

The Rocky Mountain News **Unbowed by Adversity**

By Jody Berger 6-12-2004

When One Dream Died, Olympic Hopeful Erika La Brie Took Aim at Another

Her aim is true. Always has been. Since her days as a skinny, self-described nerdy teenager, Erika La Brie wanted only one thing: to represent her country.

At first, La Brie wanted to wear the pressed military blues of an Air Force officer. And, despite the odds against her, she was well on her way to reaching that goal.

La Brie would have made it if not for the sexual assault scandal that derailed many careers at the Air Force Academy.

La Brie, a victim of an attempted rape, struggled with the unfairness of it all and suffered the pain of a dream deferred. She screamed and cried and ultimately found another way.

Forget Air Force blue, she thought - she would wear the red, white and blue of an Olympian and serve her country athletically.

The only problem was, at the time, La Brie's chosen sport was not included in the quadrennial Games. A gifted athlete whose capacity to train knows no bounds, La Brie was a martial artist who won gold medals and gleaming trophies with a samurai sword - not exactly an Olympic endeavor.

No matter, La Brie, who also goes by the nickname Aya, found a sport that was Olympic and sentenced herself to training for it full time at full throttle. Now, five years and hundreds of thousands of arrows later, she stands on the cusp of reaching the original goal: representing the United States.

When the U.S. Archery trials begin Monday in Mason, Ohio, La Brie, will be there, bow in hand and eyes locked on target.

Despite coming to the sport later in life than most archers and traveling a crazy, globe-trotting course to reach the trials, La Brie is one to watch, archery experts agree.

"I would never count her out," said Tom Parrish, USA Archery's director of high performance.

One reason might be that La Brie never counts herself out - no matter how great the odds against her.

Entering the academy

La Brie's parents divorced before her second birthday. Before her 10th, she moved in with the first of several foster families. She bounced around as a child but stayed true to her passions: She studied art, she excelled in school and she dabbled in judo and aikido.

"I got sick and tired of being bullied as a kid," she said, explaining her early interest in martial arts.

In 1990, La Brie graduated from Mount Blue High School in Farmington, Maine, enlisted in the Air Force and packed her bags for Ellsworth Air Force Base in Rapid City, S.D. There, she learned about meteorology and helped provide weather reports for pilots.

One night in her barracks, La Brie said, she awoke to find an airman on top of her.

With a decade distancing her from the episode, she can talk about it calmly. And openly. The Rocky Mountain News does not name sexual assault victims without their consent. La Brie agreed to use her name because she thinks it is important her story be told.

La Brie fought off her assailant, screaming and punching, until he went away. She reported the terrifying episode to her supervisor and an investigation was launched but never solved.

La Brie said she never was punished, harassed or intimidated for coming forward.

She can't explain why things don't always work that way.

At the time, La Brie did not dwell on it. She focused on becoming an officer - a rare achievement for an enlisted woman, especially if she hopes to make the transition through the Air Force Academy.

There are more than 286,000 enlisted men and women serving in the Air Force. Only 10 to 15 of them are chosen each year to enter the academy and pursue a career as an officer.

To La Brie, a 5-foot-6, 120-pound ball of energy, those seemed like reasonable odds.

She filled out the forms, sat through the interviews and passed the fitness and medical exams. After only 1 1/2 years at Ellsworth, La Brie earned the coveted spot in Colorado Springs.

"To go from the enlisted ranks to the academy?" asked Col. Art Haubold, an Air Force spokesman, "It's a huge honor. Only a handful of people can do that."

La Brie spent one year at the Air Force Academy Prep School and earned her appointment to the academy Class of '97. Her goal was in sight.

Once classes began, La Brie studied meteorology, then switched to international relations. And, she realized, she simultaneously could pursue her other love: martial arts. At the academy, she discovered the samurai sword.

"It's so beautiful," she said of the heavy steel weapon. "It's a work of art."

In competition, swordsmen and women cut bamboo sticks with ancient Japanese forms. La Brie learned all the cuts and all the moves - and had no idea either would be a life-saving skill.

Live by the sword

In La Brie's sophomore year, the unthinkable happened again. She went to sleep one Saturday night and awoke to another cadet by her bed, kissing her neck and face.

She said she told him "no" but he continued to touch her. She feared he would rape her.

Later, when the Air Force looked into the episode, investigators interviewed La Brie and her assailant. Their stories were the same.

