

Sarah's Legacy

by Lori Knowles in [Fall 2012 issue](#)

One of the world's best freeskiers continues to inspire young female athletes on snow.



Sarah Burke 1982-2012 * photo: MIKE RIDEWOOD

Sixteen-year-old Emma Stevens from Brookfield, Nova Scotia, has been awarded the first annual Spirit of Sarah Scholarship and has accepted a spot to train at [Momentum Ski Camps](#) this summer. The scholarship was set up to honour the memory of freestyle skier and long-time Momentum camper and coach Sarah Burke, who died earlier this year in a tragic halfpipe training accident...."

This simple missive was dropped in my inbox in mid-July, just as paddles and wakeboards were hitting the lakes and snow-skiing was taking a hot summer sojourn. The tragedies on the slopes that cast clouds over the winter of 2012—namely the deaths of Canadian competitors Nik Zoricic and Sarah Burke—were slowly starting to lift.

I was sidelined by the message from Momentum Ski Camps. I wondered what it must be like

for that fledgling group of female freeskiers on their first day of pre-season training to be hitting the slopes without Sarah Burke.

Camper. Coach. Mentor. Friend. The X Games champ from Midland, Ontario, had been a fixed link at Momentum's summer Girls Week camps since 1996. Back then she'd been a lone female teen in the park, and since then she'd trail-blazed for women in slopestyle and halfpipe. In the 15 uninterrupted years she'd been involved with Momentum, first as a camper, then as a coach, she'd encouraged countless women to follow her tracks. How would it be this first year at camp without her?

In a sport that's still so precarious—one in which success is still such a big reach for women—what of Sarah Burke's legacy do young female freeskiers have to hang onto? Who's taking over? How truly strong is the "Spirit of Sarah"?

John Smart

Coach John Smart, director of Momentum Ski Camps, himself a two-time moguls Olympian and 13-time World Cup winner, goes all soft when he remembers Sarah Burke. I catch him on his cell in July in a hotel room in Whistler, weary after a day coaching kids on the glacier. Momentum's annual Girls Week has just wrapped up—the first without Burke—and while it went off without a hitch, he's missing his star freestyler.

"We renamed the *Happy Camper Award*, the *Sarah Award*," he says straight off, "because Sarah always was that, happy." The image Smart sets of Sarah at past Momentum camps is one of joy, humility, perseverance and determination, all traits, he says, every sport could use in a role model.

The woman who'd won X Games golds, FIS Globes, U.S. Open titles, Euro Open and Dew Tour purses—the woman who wowed the lenses of countless photographers and cinematographers, who'd shone on ESPY red carpets, and who'd doggedly convinced IOC members to include halfpipe and slopestyle among Olympic sports—made certain she never missed a Momentum camp. No matter where she was in the world in the summer—L.A., New York, Japan, Europe—Burke would beeline it back home to coach new talent. "Even if it was only for a day," Smart says, "in 15 years, she never missed a Momentum camp."

Up there on the glacier, whether in sun, wind, rain or ice pellets, Smart remembers Sarah slogging it out along with her campers: hopeful 15- and 16-year-old freeskiers who'd swapped traditional summer camp by a lake for ski camp on a mountain. Their goal was to work with their mentor, honing skills in pipe and slopestyle.

"It didn't matter what it was doing up there," Smart says. "Nasty weather days, rain, snow, sleet...I'm out there making sure everyone gets off the hill and there Sarah would be with her kids. She'd come up the T-bar soaking wet, a flock of kids behind her. She'd be wide-eyed and laughing. She was very playful—it's what made her so good with kids. She fed off their energy and she fed it back to them."

Roz G

Rosalind "Roz G" Groenewoud is a fierce competitor and determined freerider who burst onto the ski scene at 17 with a 2nd place at the U.S. Freeskiing Open. Roz G is now a Momentum coach, one of four women on Canada's national halfpipe freestyle team and the reigning 2012 X Games Superpipe champion. But back at her first Momentum Camp in 2004, she was a stressed-out 14-year-old kid feeling loads of pressure.

"I struggled a lot at that camp," Roz G remembers, speaking on the phone from her home in Squamish, B.C., while on break from pre-season trampoline training. "My skiing just wasn't there. I was sitting alone in Whistler Village, frustrated, unhappy. Sarah Burke, who'd been one of my coaches, came along and saw me sitting there. She could tell I was bummed. She asked if I wanted to go for ice cream."

After a pause, Roz G continues the story: "We talked about boys, skiing...and ice cream. It was the highlight of my camp. I really looked up to her from then on...more than any other ski girl. I was struggling that day, and Sarah reaching out was more special to me than any tips I could have been given up there on the glacier."

