

OLYMPIC CYCLIST  
HALEY SMITH FOUND  
BALANCE CLIMBING  
HER TOUGHEST HILL

BY BLAIR CRAWFORD

# PEACE ON TWO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHNNY C.Y. LAM

# WHEELS

“Chaotic, fast, and terrifying right from the start.”

If that doesn't sound like fun to you, then don't try to keep up with Queen's graduate student and Olympic cyclist Haley Smith.

That's how Ms. Smith described her ride in last October's 161-kilometre Big Sugar Gravel bike race in Bentonville, Ark. It was the final event in the prestigious and punishing six-race season that made up the 2022 Life Time Grand Prix.

Ms. Smith didn't win at Big Sugar. She didn't need to. With one win and two more top-three finishes, she was named the overall female champion in the series, which combines traditional mountain biking – her specialty – with racing on dirt and gravel back-country roads.

As champion, Ms. Smith took home the US\$25,000 grand prize.

It was an impressive accomplishment for the 29-year-old, especially considering the two passengers she carried with her for every gruelling, gravel-covered kilometre.

One was her angel, who whispered encouragement and kept her focused on the prize.

On the other shoulder was the demon, the one who tried to undermine her every action; the one who represented the eating disorder that nearly took her life when she was in Grade 9.



“It’s hard to explain,” says Ms. Smith. “To anyone who hasn’t had an eating disorder, it just seems like insanity. It’s not logical for your brain to try to starve you. That doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s like having an angel and a devil on your shoulders, but the devil whispers in a really low, subliminal way. It just feeds you a lot of subtext on everything – every interaction you have with people and food and your environment.”

Not only did Ms. Smith overcome her eating disorder, she represented Canada in mountain biking at the 2018 Commonwealth Games and the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. She’s talked openly about her struggle with mental illness and the role sport played in bringing her back to wellness.

It’s one of the reasons she came back to Queen’s to begin her master’s in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies after completing her undergraduate degree in 2015. She’s working in the lab of Dr. Jean Côté, studying the relationship between parents and children in sports, especially non-institutional, non-rule-bound sports like cycling.

“The lab is focused on sports psychology in terms of child development, as opposed to only the performance aspect of sport,” she says. “That was really important to me because sport saved my life. It helped me get over these mental-health issues. And that wasn’t because I was trying to be the best bike racer in the world. It was just because good sport provides you with opportunities to develop healthfully.”

Dr. Côté welcomed her to the lab; such was the impression she made as an undergraduate.

“She was a wonderful student. You don’t always remember all undergraduate students because there are so many, but I remember Haley very well,” he says. “With her experience now, she’s bringing so much to the program. It’s wonderful to have her here.”

Ms. Smith grew up in Uxbridge, a small town about an hour northeast of Toronto. Her father and brother both raced mountain bikes and she entered her first race at age 13.

“I just started tagging along and I found I had an aptitude for it. I liked it. I liked how it made me feel,” she says.

But it was soon after that, when she entered high school, that the demon of her eating disorder took control of her life.

“I was always very anxious as a child and it was something very existential for me,” she says. “There’s a developmental pathway where every child becomes aware of their own mortality. There’s a time when you understand death. And I didn’t navigate that

developmental pivot point well.”

She began to have panic attacks and suffer from extreme insomnia, overwhelmed by her fear of people dying. Entering high school was traumatizing.

“Eating disorders develop as a way of exerting control when you feel out of control and they occur in people who have highly controlling personalities,” she says.

