

THE RULES ARE, THERE ARE NO SETUR

OLYMPIC STORIES ARE SUPPOSED TO BE HEARTWARMING TALES OF TRIUMPH PACKAGED INTO THREE-MINUTE TV TEARJERKERS. BUT AS OLYMPIC WRESTLER SARA McMANN KNOWS, HAPPY ENDINGS CAN BE HARD TO COME BY.

BY LINDSAY BERRA



McMann's toughest opponent before—and after—Beijing may be herself.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY AMY GUIP

THE THERMOMETER in the big steel tub reads 54½°—cold, but not nearly cold enough. It's early January, six months before the U.S. Olympic trials and eight months before Beijing. National team wrestler Sara McMann shivers in her bike shorts and sports bra, barefoot on the antiseptic, white-tile floor of the Limestone College training room in Gaffney, S.C. Her boyfriend, Trent Goodale, the Limestone assistant wrestling coach, pours in another bucket of ice. He leans against the wall to time this session of tough love as McMann lowers the bottom half of her thickly muscled body into the water. The cold takes her breath away, raises



goose bumps, drains her already pale skin of color. Like all athletes who ice injuries, McMann knows the sequence of sensations to come: cold, burning, aching, numbness. Later, the numbness will recede, and, as her flesh thaws, the ache in her 27-year-old knees will become even more intense. But that, too, will subside. Then, as always, McMann will be left with only the chronic pain. The pain no ice bath can touch.

McMann wrestles like life comes at you: relentlessly. She stands her ground, takes her lumps, but long ago she made the decision to fight back. And while her story is inspirational, it cannot be wrapped with a made-for-TV bow. No three-minute up-close-and-personal on NBC can provide answers

to the questions life has posed, because there aren't any. McMann knows this intuitively, but that doesn't make it easier. As fans, we want sports to provide catharsis. We swallow the triumph-of-the-human-spirit marketing pitch that comes with every Olympic Games because it gives us fuzzy feelings inside—hope for our own lives. Sometimes, though, overcoming odds is just a cliché, and wrestling is just a sport. It doesn't matter how many medals McMann earns. There may be satisfaction in winning



To compete at the Games, McMann must beat Miller (above, in blue) at the U.S. trials next month.

gold, but there is no redemption and there is no happy ending. At least not the kind you want for Sara McMann.

McMann, an Olympic silver medalist in 2004, braves the ice for 10 long minutes, huddled in on herself as if bracing for yet another of life's broadsides. And she'll get two in short order. Later in the month, at the World Cup in Taiyuan, China, she will tear her right MCL and pull out of the final. Thirteen weeks later, at the U.S. Nationals in Las Vegas, she will lose in the final of the 63kg (138.75-pound) division, when Randi Miller's front headlock ties up McMann's shooting hand (her right), preventing her from hitting the quick and crushing shots that have become her trademark. The 24-year-old Miller will earn a bye into the finals of the Olympic trials on June 13. At those trials, McMann must win three prelims and beat a rested Miller in the final to make the team. It'll be a rough go, even for a six-time national champion. Then again, Sara

McMann has become an expert in rough gos.

HER NIGHTMARE began in January 1999. McMann's older brother, Jason, her role model, protector and wrestling buddy, disappeared after an altercation with several football players at central Pennsylvania's Lock Haven University. Three months later, the 21-year-old's beaten and badly decomposed body was found in the woods nearly 30 miles outside of town. To be close to her family and the memory of her brother, McMann, who was wrestling for the University of Minnesota-Morris, transferred to Lock Haven and joined the men's varsity team. After police failed to turn up any suspects, the McManns took their case to *America's Most Wanted*. More than three years after Jason's murder, a tip called in to the show led to the June 2002 arrest of former Lock Haven safety Fabian Desmond Smart.

