes, I think I have that kind of personality that sets goals. Even now, in teaching I set goals for the students and myself. It is hard, sometimes you have to really step back and be flexible. I remember setting goals in high school. For example, in the regional

competitions to qualify for OFSA, I would be like, “I know I can win GBSSA (Georgia Bay Secondary School), but I want to win that ski race by 2 minutes.” I would set goals like that for myself. I was a weird kid in high school. I wanted to go to bed early so I could wake up early, so I could go to the weight room at school. I wanted it so bad. I wanted to have success at something, to do well in something. I wanted to work hard at something and see it pay off. Maybe it was a subconscious experiment to see if hard work really did pay off. When I started cycling it was just an activity that was different from skiing that would give me fitness for cross-country skiing and it was also an opportunity to try something new. My interest was also piqued from watching the 1984 Olympics and cheering on Steve Bauer. I remember watching and thinking to myself “I’d like to try that”.

As far as cycling, did you have any major goals?

“I never specifically had a certain race I wanted to compete in or level of cycling that I wanted to achieve. It was always that I just want to see how I can improve my performance. Even when I went to the Olympics, I talked to some Olympians who said, “I knew from when I was a kid that I was going to be in the Olympics.” I never said that. Even two years before I went to the Olympics I had never even said that. It is always a thought in the back your mind for any Olympic sport, but it is not what I said to myself.”

When you were in your regular season what was your training schedule like?

“When I finished university I became a cyclist full time until last year. It is a job and it takes a lot of self-discipline, since you don’t have to be at a workplace from 8-4. It is up to you to make your schedule and get out on your bike. That’s your workplace. For training, you just have to get up and do it. You talk to your coach and ask what you have to do that day. It would be hard. I would come home and want to play with the kids, but I was tired. You are structuring your whole day around that one thing and there are many daily sacrifices. You can’t stay up late watching television and you have to be very disciplined with your diet. In everything you do, you have to ask yourself, ‘Is this going to be good for my sport?’. Obviously there are going to be those days that you have to go to McDonalds or Dairy Queen, or you will go crazy. Most of the time, your day is simply focused on getting done what you need to get done to do well.”

Was being a professional athlete worth it all?

“Yes, I have no regrets.” I have never regretted any of the sacrifices I have had to make like missing my university graduation (both of them) or missing important family events, even putting off having a family until I was into my thirties. Nor, would I trade in any of my experiences while racing and training for a pension plan. I am 42 years old and have no pension plan in place or RRSPs. This is probably is the greatest sacrifice an Olympic level athlete will make and one thing that never occurs to the general public as they cheer for the Canadian athletes every 4 years then cry foul if their tax dollars are directed towards amateur athletes.

Personally, what was the most memorable career highlights?

“It was probably in 2003, when there was a World Cup in Belgium called Waalse pijl. They call it ‘the wall’ because it is a race ends on a really steep climb. That race was

tailored made for my ability, with those steep little hills. It is something that I always loved and always could do really well on. They hurt a lot and you feel like your lungs are about to burst on the top of the hill. However, I seem to do well on them. During the race I was coming on to the first place rider when there was fifty meters left, she looked down as I was coming on to her. Once she noticed me, she pushed harder, but at that point I had nothing left. I ended in a close second. This race is definitely my all time favourite career placing. It's a very special race, with huge crowds. You can smell the sausage, beer, cigar and cigarette smoke as you struggle up that last killer hill and it's almost sickening but the noise of the crowd and their enthusiasm for bike racing makes it a classic." After the race the fans come and seek you out for an autograph and they crowd around the team vehicles, it is just nuts, they are *mad* for bike racing."

Was traveling a big part of the professional athlete experience and where was the best place you've been?

"Yes it was a big part of being an athlete, but after so many years of traveling I don't want to go anywhere anymore. At first I was really excited to travel, but over time the novelty wore off. The best place was Columbia. The people there were so amazing. We were in Duitama, and the people there do not have a lot. The people that lived along the cycling course were so proud to have world championships there. They all painted their houses and put up flags. They were all so excited to welcome the world. The other place I loved is New Zealand. I would go back there in a heartbeat. It's more like Canada, pretty laid back and beautiful."

