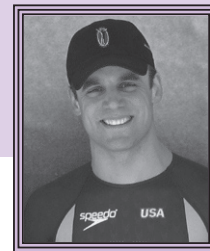


**A
FAMILY
PORTRAIT**

ERIC BERNOTAS

In this newsletter we have interviewed many successful and interesting people including accomplished athletes, but Eric Bernotas is our first Olympian with TS. We spoke to him a few weeks after he returned home from the Winter Games in Italy.



TSA: Skeleton is a very unusual sport. What drew you to it?

Eric: Basically, it's a dream come true for me. I wanted to be able to find a sport and fall in love with it. It just came along a little later in life. It's been my vehicle and an incredible journey. It's a thrill and I've met a lot of wonderful people through the sport.

TSA: How do you do it with your TS?

Eric: It's about shifting body weight in a sled that weighs 70 to 80 pounds and is low to the ice. There are runners that you switch in and out pending the ice conditions. You steer with shifting weight. It looks crazy and unsafe but it's really not like that. It's pretty safe—barring negligence. When I'm in a curve things feel like they slow down.

There's a lot of pressure and it's fast. I can't really explain it without the experience. There's the G force. Some curves run to a 4G of pressure and your head is hanging off the sled—in a helmet. Heads on ice going through those curves! You need strong neck muscles; necks aren't made for that kind of sport.

I'm now looking for a way to go faster, be the best and see how far I can take it.

TSA: But what about your TS—the involuntary movements—don't they have an impact on your ability to steer the sled?

Eric: For the minute on the sled, my concentration is really, really high. I've never noticed any involuntary movements when on the sled. I'm assuming it's because of the high concentration and intensity. When I'm warming up I get jitters, my tics. When I'm standing at the line my tics have become a good indicator for me that I'm not in the best frame of mind—that I'm on the right track or not. I turn to my breath and breathe. I put myself in a meditative state,

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where the tics don't distract me from the task at hand—awareness.

TSA: Do you recommend meditation for other people with TS?

Eric: Absolutely. It can't hurt and it might help. Even the little involuntary movements that are there—they seem to be subdued. It helps me get to that total awareness.

Skeleton is about all the senses. You don't see everything so you have to use the other sense, feeling the curves and the pressure. There is a different intensity of the curve itself, some come really quick, long or short, gradual or steep. You make the right pressure by being aware in order to steer with the right time and intensity, feeling your way while going close to 80 mph, sometimes even faster, depending on ice conditions and the tracks.

It's like when we were younger and on our sled, we always wanted to go faster and longer. And this is the way I do it now. I do something that I'm passionate about.

TSA: You've had your share of ups and downs and challenges?

Eric: When I was a child with facial tics and habits there was a certain amount of social impact. I was teased a little but nothing extensive. My TS increased in high school. I can remember thinking back then that it gave me an understanding—even if it was nothing compared to what the other kids were teased about—an understanding of how I wanted to treat other people. And I'm thankful for that awareness. My obstacle had wisdom to shed on my life.

When I was off on my own at college, the pressure and relationship troubles began. Having freedom to make all my decisions, to party and go out, it was troubling for me. And then the tics got worse in that social atmosphere. I don't think the movements were worse but I was more aware of them.

TSA: When were you diagnosed?

Eric: It wasn't until I graduated from college that I finally got the diagnosis. That last

year in college the lack of motivation and depression

were the issues. I started to train, riding a bike up hills, running, you name it. Training was my salvation. Following my passion is what keeps me off the edge.

TSA: But skeleton? How did you pick that unusual sport?

Eric: I discovered it in December 2001, right before the Salt Lake games. I graduated in 1994. By then I'd done seven years of training just to feel good but I was always hoping that something would come along. I was prepared for an opportunity.

I got lost on a trip with my girlfriend and stumbled on skeleton. We just found ourselves there and I picked up a magazine with a featured article on it. It was really her will to live that day more than mine; she was the one to drag me up the mountain. She's the reason that it fell into my lap. She got a taste that this is what I'd been waiting for. I talked to the coaches, and started training on January 22.

TSA: You are 34. Is that old in your sport?

Eric: The gold and the silver winners were 39 and 36 years old. It's an experience sport. Getting involved at 30, I never counted myself out. I think I've got another four years in me.

TSA: What's happening right now?

Eric: I'm in a specific training break after the games. I will get back on my mountain bike and then I'm heading up to California for surfing and fun with physical activity, before I start training again.

TSA: What about later, after your Olympic career?

Eric: I don't know. I know what it means to train. Whatever it is, I'll find something else. I know I'd like to get involved with coaching at some level high or intro level. I'm looking for opportunity in the future.

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Family Portrait: Eric Bernotas

TSA: Tell us a little about the Olympics.

Eric: The race itself is like any other race. The Olympics are an opportunity of lifetime. I finished 6th. It was very disappointing but it was one of those things. I know not to press, to let it come and that mental prep is a huge part of our success. During the training runs I was one, two and three, but on race day I tried to press and force it and it was a huge lesson; one I needed to swallow because about 30 media people were waiting to talk to me. I've grown stronger from the lesson.

TSA: How does TS fit in?

Eric: It doesn't affect me at all. People often ask me about it and I'm sure others just think about it. Right now it's a possibility, an opportunity to be an inspiration to someone else. I may not think about it on a regular basis, but I've learned how my obstacles become opportunities. I may have seen it as an obstacle, but now as an opportunity, to make a difference in someone else's life. ■