With her emotional anchor gone, McMann turned to the one thing she could control: her performance on the mat. She won national titles each year from 2000 to 2003, and in 2004 she qualified for the Olympic team. When she stepped into the circle that summer in Athens, she wrestled for Jason. In the gold-medal match, McMann took a 2-0 lead against Japan's Kaori Icho, only to give up three straight points. The final takedown came when Icho turned on a bad shot by McMann with 23 seconds left. The silver medalist should have been happy, triumphant, redeemed, but McMann couldn't stem her tears. Jason surely would have been proud of her second-place finish, but his sister cried during the Japanese national anthem as a competitor who had lost gold. Later she told reporters that nothing in the world could be more painful. She knew better, of course, but the lesson was about to be learned once again.

McMann's No. 1 fan in Athens was fiancé Steven Blackford, a three-time All-America wrestler at Arizona State. After the Icho match, he rushed across the gym, clapping his hands above his head, to cheer and embrace the woman he'd decided to spend the rest of his life with. The two, who'd been dating since February, considered eloping in Athens but decided to avoid distractions during the Games.

Their new life should have begun Sept. 3, 2004.

McMANN WRESTLES LIKE LIFE COMES AT YOU: RELENTLESSLY. SHE STANDS HER GROUND, TAKES HER LUMPS AND FIGHTS BACK.

McMann, 23, and Blackford, 27, had just returned to the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs from Greece. They pointed her Jeep Cherokee Sport toward Washington, D.C. Blackford was enrolled at Catholic University's law school and McMann was planning to continue taking classes in pursuit of a master's degree in counseling. "We were moving, starting new lives," McMann says, sitting cross-legged against the cinder-block wall of the Limestone wrestling room in mid-April. "Everything we owned was in the back seat." The rapidly receding Rockies filled the rearview mirror; 600 miles ahead in Des Moines, they would be dropping in on Blackford's parents for a Labor Day barbecue.

unconscious but alive. By the time help arrived, though, he was gone. And McMann's life was suddenly a blank slate. "Accidents happen, and that's the bottom line," says U.S. women's wrestling coach Terry Steiner. "But at that point, Sara was in turmoil. She wasn't going to understand that. She kept saying over and over again, 'I did this. It's my fault. I killed Steve.'"

WHAT DO you do when your brother is dead and your fiancé is dead and the grief and the guilt and the senselessness of it all are enough to pin you to your bed for days at a time? For a while, McMann did nothing. She couldn't muster the courage to attend Blackford's memorial service four days after



McMann (far left) lost in Athens, but that paled in comparison to losing Blackford (below, in maroon) weeks later.



McMann pauses and closes her black eyes and, for a moment, is somewhere else, perhaps driving again on a nondescript ribbon of blacktop slicing through the eastern Colorado plains, where the road's hypnotic openness inspires a heavy foot. She takes a deep breath and continues: "I didn't know then why my car went off the road. I still don't."

It was just after 1 in the afternoon when the green Jeep drifted into the grassy median beyond the left lane of I-76 near Brush, Colo. McMann panicked, overcorrected and skidded back onto the highway. The truck rolled onto its side, continued to slide off the right side of the road, then tumbled down an embankment—turning over twice—before coming to rest near a low wire fence. Neither McMann nor Blackford wore seat belts. Both were ejected from the truck on the second roll.

"The hardest thing is that I have an unbelievably good memory of the accident," McMann says. She stops again, refusing to continue. The haunted look on her face says the scene still rolls in her mind. Alerted by a cloud of dust, passing motorists found McMann cut and bruised but otherwise unharmed. Blackford, who crashed through the right passenger window and landed 30 feet from the truck, was

wrestling coach. McMann took a basement apartment in Iowa City and began training with the Hawkeyes. On the mat, she was in charge. On the mat, she could fight off her grief, one Hawkeye at a time.

It was at Iowa that McMann met Goodale. Younger by 2½ years, Goodale was Iowa's 133-pounder, and he made her smile again. After graduating in 2006, he accepted the Limestone assistant job under Ben Stehura, one of McMann's former teammates at Lock Haven. McMann followed last August.

Gaffney is famous, in some parts, for the water tower painted to look like a giant peach that hovers over I-85 behind Abbott Farms. But peaches, a small college and an outlet mall are about all the town has to offer. It's not a place where wounded souls go to heal. Nor is it a place where elite athletes train. But small-town solitude mixed with college-team camaraderie was just what McMann needed.

