

What is Gold Anyways?

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Ever since I started writing "My Twisted Road to Gold" I always seem to get waylaid by some other event that compels me to write about other twists. I sometimes wonder if God deals these twists just so I have something exciting to write about. Quite frankly, I could have done without some of the twists I had this past season.

This was an Olympic year and like many recurve archers, I started my push for the team one year in advance. I put my compound on the back burner and redirected my training towards Athens. Although I had not shot my recurve much the previous season, I had ended with a bronze medal at the 2003 US Grand Prix. My confidence began to increase when I gained sponsorship from PSE and a coveted invitation to live and train at the US Olympic Training Center (OTC) in Chula Vista, California.

I would live in an archer's paradise and have access to the finest training facilities. Better yet, I would finally have a bow that was not second-hand!

I savor every breath, waste nothing and keep a journal:

I wake early to run the two mile path that encircles the 150 acre facility. The desert air is crisp and cool. Breakfast is very enticing with a wide array of fresh fruit, cereals, juices, eggs and my favorite: turkey bacon...mmmm!

After showering, I ride my mountain bike down the Olympic path to the archery field. The Easton Archery Complex is the largest outdoor range in North America with 50 lanes extending to 90 meters!!!

Some archers stretch and retrieve their gear from the equipment room while others are already shooting in an attempt to avoid the off-shore winds from the Pacific coast that roll in between 9:00 and 10:00AM each day. The green expanse glistens with morning dew. My new X-Factor gleams without regard for sunscreen while I soak up the rays and enjoy the first day in the California sunshine. I am scheduled for three months and my performance will determine my future status in the resident athlete program.

At noon, the dining hall becomes my nemesis. I eat so much food from the buffet that my inner "couch potato" makes the first hour of afternoon practice a grueling session. Once the lethargy wears off, I'm free to once again battle the strong winds. I just imagine I'm in the Panathenaiko Stadium and the winds are from the Aegean Sea. After another 200 arrows, I call it a day when the wild rabbits and birds infiltrate the field and signal that it's their feeding time and we should take their cue.

However, before I can eat, I ride around the complex, by the Otay Lakes where the rowers and kayakers practice, past the track, soccer and softball fields and end my day at the Olympic flame in front of the Copley visitor center. Day one; I say a prayer and thank God for the grand opportunity awaiting me. It's mine for the taking.

Dinner is my favorite time of day because the only thing I love more than shooting is eating. Every fixing has a chart that enables one to track calories ect.... I never really keep track of them. I just make certain I try a little bit of everything. It's more fun that way. The dining room has two wide screen TVs. One airs only sports and the other, mindless programs which suit the weary minds of athletes who train everyday with only Olympic gold on their minds.

Exhausted and burnt to a crisp, I return to my dormitory, a small room with a twin bed, closet, TV and nightstand. I share a bathroom with a fellow archer who rooms next door. After a tepid shower, I forsake a phone call home and tumble face-first into bed to avoid irritating my bright red shoulders. My eyes are closed before I hit the pillow dreaming of matches, medals and Greek gods...zzzzzz....

I had already earned a spot at the final selection event for the US Olympic Team. Now I felt I was on the home stretch. Everyday until the trials, my plan was to immerse myself in training and preparation. Once a week, I went to sports medicine for massage therapy. 400 arrows per day were considerably more than I was used to but I felt my stamina improving and my scores reflected my efforts.

The training center coach arranged high speed filming of our shooting. I concentrated on super-tuning my bow setup and super-tuning my shooting form. We practiced as a team and individually challenged each other in matches. Once a week we shot qualifiers at 70 meters, followed by the Olympic round.

Just when I thought life couldn't be better, my new red, white, and blue X-Factor arrived, so I now had two identical set-ups for the first time ever.

Opportunities like this were one in a gazillion. I felt a horrible loss at not being able to defend my country when I was medically discharged from the US Air Force years back. I wore my uniform with pride and honor. Now my dream was to wear the USA Olympic team uniform! I was given the ultimate opportunity to make my dream a reality.

I savor every breath, waste nothing and keep a smile on my face.

I decided that I still wanted to attend US Indoor Nationals even though I didn't have an indoor-specific set-up. Practice was amazing. When the buzzer sounded, I started shaking like I was standing in shorts in a snow storm trying to shoot (Yes, I've done that before!). I wasn't even nervous! There were no consequences for my shooting that would cause such nervousness, so I figured I was just dehydrated. I managed to hit every color on the FITA face and fling a few off the bail. I was devastated. I wouldn't give up. I just reprimanded myself for not foreseeing a way out of this predicament, bit my lower lip, and continued on towards my worst indoor scores ever.