What was it like going to the Olympics?

"When I went to my first Olympic games, I was so happy and expected it to be my only time. I read about all these athletes who have gone many times, and I wondered why they would want too. But when I finished in Atlanta, the first thing I thought was "I want to do that again, and I want to do better next time". Then I understood the other Olympic athletes. The Olympics can be frustrating sometimes too. In Athens I was traveling with a lot of luggage, and when I finally got on a bus to go to the Canadian compound there was no one to meet me, so I had no idea where to go. I tried to go find somebody, and I remember thinking, "Why did I want to do this again?" The stress is sometimes really high, and you need to have your way of dealing with it. Every athlete will have a stress since its not all fun and games. There is the good, the bad and the ugly in sports."

Is there a defining moment in your career when you realized, "I did it!"?

"I think it was a gradual transition. When I started cycling after university, it took a few years for me to say, "Yes, my job is an athlete." That is something that happened within me, but also in society. I used to joke sometimes that after cycling I will get a real job, but being an athlete is a real job."

What were some barriers you faced as a female athlete?

"In terms of being female versus male, cycling is considered an 'old boys' sport. This causes a few barriers, but every female faces them. In terms of making a living out of sport it is difficult. There are so many big races for men that have rich prize purses, good money but if (and that's a big if) they have a women's event running with it the women

will typically race for less than one-quarter of the total money the men have. You see the best professional men in Europe and they make millions. Here in North America, we are working for four digit salaries. Like \$5000 a year for a US team. That's it or \$10,000 if you're lucky. On a certain level, every Canadian male or female faces this financial barrier. It is part of the life of an athlete. I have made a lot of sacrifices, but they are not sacrifices that you couldn't live with out. There are also barriers that you set for yourself. For example, if you think that you can't than you won't, but if you try you are no further behind. There are some perks to the life of an athlete. You get to travel and most of the time on someone else's dime."

Have you ever had an injury?

"I didn't have too many injuries that were a result of over use or a severe injury that put me out for a while. In bike racing there is always a risk of crashing. I hurt my back for a while and as soon as I found a better bike position, that resolved it. In May of 1991 I broke my leg in a crash in a race around Queen's Park in Toronto. I had surgery to clean it, plate it and then had a cast for 9 weeks. I did race again in August of 1991 but did only a few small races then started racing again in the spring of 1992. So I was only out for about 3 months but then the season was over."

Who has been a major support throughout your career?

"Family. My immediate family and parent's have always been a great support. My husband is my number one support. He takes care of my bike and keeps me motivated. My mom and my mother in law have done so much for me, especially after I had my first daughter. They allowed me to be able to travel for two weeks, knowing that my kids were okay. I can't stress enough how important they are."

Did Hamilton as a city help support you?

"Yes, Hamilton has provided lots of moral and financial support. I did get a lot of support from community groups. Hamilton is all about community. For a city this size the feel and sense of community is very strong. My neighbour Nada had a fundraising party supporting me before going to the Athens Olympics. It was fantastic. I know that I have a lot of support and Hamilton has a fantastic sporting community. Even if they are not helping you out in a specific way, generally you know that they are there. I want to give back to the community now."

Are you still competing in races now?

"No, I am not a full time athlete anymore. I am currently a part time teacher in French. This is a bonus from cycling. Cycling has contributed to the after life of my athleticism. I still like to ride. I took a big break this year. I rode my bike for the first time last weekend since August and it was great. There are a lot of local events that I would like to participate in for fun. One of the best races that I know in the whole world is the Paris to Ancaster. Anyone can do it, and that is the best part about it. There are about 1,800 participants of all and abilities. Everyone is there for a different reason or challenge, which is fantastic. This is what cycling is all about to me, participation for everyone. It is a life long sport."

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