In Gaffney, she trains daily with a variety of opponents, and her foe on this sunny and humid April morning is Ian Barker, Limestone's 125-pounder. His job is to replicate Miller's front headlock, a move McMann must learn how to counter by the trials in June. Stehura tells McMann to stay down and maintain her head position to keep Barker from getting beneath her. The hour-long session is voluntary for opponent and coach. Barker and Stehura arrived at 9 a.m., nine hours before Limestone's off-season practice, to work with McMann. "She's a hammer," Stehura says. "She's in your face, and she can be brutal. Her shot selection is excel-

lent, so nearly all the shots she takes are clean. She sets people up so well that there's no defense for them. She gets almost no resistance."

Resistance comes off the mat. McMann is so comfortable with the balance she's struck between wrestling and graduate classes that she doesn't like to leave, and that has created friction with U.S. coaches. As a member of the national team, she is partially funded by USA Wrestling and is required to attend training camps in Colorado Springs. But that's the one place she can't fight back, where memories of Blackford shatter her focus and grief debilitates her. She has skipped several sessions since Blackford's death and regularly butts heads

AFTER McMANN LOST THE GOLD MEDAL IN ATHENS, SHE TOLD REPORTERS THAT NOTHING IN THE WORLD COULD BE MORE PAINFUL. SHE KNEW BETTER, OF COURSE.

with Steiner over the example she is setting for teammates. In January, McMann left a camp after two days despite promising to stay for five. "You could physically see how hard it was for her to be here," says Katie Downing, McMann's friend and U.S. teammate. "It was just too much for her." McMann is so apprehensive about Colorado and its ghosts that she even declined to be the maid of honor in Downing's wedding because the date, Aug. 31, falls too close to the fourth-year anniversary of the accident. "Sara has always been a little strong willed, and that's part of what makes her a great wrestler," says Steiner, who could have kicked McMann off the team but decided not to. "She's stubborn, she's feisty and she knows what she wants. But you have to be able to turn the switch off, and she doesn't turn it off too much. And that can be hard on people around her."

McMann knows it. She's the first to say there are times when she's not strong, when a snippet of memory makes the tears flow. She can be stubborn to a fault and admits that the old Sara never would have defied her coaches. But losing Jason and Steve has given her a new understanding: Just because you lose a brother, there's no rule that says you can't lose a fiancé. And losing a fiancé doesn't mean you won't lose a mother or a friend or a child later on. "Those are just the rules of living," she says. "If you're going to live life, you have to understand the rules of the game. Now I know what I have to do and what I don't have to do. I will never be the same. But if you're wise, you accept it. You don't have to stop living."

After Jason's murder, McMann found solace on the mat. Wrestling was their bond, and she wanted to win to honor it. But after Blackford's death, it

was habit, a commitment to training, that brought her back to the sport. She's an athlete, and athletes compete. "Wrestling is a selfish goal," she says. "I want to be the best in the world. Going to the Olympics is a great thing, but it's a great thing for me." She will honor Blackford by becoming a mental-health counselor, devoting her life to helping others, fulfilling goals they shared when she started her master's degree. She will do this after she takes one last stab at gold.

For that, McMann must get through Miller. And then Icho awaits. Yet win or lose—at the trials and in Beijing—McMann is not looking for answers in wrestling. She knows there are no reasons at all for why Jason and Steve were taken from her, knows that winning a thousand golds won't change the fact that her brother is gone and her fiancé is gone and the empty space in her heart never will be. But she knows she can come home and make a life with Goodale and have kids of their own and be happy, like Jason and Steve would have wanted her to be. Sara McMann can take a hit, and she can hit back—just as she's always done and always will do, on or off the mat.

Can winning Olympic gold help McMann pin her demons? E-mail us at post@espnmag.com

GAFFNEY, S.C., ISN'T A PLACE WHERE WOUNDED SOULS GO TO HEAL. NOR IS IT A TRAINING GROUND FOR ELITE ATHLETES. BUT IT WAS JUST WHAT SARA McMANN NEEDED.