I returned to the OTC and consulted the coach and other archers. I concluded that I must have been dehydrated although I couldn't see how. No worries. A few weeks later I went to defend my title at the NFAA Indoor Nationals in Louisville, Kentucky. I took every precaution to ensure I was fit and ready for this event.

When I started shaking again, I was baffled. I wasn't cold. I know I wasn't dehydrated. I wasn't nervous enough to cause such shivering. I continued sucking down fluids until the shaking finally subsided but then I was plagued by a strange pang in my shoulders and knees. I had endured a pinched nerve before but knew this pain was different. I watched my score crash and burn but I still finished the first day's shooting.

That evening, I made certain to eat well and retired early. The final day would be different, I insisted. Although I couldn't salvage a victory, I wanted to get my groove back. So that was my goal...until 2:00AM the next morning when I awoke with intense pain in my lower left abdomen. I recognized the pain as the same I'd experienced a year prior. Last May, my doc told me I had ovarian cysts and insisted they eventually dissolve and intense pain was not uncommon. OK, I understand, BUT THIS REALLY HURTS!!!

I tossed and turned the whole night and it took all of my mental fortitude to decide to shoot the final day. I was actually more scared of being alone in the hotel. At the venue, I couldn't just watch. I wanted to shoot. That's what I do: I shoot archery! Grrr....

I continued to shake and atop this nightmare, my bow grip snapped in two. I rushed to my sponsor's booth and managed to break the grip beyond repair ☹. So I just shot off the bare riser. I wasn't doing too badly and the pain seemed to be easing up. However, I had five arrows to make up at the completion of the round.

During the intermission before my make-up, I took a turn for the worse. I starting shivering to the point I couldn't even get a sight picture AT ALL. The pain in my shoulders was overwhelmed by the pain in my abdomen.

I was the only one on the line. I was shaking and crying when my target mates opted to stand on each side of me and comfort me. My final arrow was nocked but I could no longer pull my bow. I tried and tried but my bow weight felt like 400 pounds. Time was ticking. I was defending National Champ, potential US Olympic team member, and too stubborn to quit. I pulled the arrow off the string, took aim and launched it at the target before my legs gave way. The arrows skidded halfway down the lane. I came in dead last place but I finished. ☺

My condition worsened and I was unable to fly so I stayed with a friend in Tennessee. A trip to the local hospital with nausea, fever, shaking and intense pain revealed nothing. I just writhed in pain on my friend's living room floor. I begged for her to get my bow from its case and I clutched it to my chest and cried. What was happening to me?

I decided that I would attempt to fly back to California in hopes the OTC Sport's Medicine could give me answers. The next morning I was even worse and really scared so I decided to change my flight and get off en-route at my home in Denver, Colorado. On descent, I started convulsing and unconsciousness seemed a better alternative to the pain. Paramedics strapped

me to a wheelchair, carried me off the plane, and after meeting my family, I was rushed to the emergency room.

In and out of darkness, I remember very little. Morphine... drinking contrast dye... a cat-scan tube... more morphine... ambulance... morphine... darkness...

I just opened my eyes. Not like waking up. They just opened. The discomfort of tubes in my nose was the first thing I noticed. Then the gold. I looked down. My gold medal from the World Target Championships was hanging around my neck. When I tried to move I was restrained by several IV tubes in my arms. Where the hell was I?

A nurse came to my side. She pulled the covers down. My abdomen was swathed in white gauze. She slowly peeled away the layers to reveal a monstrous site. A long vertical incision ran the length of my abdomen held together by numerous metal staples. My head went back into darkness.

I awoke to my name. A doctor was standing by my side asking questions. NO, I didn't feel very well. YES, that hurt.

Now it was my turn. WHAT THE HECK HAPPENED TO ME?

Indeed, it was cysts that caused the pain. However, nothing prepared my left ovary for the big one that caused it to flip and twist, cutting off the circulation. The doctor said my ovary died and had most likely been decaying for 2-3 months before it went gangrene and started leaking into my system. The shaking I experienced was my body trying to fight the deadly toxins. My left ovary eventually ruptured. The doctor gave me only 4 hours to live and credited my excellent health to my survival. They removed the ovary and tube, barely saved my right ovary and uterus and cleaned out my abdomen. Now my body would have to purge the remaining toxins on its own.

