



Welcome, Pain

The unlikely benefits of setting a world record for the most vertical feet skied uphill by a woman in 24 hours. BY DINA MISHEV

MY LEGS BUCKLED BENEATH me whenever I tried to sit down. When I collapsed into a chair, the muscles in my butt cramped up and no amount of wriggling could make them less painful. My stomach was bloated. My cuticles and knuckles were cracked and dry and several fingertips were pulsing because the skin behind the nails had been pulled back. Then there was the headache of beyond-migraine proportion. All told, I had got a pretty good idea of what it might feel like to survive a fall from the Empire State Building.

Still, I welcomed this kind of pain.

This was pain I could explain and describe. It had a concrete cause and my friends and family could, and did, truly empathize with it. It was the ache and discomfort I fully expected to feel after completing a 24-hour nonstop uphill ski race—one in which I set a world record for the most vertical feet skied uphill by a woman in 24 hours. This kind of pain is the opposite of the kind caused by my multiple sclerosis (MS).

I was diagnosed with MS in June 2006, at the age of 30. Multiple sclerosis, which for me most often means double vision, numbness and tingling

If I'm going to be in pain,
I want it to be "normal" pain—
not like my MS.

on my left side, depression, and chronic pain, is now part of my life. Everyone develops her own mechanisms for coping with pain, but I'm bothered less by the pain itself (fortunately, drugs work well for me) than by its unpredictability and indescribability. So one way I cope is by doing things I expect to cause more pain. Yeah, I know: crazy. There is some rhyme to my reason, though. If I'm going to be in pain, I want it to be a normal, expected, explainable pain. The exact kind I experienced in February 2009 after completing the 24 Hours of Sunlight, a race where skiers find out how many vertical feet they can ascend (yes, that's skiing uphill) over a full day and night in Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

My husband and I, both avid skiers, had done the same race two years before as a team. That year, in the 12 hours I was on the mountain, I climbed just over 21,000 vertical feet—still nearly two miles shy of the women's world record. But last year I took my training to a new level, including vertical skiing 30 to 40 hours a week for 10 weeks prior to the race. And by adding another 12 hours of race time to the second Sunlight, I not only brought on all sorts of "welcome" pain,

but prepped myself to set that record.

The first six hours of the race were the toughest. I was overheating—a bad thing when you have MS, since heat can exacerbate symptoms—and distracted rather than invigorated by the spectators. Most of my training had been done solo; I had gotten used to skiing uphill on autopilot, my mind often wandering to some far-off place. Once the sun set, though, I found my groove. The mountain was cool and empty. The moon was out and the stars were spectacular. When the race was over, I had skied 23 laps, 15,000 feet each, beating the previous world record by just one lap. I was exhausted and elated. And for several hours afterward, I was without pain, welcome or otherwise. **PS** DINA MISHEV is a freelance writer in Jackson, Wyoming.