According to the investigators' report, he confirmed that the night unfolded as she said: He entered her room uninvited and "began to kiss and caress her." He asked "if she wanted to do something" and she said no.

La Brie grabbed a training sword that stood near her bed and held it tight between her legs.

"Subject viewed this as just another obstacle, not a threat, and continued with his advances by kissing her up and down on the stomach area," the report of his interview continues.

La Brie gripped the weapon as if her life depended on it and prayed that her assailant would get frustrated and move on. She didn't punch or scream like she had at Ellsworth.

"If it had been the first time and I'd had the sword, I'd have hacked him into little pieces and put him in a Ziploc bag," she said, years later. But the second time, the shock was too much.

Ultimately, the assailant left her room, but the horror never moved on. When La Brie told what happened, she said she was ostracized. Within the academy culture, she was branded a rat and tormented for telling on a fellow cadet.

La Brie became frustrated and depressed and developed a sleeping disorder. Ultimately, she was so depleted she required a medical leave to recover.

Without any true family to go home to, La Brie went back to Japan to continue studying martial arts.

"I liked it there because it's a safe culture," she said. "There's very little respect for women, but it's safe. No one will harm you."

She stayed two years, teaching English, training with the sword and competing whenever possible.

"The sword saved my life, so I felt I really had to learn how to use it," La Brie said. "I tapped into a level of intensity that most students don't have."

Return to the Springs

When La Brie returned to the academy in fall 1996, she was ready, even eager, to carry on with a military career. It was, after all, her life's dream. And to achieve that dream, she was willing to return to the location of her worst nightmare.

La Brie feared she might be harassed again for reporting the episode, but she hoped enough time had passed and that other cadets would leave her alone.

She had a harder time managing her fear of another assault. She had heard that other women had been attacked in their sleep and she could not ignore what happened to her.

More than two years later, a good night's sleep remained elusive.

"I continued to sleep with my sword," she said.

La Brie was willing to live with restless nights, but she wasn't given the opportunity. In December, just before the holiday break, La Brie learned she was receiving a medical discharge for her sleeping disorder. She never would graduate from the academy.

Devastated, she returned to Japan. She picked up her sword and competed until a back injury made it too difficult to train hard.

"I thought about Japanese archery because it was static on the legs but I could still use my upper-body strength," La Brie said.

She picked up the low-tech Japanese-style bow and soon was competing. And winning. With her earnings from teaching, she hired a coach and buckled down to study the sport.

When La Brie discovered that archery - that of a higher-tech design - was an Olympic sport, she couldn't contain herself. She had found a way to represent her country. She would do it in Athens, with a bow and arrow.

Returning home

Throughout her ordeal at the academy and her two tours of Japan, La Brie was in and out of touch with her foster family in Maine. But she was in constant communication with her best friend from the Air Force base in Ellsworth.

Andy Meteer, now a tech sergeant based at Buckley, and his wife AnnMarie became La Brie's family. When La Brie decided to focus on making the U.S. archery team, she returned to the states and moved in to the Meteer's Colorado home.

"There's an outdoor range off Tower Road," AnnMarie remembered, "and Erika would go there and shoot 200 to 400 arrows a day. She's very goal-oriented."

La Brie worked her way up the ranks, winning a spot on the U.S. Archery Field Team and finishing in the top 10 in international competition.

This year, she was invited to train at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, Calif. And her arrival there did not go unnoticed. Eleven-hundred miles away in his office in Colorado Springs, the director of high performance heard all about it.

"Most archers shoot around 1,000 arrows a week and some shoot less than that," Parrish said. "Her first week in Chula Vista, Erika shot more than 1,800."

Focused on Athens in August, La Brie continued training at her breakneck pace, only stopping briefly when an injury forced her to in April. Since then, she has been working to regain her strength and her stellar form.

And, constantly, La Brie struggles to keep her head in the game.

"I lost the Air Force Academy, and now I'm so afraid of losing this," she said.

More than 100 athletes are expected to show up Monday at Heritage Park for the trials. On Tuesday, the first day of real competition, the field will be cut to 16 men and 16 women. By Thursday, those numbers will have dropped to eight each.

The remaining archers will compete in a round-robin for two more days until June 19, when USA Archery will present the 2004 Olympic team - three men, three women and two alternates.

"That's my birthday," La Brie said. "I'm really hoping it's a good one."