According to my sister I kept asking for my gold medal, which I have no recollection. So she retrieved my medal at home which still hung around the cam of the bow I shot in New York. She insisted the surgeons put it around my neck before I awoke. I cried everyday I looked at it. I had survived adversity to win it. Augh! How would I make the Olympic team like this? I couldn't walk! Pulling my bow was way out of the question. My core-strength was zero.

After a week in the hospital, I went home. I spent two weeks in bed curled up with my bow. After removal of the staples and approval from my doc, I flew back to the OTC. I still could not walk. I hobbled on crutches. It took me over 20 minutes to get to the archery field where I could only watch the others live out their quests. Everyday, I went to sports medicine for rehab. Initially, they worked on just the incision but weeks later they approved arm exercises. I begged to shoot my compound. They said no. I begged some more.

One month after my surgery I balanced myself with my stabilizer on the shooting line at the Texas Shootout and shot my compound. I was giddy in my elation that I was shooting again. I didn't even care that I placed seventh at the same event I won the year prior. I won a bigger victory: a new vision of my Olympic dream.

However, recurve was another story. I still couldn't hold my 45# bow at full draw. Actually, I could barely hold the bow UP! I got lighter limbs, stripped the bow to a single stabilizer and tried again. I went to a local shoot because the OTC demanded I meet the score requirements to stay on site. They lowered the required score, but try as I may; I wasn't even close to that score. My incision bled from my efforts and doubts that I would recover in time for the Olympic trials increased. I couldn't bring myself to quit. I shot another event but fell over, hitting my head, and bringing more shame upon my efforts.

The final event before the trials was the Gold Cup. I shot my worst double 70 and shot a whopping 112 points in my first match. Too bad it was an 18 arrow match and not a 12! ☹ I looked at the coach and all my friends and told them that I had decided not to go to the trials despite having earned a spot. That night I cried myself to sleep holding my red, white, and blue X-Factor.

The OTC was forced to move me off-site. I was no longer a potential candidate. I moved into a small room at the home of retired navy commander who offered to help off-site athletes. I just couldn't go home. I continued to train. I continued my rehab. I just continued.

One afternoon I stopped by Athlete Check-In and gazed at a large monument of the Olympic rings. I just stared at the colors of the rings. They started to take on a whole different meaning. They were no longer a representation of the five continents that participate in the games.

The **BLUE** ring represented the clear skies of discovering a new dream; shooting on the US Team in the Olympics or World Championships.

The **BLACK** ring represented the dark cloud that makes dreams so challenging to achieve; dedication to training, mental preparation, finances, or sacrifices.

The **RED** ring represented the figurative blood spilled on the path towards a dream; the inherent adversity such as injury, losing a big match, or personal issues that make or break an athlete.

The next tier was where I found myself at that moment.

The **YELLOW** ring represented the healing process; coping with the adversity that caused the set backs.

The **GREEN** ring... I had to think about it. I wasn't there yet. That represented personal growth...

I went to the Olympic Trials. It was windy. I was weak. I failed miserably. I cried for days straight.

I went back to California dejected and found myself standing in front of the rings again. This time I was steaming mad. Why did I have such an epiphany about the colors when it seemed like I didn't gain a thing? Why did I push myself so hard? I should have just shot my compound. Who was I kidding? But that dang green ring seemed to reach out, grab me, and shake me back to my senses. It was the growing ring, so I had claimed. Yet, how did I grow? Wasn't this my grand plan for overcoming adversity on the road to gold? Gold? Gold? What is Gold anyways?

I bowed my head in shame because I realized that every color in the rings represented more than a color to me. Why didn't gold? Why did it have to be so definite? I did not achieve gold as in a medal but I achieved a golden lesson:

I didn't quit. I gave everything I had. I survived. I grew. I lived. Was that not equivalent to Gold? Like a cherished medal, I have a trait I can show to others with pride:

DETERMINATION.

I was by that sheer determination that I made the US Field Team and went to Croatia. At the World Cup I slipped on the second day and messed up my right knee. I barely advanced to the elimination rounds. After struggling through four targets, I was carried off the course on a stretcher... but I still won "gold." I didn't quit. I gave everything I had. I survived. I grew. I lived.

I love that dang green ring! Let the growing begin...