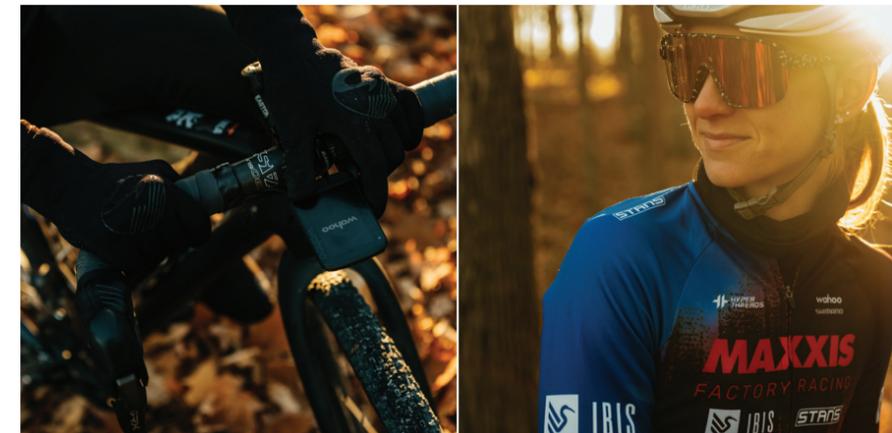
She was admitted to the eating disorder clinic and ordered into bed-rest. Gradually, as she regained her strength and control of the disorder, she was allowed to exercise again.

At the time, Ms. Smith was diagnosed with anorexia, but that diagnosis has been changed to one of orthorexia, a disorder characterized by an extreme obsession over the quality and purity of food.

As she recovered, she began to ride again. She was good, and by Grade 12 was racing in national events. On her bike, Ms. Smith found the calmness and peace her mind craved.

“Mountain biking requires a high degree of focus, especially as a beginner on trails because it’s very easy to crash,” she says. “Riding gave me an hour when I couldn’t think about other things.”

“I think her greatest attribute as an athlete is just her mental toughness and her tenacity,” says Dan Proulx, Ms. Smith’s coach for the past decade and now the Canadian National Cycling Team coach.



SHE'S WISE ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT CYCLING SUCCESS ISN'T A GUARANTEE THAT WILL KEEP THE DEMON AT BAY. MS. SMITH WRITES ABOUT HER STRUGGLES ON HER BLOG, TALKS TO YOUNG PEOPLE IN SCHOOLS, AND SPEAKS CANDIDLY IN INTERVIEWS ABOUT EATING DISORDERS AND MENTAL ILLNESS.

"She's one of the toughest riders I've ever seen. It doesn't matter what the event is, mountain biking, gravel, or road. She's able to put in training that other riders just can't match. It makes her one of the most formidable opponents."

In 2018, Ms. Smith won bronze for Canada in mountain biking at the Commonwealth Games in Australia. She competed for Canada again at the 2020 Summer Games held in Tokyo in 2021, but crashed in practice and was disappointed with her performance.

Then she found gravel racing, a form of cycling that is soaring in popularity, even as traditional road-cycling events in North America are in decline. Like marathons and other running races, gravel races are open to all comers. Most feature mass starts with elite athletes like Ms. Smith near the front vying for prize money, followed by a gaggle of recreational riders just there for the experience and hoping to finish races that are sometimes 10 or 11 hours long.

As a recent *New Yorker* article described them, gravel events are the "mullets" of bike racing – all business up front; all party at the back.

That laid-back nature appealed to Ms. Smith.

"In gravel racing, she's found a balance and an enjoyment of the sport that wasn't always there when she was mountain biking," Mr. Proulx says.

But she's wise enough to know that cycling success isn't a guarantee that will keep the demon at bay. Ms. Smith writes about her struggles on her blog ([haleyhuntersmith.com](http://haleyhuntersmith.com)), talks to young people in schools, and speaks candidly in interviews about eating disorders and mental illness.

"I'm an open book," says Ms. Smith, who relies on her coach and her husband, Andrew L'Esperance, to tell her when her thoughts and emotions stray back into a danger zone.

She says it's important for her to share her experiences with a younger generation of girls.

"I think that's important because when I was 14 and had to go back to high school after having an eating disorder, I felt so ashamed," she says. "I was so embarrassed that people would know this about me. There's just so much suffering unless you realize that you're not alone, that you're not the only one suffering and you're not crazy.

"I can't prevent other young girls from going through this, but I can make sure that they don't go through it feeling worthless or like they're the only one who's ever experienced it," she says.

"There's a very selfish element to talking about this," she adds. "It's cathartic to talk about your experiences and to have people gift you with their attention. It makes me feel less alone." 🍷