Roz G says now that she herself is a champion, role model and coach, she strives every day to pass on the spirit of Sarah. "She was a big sister to me in many ways. Now I'm a big sister to those girls who are out there hoping and working."

Dania Assaly

Dania Assaly was born five years after Burke. Like Roz G, she's a member of Canada's national halfpipe freestyle team. And while she's just coming off a knee injury, her goal is to ski the pipe for Canada at Sochi in 2014.

Reaching her in Vancouver where she was resting after coaching Girls Week and prepping for national team training, I ask her how much Sarah Burke has influenced her career. She doesn't hesitate and sums it up in two meaningful sentences: "Sarah was the first person I saw ski and the first person I looked up to. She was kinda the only girl doing it."

Assaly says she first met her "idol" in 2003 at age 16 at a Momentum camp where Burke was coaching. "I hoped she'd be my coach every single day," she says. "She was the one person I loved to learn from. She just had this passion for skiing. She loved every minute of it. She wanted every girl to learn; she wanted us to progress so that we could compete with the boys. She was always *really* excited to see girl campers."

Now that Assaly is a coach, competitor and mentor, she's mindful of passing on the late athlete's positive energy. "Every day was sunny with Sarah. Every day was fun. She wanted us to overcome hard times, love what we do and smile while we're doing it."

As I talk with her about Sarah, the enthusiasm in Assaly's voice grows. "Like her, I would love to be someone these girls look up to. Live, love, laugh, dance...that's what Sarah encouraged. I want to do that, too."

Emma Stevens

Sixteen-year-old **Emma Stevens** may well be a young Dania Assaly. Or a young Roz G. Or perhaps even a young Sarah Burke.

I catch the Nova Scotia slopestyle skier in the living room of her home near Halifax having just returned from Girls Week. Stevens tells me she trains in winter with the Wentworth Freestyle Team, and that she first arrived in the park about five years ago on the tails of her older brother Charles. She was 11 years old and was one of the only girls there. Sensing Emma needed a woman to watch, Charles turned on the TV and said "Hey, check out this girl. She's really good." It was Sarah Burke.

From that point forward, Emma Stevens never stopped watching Burke. Movies. Podcasts. Videos. Magazines. Stevens followed Burke's moves as closely as she could while gradually building her own career. By winter 2012, Stevens had scored top spots in Canadian Opens and the Junior Nationals, and had been voted Nova Scotia's freestyle skiing female athlete of the year for two years running.

Then in spring 2012, after Burke's death, Stevens's mother suggested Emma apply for a tribute scholarship offered by Momentum Ski Camps: The Spirit of Sarah. John Smart was offering a free Girls Week tuition to a young woman who could prove she'd been inspired by Sarah.

Emma wrote to Smart:

"I may not have personally met Sarah, but she has been my idol in every way since I started freestyle skiing. When I think about striving for greatness, I think about being as good as her. Seeing her go for her dreams no matter what, and rising above every obstacle she encountered...that was inspirational. I feel that Sarah made it possible for me to be recognized as a strong skier first, and not just another girl who skis. I know that when I achieve my goals, Sarah's strength and courage will be with me."

Smart chose Stevens as Momentum's first annual Spirit of Sarah scholarship winner.



Photo: RAFFAELLA DICE



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Momentum Ski Camps Girls Week * photo: RAFFELLA DICE

Back at his hotel room in Whistler, now that the scholarship has been awarded and the Girls Week is complete, I ask Smart: “How was the spirit of Sarah?”

“Pretty strong,” he replies. “I don’t know how much you believe in that stuff, but I’m convinced Sarah was, you know, somewhere out there this week. Watching.”

Smart describes a 2012 camp where the girls were enthusiastic and happy, more festive than sad. He said they were busy learning Cork 7s and Rodeo 5s for the first time, buying and making bracelets for the Sarah Burke Foundation, roaring around with Sarah Burke’s frenetic, air-hound husband, coach and freerider Rory Bushfield, and doing girly things at night with Roz G and Dania Assaly—just as they would have if Burke had been there.

“Sarah,” Smart says, “was certainly there in spirit.”

Later, I ask the same spirit-of-Sarah question to Emma Stevens.

“The thing about Sarah,” Stevens replies carefully, “is that she *inspired*. When you’re in the position I am, that’s *so* important. You see one girl doing it, like Sarah, and if she can do it, I say to myself that *I* can do it. Then that happens again, and then again, and it builds.”

Stevens stops and thinks about what she’s just said.

“So yeah, I’d say Sarah’s got a pretty strong spirit.”



Momentum Ski Camps Girls Week * photo: GADBOIS PHOTOGRAPHY

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