



Clara Hughes, Speedskater

This article first appeared in Swerve Magazine, Calgary and was nominated for a National Magazine Award in 2008.

Clara was a teenager who smoked and got into trouble. She came from East Kildonan, in Winnipeg. She was a 7-11 kid, a Kenwood mall rat before there were any malls, a teenage prairie alien displaced by her body -- tall and red-headed -- and the way that her eyes held you in place whether you liked it or not. A lot of kids were good at sports, but so was Clara, only she didn't carry around the result of every game or race like gremlins clawing at her shoulder. She shook them off, tapped a smoke from its box, fed it between her teeth, quoted some Ozzy, then took a shot on the arm and gave one back. She laughed at the world -- her smile was like a lamplight in the cold, dark winter -- and she dared time to move her along. To her friends, it wasn't so much what Clara did, but what she chose not to do. She could have wandered over the earth and seen the world change in her path, but instead, Clara just hung out: her hands pressed in her pockets, boots rooted to the hard Manitoba dirt. No hurry, no worry.

Clara's mom, Maureen, always used to tell her, "That's good, Clara. That's good," whenever she considered doing this thing, or that. "Mom, I think I'm gonna play ringette." That's good, Clara, that's good. "Mom, I think I wanna take ballet." That's good, Clara, that's good. A lot of parents figure that the only way their child is ever going to be a successful competitive athlete is if they bury into them a blind and desperate sense of greatness. Make them hungry and afraid, malnourished if not for their gift. But Maureen (a painter) was an artist, and so was Clara's dad, Kenneth, (an author), so they knew that life was already full of demons and bastards trying to live off other people's dreams. They knew that to invite the poison of athletic arrogance and the cruelty of the sporting wars into their daughter's life would be to corrupt the folly of youth, the purity of art, and the essence of a life knocked about by the wind. Anyone who watched Clara play sports knew that she had the make-up, the jam, the finesse to make any playing field or patch of ice her own. But Maureen and Kenneth knew that their daughter would have to find it herself. "Dad, I think I wanna go see Guns Roses." Fine, Clara. Just don't let the bastards grind you down.

In 1984 -- which is also the name of Van Halen's 6th record -- Quebecois speedskater Gaétan Boucher won three medals for Canada at the Sarejevo Winter Olympics. This happened not ten years before the very complex where he competed was destroyed during a torrid civil war whose roots were showing when the world sent its ambassadors, fans and players to the games, but whose perspective became obscured by trays of shiny medallions and giant mugs of beer. Like millions of other kids, Clara watched the rebroadcast of Boucher's early morning race, which, it

turned out, was the beginning of Canada's pivot from an also-ran winter sports presence to a multiple-medal force. Clara stood in Maureen and Kenneth's living room wearing her black jeans and JUDAS PRIEST t-shirt with holes under the arms and tilted her head this way, then that way, then turned to face her mother, Maureen, who was sitting at a kitchen table busy with newspapers, books, a journal, a bag of bread, some jars of jam and honey. Clara told her: "Mom, I think I want to go to the Olympics."

That's good, Clara, that's good.

Clara ditched the smokes and started to work. Her Judas Priest shirt was good for sweating in; every athlete needs these kinds of shirts, the kind you can bury at the bottom of the equipment bag and pull out whenever you need to remember. Pretty soon, Clara learned how to stovepipe her back and canoe her long metal blades along the ice. Her friends went to watch her skate one Saturday afternoon. They nodded to each other as their parking lot headbanger swooped past, knowing that the mighty winterbird who'd been living inside their friend was finally getting born.

But as quickly as it had started, it stopped. One day, some dude came up to Clara and said, "I think you'd be a really good cyclist. You're a good skater, but you'd rock the bike." So Clara decided to try competitive cycling. That's good, Clara, that's good. Riding put her in the country's elite training centres, where labcoat sportsmen worried over reps and rhythm and rates of acceleration while palming stopwatches and scribbling numbers on a clipboard. Predictably, Clara's math hummed and the numbers rose and, in 1996 in Atlanta -- twelve years after she'd first seen Gaétan Boucher skate -- she won two bronze medals. Her first Olympics were special but "the atmosphere at every Games can be dark and soulless. On a certain level, it's quite cold, and nobody really seems to enjoy it. At the Olympics, a lot of the dubious things about sports are kind of brought to a head: the self-absorbed, individualistic win-at-all-costs mentality, with everybody telling you how great you are. But I like to think of myself as nothing, and that, because I'm nothing, I'm everything." In Atlanta, the Olympic park was bombed, and a security guard named Richard Jewel was wrongly accused of perpetuating the crime. I heard about the bomb while drinking whiskey with Joe Ely during the Calgary Folk Festival. He told me: "Things like this shouldn't happen in America." The Atlanta Games have since become known as "the Coca Cola Olympics" for their rampant commercialism. Not ten years after the event, terrorists flew two planes into the World Trade Centre and, as a result, the Department of Homeland Security changed the nature of American civil liberties forever. The world had sent its ambassadors, fans and players to Atlanta, too, but their perspectives' became obscured by trays of medallions and bigger mugs of worse beer.

Clara raced in the next Games and won again. Then she hung up the bike. "I finally realized that the only reason I'd ridden the bike was because I was good at it. Which is the worst reason for doing anything." A little while later, Clara went to Baha, California. There, she rode past the US cycling team's training centre, where irony hung in the air like a fat, heavy pigeon, because American cyclists are forbidden to train by touring their bikes. As she wheeled past the US hub, she knew that she was free, that she could "finally be the person -- and the athlete -- that I wanted to be. In Baha, I realized that, until that point, I'd never really had fun on my bike. I didn't enjoy riding until I stopped competing. That taught me a lot about life's process -- about how the

journey should be just as important as the result. How you have to relax and slow the world down. Because my sports required that I constantly move around in circle, my life's path had to be anything but that. Getting there had to count for as much as where I ended up."

