

Alumni Profile

Thomas Walsh '13, Adaptive Ski Racer

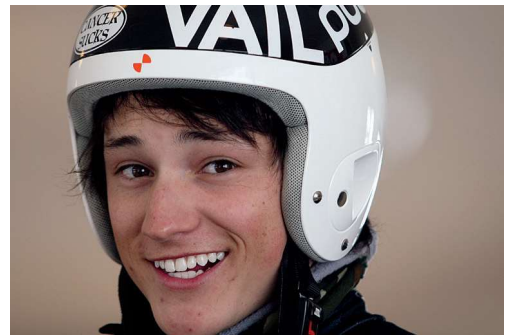
by Kimberly Reynolds

When you catch sight of Thomas Walsh, all 5'4" and 120 pounds of him, his face is striking. It is angular. He has brilliant white teeth and a classic profile. His face hints at the things he has done - act in the GMVS fall play productions - and the things he might do - ski for a gold medal in the Paralympics. He holds his head up high, has a bouncy energy, and seems confident about his place in the world.

He is one of Mikaela Shiffrin's best friends. They have known each other since preschool. They grew up skiing together in Vail, CO. Who could mistake the beaming smile of Thomas as he waited for Mikaela after she claimed gold in the slalom at the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia? Yes, he was waiting for her at the venue! Who knew the miles he had traveled to reach her? She was surprised, ecstatic, and yes, concerned for her childhood friend. She told him to go dry off.

The Make-A-Wish-Foundation had sponsored Walsh's trip to Sochi. In 2009, at the age of 14, just days before he was to attend GMVS, he was diagnosed with Ewing Sarcoma, a rare disease in which cancer cells are found in the bone and soft tissue. Shiffrin and her family drove to Denver when they heard of the diagnosis and stayed with Thomas through the week. For the next year, they would continue this ritual. Walsh eventually transferred to Dana-Farber Cancer institute in Boston, MA, but Shiffrin would still visit and encouraged him to get better.

Walsh endured countless surgeries, so many that he and his mother, Kathleen Walsh, can't recall the

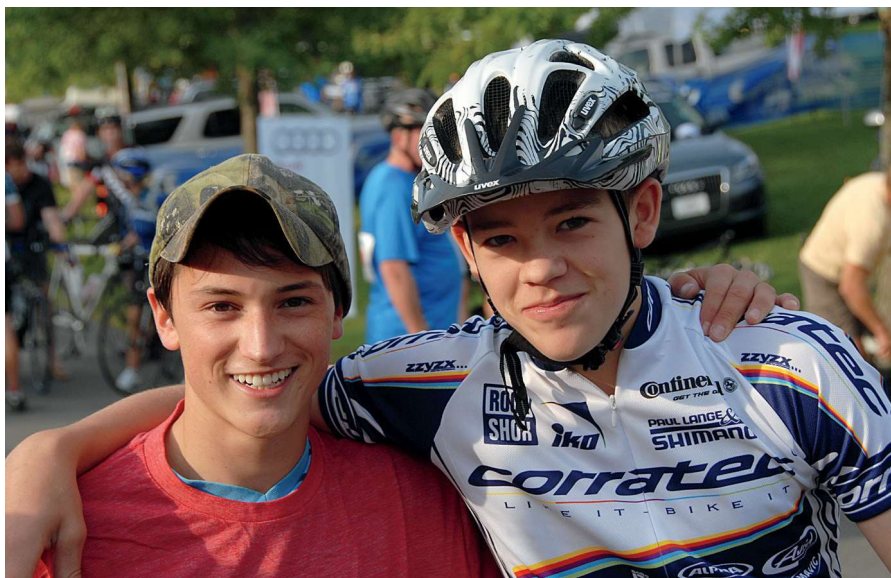


number. Thomas remembers going under anesthesia more than 30 times. His first major surgery was a pelvic resection. His suprapubic, supraanul, and right acetabulum, a concave surface of the pelvis - where the top of the femur meets the pelvis at the acetabulum and forms the hip joint - were removed. He went on to have lung resections in which tumors were removed from both of his lungs. "And that made my lungs completely smaller and atrophied by about 50 percent lung capacity, and that's really what made me classified as an adaptive athlete."

After surviving the cancer, Thomas, who thought skiing was a thing of the past, realized that his dreams of ski racing and attending GMVS were still alive. He called Headmaster Dave Gavett.

As Gavett recalls the conversation, "Thomas said, 'Mr. Gavett. This is Thomas Walsh. I'm wondering if you still have room at your school'." Of course he did.

"I don't think he knew what he was getting into," Gavett said. Thomas didn't either. He couldn't ski; he couldn't run. He had brain-thinking issues and "chemotherapy brain," a term used by cancer survivors to describe thinking and memory issues. "Just assimilating into normal life, it's harder than I can say," he said.



Thomas with friend, Sam Gavett, during his GMVS days



Thomas in Cats, '11

Despite his physical limitations—reduced lung capacity and an impaired right leg—he did all the things the other kids did. He acted in three GMVS productions: *Anything Goes*, *Cats*, and *Godspell* to positive reviews, and he competed against able-bodied athletes. “It was hard for me to be there knowing what I used to be and what I was.” Of the races he entered, he said, “I was coming down toward the back of the pack every time, but I loved it. I was having fun doing what I loved.”

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Thomas graduated from GMVS in June 2013, and thought he was saying good-bye to ski racing. He headed off to Savannah College of Art and Design. Sometime in his sophomore year, he realized he could ski as an adaptive athlete. Because of his pelvic resection and numbness in his right leg, he is classified as an LW4 athlete. LW4 is a para-Alpine standing skiing sport class, defined by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), for skiers who have a disability in one lower extremity. He started racing in December, 2014. “I didn’t realize what I’d been missing until I was back in it.”

This winter, Thomas trained and raced with the Aspen Ski and Snowboard Club Adaptive Program. He has a range of sponsors, supportive coaches, and had impressive results in the IPC American Series. He placed in the top three in over 11 races in five different events (SL, GS, SG, SC and DH). In November, his case will be reviewed by a group of physicians from around the world to determine if he has a disability and

is thereby qualified to race internationally. His hope is that his points - he is ranked in the top 40 in all five events by the IPC - will earn him a spot on the National Team. From there, he would race on the World Cup and internationally. For the 2018 Paralympics that will take place in Pyeongchang, South Korea, Thomas sees himself in the starting gate. “I’m really hoping that’s in the future for me,” he said.

In the meantime, Thomas is focusing on staying healthy and getting strong. In March, he headed back to Savannah for the spring quarter. “I’ve acted in a few films and have gotten my name out there. I still have that artistic side to me,” he said.

More than a year has passed since he traveled to Sochi and stood in the pouring rain to witness his friend’s Olympic run. It was a type of closure for Thomas. “Mikaela had been by my side for countless treatments. She sat by my hospital bed. And getting to see her win a gold medal meant so much.”

In the same way, it means the world to him to get back to the sport he loves. “When I left GMVS and said goodbye to ski racing, I kind of closed that door. Now that skiing has come back into my life, I’m just going to go with that.”

Kimberly Reynolds is a mother of three GMVS students, Gabe '14, Katy '15, and Sophie '19 Rosen.



Thomas in Godspell, '12