

# Sami Jo's Road to Turino



BY SAMI JO SMALL, TEAM CANADA'S HOCKEY GOALTENDER & 2002 OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST

This update finds me in Toronto pondering the incredible feats we accomplished as a team over the past month of "boot camp". For myself personally, I thought the camp went really well, however, that's relative. Let me tell you about our final week of training, and you'll understand that "really well" simply meant I survived the arduous training.

Monday we set out on our rented bikes in pre-determined groups. Me, being one of the slower riders on the team, was stuck in a group of seven much quicker riders. I had mentally prepared for this fact and had psyched myself up for the 75km ride. This ride was on the road, however the

rolling hills of PEI meant it was going to be tough. The ride began and immediately I got left behind on the first hill. My group had to stop and wait for me. Only 10 min into the ride I was clearly the slowest rider forcing the group to have to double back shamefully help me rejoin the group! Little did I know that in fact, not only was I the slowest rider but instead of the nice hybrid bikes most of

the girls were cruising on, I got stuck with a "Mary Poppins-esque bike which would have been more appropriate riding down Wysteria Lane on *Desperate Housewives* instead of serious training with the National team. The handlebars were in my lap and practically as high as my shoulders. It was tough to really push up the hills, the bike better suited for a granny-basket on the front. I was so slow; I cried for the first 45 minutes of the ride...I never cry! It was so tough and I felt like I was letting everyone down, I couldn't keep up and I felt like a failure. Vicky Sunohara, a veteran from Scarborough, kept coming back to console me, however, I was so frustrated I

could barely talk. This was only the first 20km and I still had 350km to go! Tears were streaming down my face. Vicky tried to encourage me saying, "everyone hits the wall at some point Sami, don't worry, your wall was simply at the start line". This made me laugh, lightened the mood a little, however, I really didn't know how I was going to manage the next four days. We stopped at the *Anne of Green Gables* house to grab a bite to eat after 30km and I, so frustrated, threw down my bike. Luckily for me, the bike tech was there. He took one look at my bike and couldn't believe I had ridden that bike that far and immediately gave me a hybrid bike like the rest of the girls. Let me tell you, when I hopped on that bike it was heavenly! The difference was incredible. Suddenly, I could keep up to my group, even push towards the front at times. (Especially on the down hills, I had momentum on my side!). I loved it; I could finally look at the beautiful scenery, albeit briefly as my heart rate was so high I had to focus on the task at hand. Monday night we stayed at a campground nestled in our mummy sleeping bags in our tents lent to us by the armed forces. I enjoyed the camping, although it's not really camping when the caterers bring baked lasagna and Caesar salad to your campsite! For plenty of the girls that was roughing it enough.


We awoke early Tuesday, had the caterers bring pancakes and eggs, packed up our tents and set about to embark on the 125km challenge. No race today, the task was simply to finish. I struggled for 125km against inner demons I never knew I had. I experienced every emotion possible, from excitement to anger, to elation to frustration over the course of the seven and a half hours I spent on the bike. Even Great Big Sea got old on my Mp3 player. It took me eight and a half hours, however that included breaks. I actually sat on a bike seat rotating my legs for an incredible 7 hours and 30 minutes. We rode on the Confederation Trail, which is the trail the old railroad used in PEI. When our coaches told us excitedly about this trail they said it was nice and flat. Obviously, they never rode the Trail, because it was neither! Firstly, it was gravel, which immensely slowed our bikes down, secondly, the hills were gradual long slow up hills; the worst kind! We didn't average more than 15-20km/h despite pedaling as hard as we could in a pack of six pushing and drafting for each other. The sense of accomplishment I felt for not only myself but for all my teammates finishing was amazing, and they even surprised us with a hotel that night. I would have preferred another night at the campground and a day off of cycling, however, for many of the girls who hated camping, this was heaven sent. For me, it meant I could prop up each leg under three pillows in my hotel room bed, as the agony in my legs was almost too overwhelming to sleep. I felt like I had developed arthritis in my joints and really wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to get back on the bike on Wednesday, let alone walk again!

Wednesday I awoke, turned to my roommate Colleen Sostorics, a defenseman who plays for the Calgary Oval X-Treme, and excitedly expressed, "Great news!" to which she replied in a pre-coffee haze, "What?" as I stammered down the hall stiff-legged, "I can walk!" Experiences such as this bike trip really make you appreciate the little things in life! Wednesday's ride was a cabin race, which meant Colleen and Caroline Ouellette, a forward who plays NCAA hockey at Minnesota-Deluth, were stuck riding 75km with me. We weren't going to win the race, so I had previously gone to Walmart and bought us all T-shirts that said "Tough Cookies". Maybe we weren't the fastest, but we looked the best! What a race! I've honestly never ridden so hard or so fast on a bike ever before. My heart rate was over 170bpm the entire way. I didn't see any of the trail, I barely looked up. I stared down at a wheel in front of me for just under 3 hours. Colleen and Caro took turns drafting in the front, and I tried to give'er in the back. They did way more work than me, however, both are very accomplished riders. They pushed me beyond any limits I thought possible and in the end we didn't come last! In fact, we finished in the middle of the pack, which for me and for our cabin was a great accomplishment. The campfires at night were always a highlight and we even treated ourselves to freshly baked s'mores slow roasted over the open fire. mmmm.

Thursday was an individual race, however, our group of six from the first day decided to ride together again for the 75km. Each one of us had our moments, our own personal ups and downs, but ultimately, we got through it all together. As we crossed the finish line, I really couldn't believe it was over. Vicky had said to me that I hit the wall right at the beginning, but after the initial smack, I climbed right over it and never saw it again.

Cheryl Pounder, a fellow teammate of mine from the Toronto Aeros, had not one, but two flat tires on the course that day, this after having her eye swell up like a prize fighter the night before when she got bitten by some random bug. Cassie Campbell, our captain from Brampton, blew a tire a couple kilometers from the finish line and had to hitchhike to the end first on the back of another teammate's bike, then in some random person's car. I have no story that compare, however, just being able to get through 350km in 4 days is what I'll remember. I'll remember the lunch stops at Mount Stewart in the back of the staff mini-vans. The butter and mayo sandwiches they had for us (definitely high performance food), and my specialty of PB on banana with

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