Clara started skating again. She hit the ice; she hit it good. 10 months later, she'd ascended into the world's speed skating elite, and before Canada could catch up to her, she'd become the first woman in the history of anything to win multiple medals in both the Summer and Winter games. That's good, Clara, that's good. Clara travelled more; she rode, more. She went to Arizona, to the Canadian north; the process, the journey. She moved to Quebec, and watched the winter birds. She even wrote about them for the Canadian Nature Federation, how her awareness of the natural world had softened the rigour and mental duress of ceaseless, muscle-burning training. A few years ago, Clara and her husband spent four weeks touring in deep America. They started out in Tucson and rode south, along the Mexican border and then up the eastern side of the state. "We entered the Navajo Nation after a day of riding 170km," she remembered. "We made some beautiful camps, met some fantastic people. Everyone wanted to make sure we were okay, and at one point, a fellow was waiting for us up the road to make sure we stayed on the proper route. This same man went another 50km to a small town to make sure that someone would give us water. It was funny because so many people had warned us about being in the Navajo Nation -- that it would be dangerous, *etc.* -- but there we were, with these amazing people who were generous and kind. One day, we were riding through Monument Valley -- one of the most majestic places on the planet -- and I was really tired. Instead of riding 30km into a vicious headwind with brutal traffic, we decided to hitchhike. It didn't take us long to get picked up, even with our fully loaded touring bikes, panniers and all (the majority of Navajo folks drive massive pickup trucks). Eventually, a gang of young guys jumped out of their truck and piled our bikes on top of a mass of camping gear in the back. One of the guys told us to hop in, and next thing we knew the truck was flying along the highway with us in the back. I have to admit I thought we were going to die. Pretty soon, the truck pulled onto a dirt road, and the youngest-looking guy stopped the truck and asked if we wanted to camp with them that night. Now, I was sure we were going to die. There was nothing we could do at this point, but Peter was completely calm. We off-roaded for awhile, then pulled up beside a sandstone pillar, at which point everybody spilled out of the car -- men with long, braided hair, tattoos colouring their arms, dressed in gangster clothes -- and started to set up camp. Despite the raging wind, they were determined to take us camping 'Navajo Style.' We sat and ate ramen noodles with these guys in the blowing sand while the biggest, toughest looking guy pointed out an old ruin in the distance. He said that his grandmother had shown him this spot when he was young, then shared some of the wisdom she'd passed on to him. One of the guys, Nathan, called me "sister," and Peter "grandfather," while quoting Edward Abbey and Walt Whitman. We sat in a sea of broken glass mixed with ancient pot shards. From the outside, these guys were terrifying, but they were harmless. They were curious about us and wanted to help us out. It was the kind of experience I'm after in life: a real human experience where I can come away with a completely different impression of humanity than before."

Some athletes change stuff. Others are just good within their box. In another era, people like Bill Russell and Jack Robinson and Olaf Koss used sport to affect social change, but today, the sporting pantheon is largely ruled by micro-managed, politically-neutral figures like Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, who have done more for their corporate sponsor's bottom line than affect social justice or enlighten the public's world view. Being a sportsman, I often find myself in social situations where tablemates or party guests sniff the air at the very mention of athletics,

arguing that sports is nothing more than a Republican (or Tory) war weapon in the hands of politically-lobotomized players who crash Hummers and marry Spice Girls. Of course, they're right. But they probably haven't heard of Clara.

During the last winter games in Torino, Italy, the Kenwood headbanger won a gold medal in the 3,000 metres on the the final day of the tournament. Maybe you remember watching it: her body keening across the finishing line until she lay prone on the track, her face hooded and searching for air, cheeks plump and frozen, eyes closed in despair like a kind of stricken red riding hood. She'd bested her team-mate, Cindy Klassen -- the anointed Woman of the Games -- who'd previously skated the day's best time. But unlike Cindy -- or any other athlete, save Clara's sporting soulmate, Becky Scott -- as soon she'd gathered her wits and collected her energy, she headed resolutely to the tv studios, where she told Brian Williams, that, on the morning of her race, she'd seen a television show about how Olaf Kloss's Right to Play program had brought joy and hope to a group of young Africans, and that, because of this program, she was emptying her bank account, and giving away all of her money. "Mom, I'm giving all of my money to Africa." That's good, Clara. That's good. After the Games, she went to Ethiopia and played soccer with kids who'd lost their arms and legs to polio. "They kicked our butt," said Clara. "They controlled the ball better than the Olympians. To see how hard they worked, and how much fun they were having, was something I'll never forget."

The next Winter Games will be held in Vancouver, BC. Every Olympics brings with it its own set of glories and tragedies; its own complicated social and cultural legacy. By 2010, the world will have changed, too, just as it changed from Sarajevo to Atlanta, and will change again in Beijing in 2008. Perhaps, by 2010, we'll need our athletes to be better citizens; more Muhammad Ali, less Tyrus Thomas. Or maybe we'll just grumble at the screen and count the podium placement while reaching for our Coke and chips. But in a perfect scenario, the last virtuous superstar, after skating in her final competitive race, will call attention to the sporting world's void while filling that void herself, at which point our country, our world, will finally recognize an athlete not for winning more than anyone else, but for the ability to illuminate the world both in and out of the box. Maybe then, we'll join the chorus:

That's good, Clara, that's good.