



defying the odds

After losing her legs to a near-fatal disease, snowboarder and actress Amy Purdy is back, winning medals and helping other adaptive athletes reach their goals.

By Jessica Ridenour

Photos by Tim Tadder



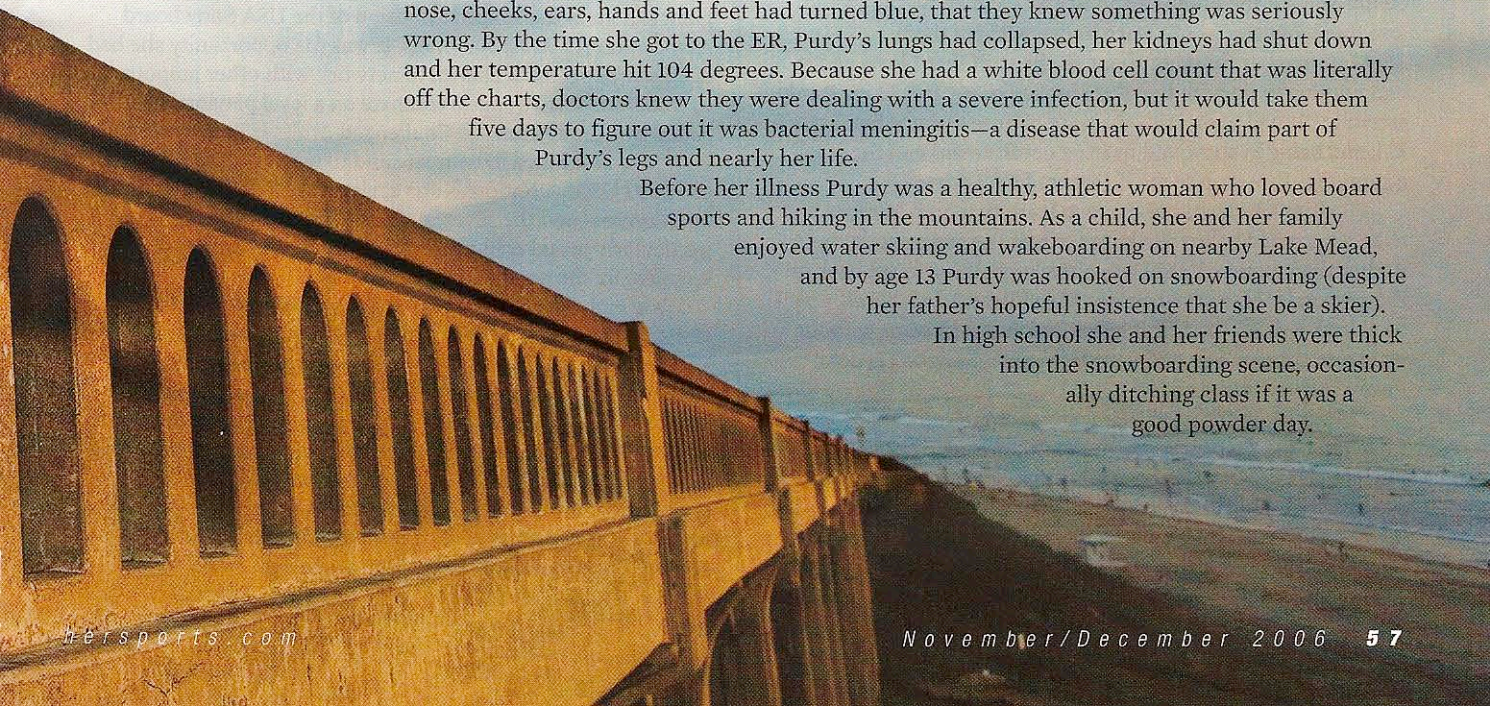
On an otherwise unremarkable July day in Las Vegas, 19-year-old Amy Purdy returned home from her job as a massage therapist feeling unusually drained and sore. She crawled into bed to sleep off the tightness in her neck and 100 degree temperature. Her fever broke the following morning, and her parents, Sheri and Stef, who nursed her through the night, were due that afternoon in southern Utah for their Harley-Davidson run. Reluctantly, they left Purdy to tend to herself, assuming her illness was of the 24-hour variety. But later that day a nurse from Mountain View Hospital called to tell them Purdy wasn't expected to live another two hours.

Purdy had spent the afternoon slipping in and out of consciousness, alternating between the sweats and the chills. "I just felt as sick as a person could feel," says Purdy, now 27.

But it wasn't until her 16-year-old cousin, Michelle Luke, stopped by and noticed that Purdy's nose, cheeks, ears, hands and feet had turned blue, that they knew something was seriously wrong. By the time she got to the ER, Purdy's lungs had collapsed, her kidneys had shut down and her temperature hit 104 degrees. Because she had a white blood cell count that was literally off the charts, doctors knew they were dealing with a severe infection, but it would take them five days to figure out it was bacterial meningitis—a disease that would claim part of Purdy's legs and nearly her life.

Before her illness Purdy was a healthy, athletic woman who loved board sports and hiking in the mountains. As a child, she and her family enjoyed water skiing and wakeboarding on nearby Lake Mead, and by age 13 Purdy was hooked on snowboarding (despite her father's hopeful insistence that she be a skier).

In high school she and her friends were thick into the snowboarding scene, occasionally ditching class if it was a good powder day.





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During the season, Purdy was on the mountain every weekend, competing in local boarding events and consistently placing in the top three. She loved the independence she felt carving down the mountainside, fearlessly attempting a 180 off a rail or spinning a 360 from a jump. "I loved pushing myself and doing it on my own," she admits. "There were no rules."

After graduation Purdy pursued massage therapy, hoping she could work at a Lake Tahoe resort where she could ride the slopes every day in her off-hours.

Then she got sick.

At the hospital Purdy's liver shut down, and her lungs and adrenal glands hemorrhaged. Her situation seemed so bleak her parents invited friends and family to say their final goodbyes. She was put into an induced coma, in which she endured over 30 blood transfusions and the removal of her ruptured spleen (she flat-lined three times during the operation). "The doctors gave me less than a 2 percent chance of living," she recalls.

During her three-week coma, Purdy maintained an other-worldly awareness. Even while unconscious, she knew she had an important decision to make: Fight to survive, or succumb to death. She felt the numbness in her feet and knew she would lose them, but she would learn to live without them.

"I remember thinking about all the stuff that I love, and it had nothing to do with the way I looked or my feet," says Purdy tearfully. "It had to do with the taste of hose water when I was a kid, and being in snow and hearing ocean waves and the smell of a campfire. It was up to me if I wanted to survive."

Purdy awoke from her coma to learn that both her legs had to be amputated below the knees to halt the gangrene in them. Rather than mourn, Purdy was already planning to get back on the mountain. Her snowboarder friend Brad joked, "Well, you'll be able to tighten your bindings as much as you want without your toes going numb, and your feet aren't going to get cold!" Purdy laughed and agreed.

"It was set in my head that I was going to snowboard, even if I had to be the first snowboarder with prosthetic legs and even if I had to go to NASA and have them design me a pair of legs."

At a frail 80 pounds and wheelchair bound, Purdy finally left the hospital after three months of observation and rehab. For the next year and a half she would remain on dialysis until undergoing

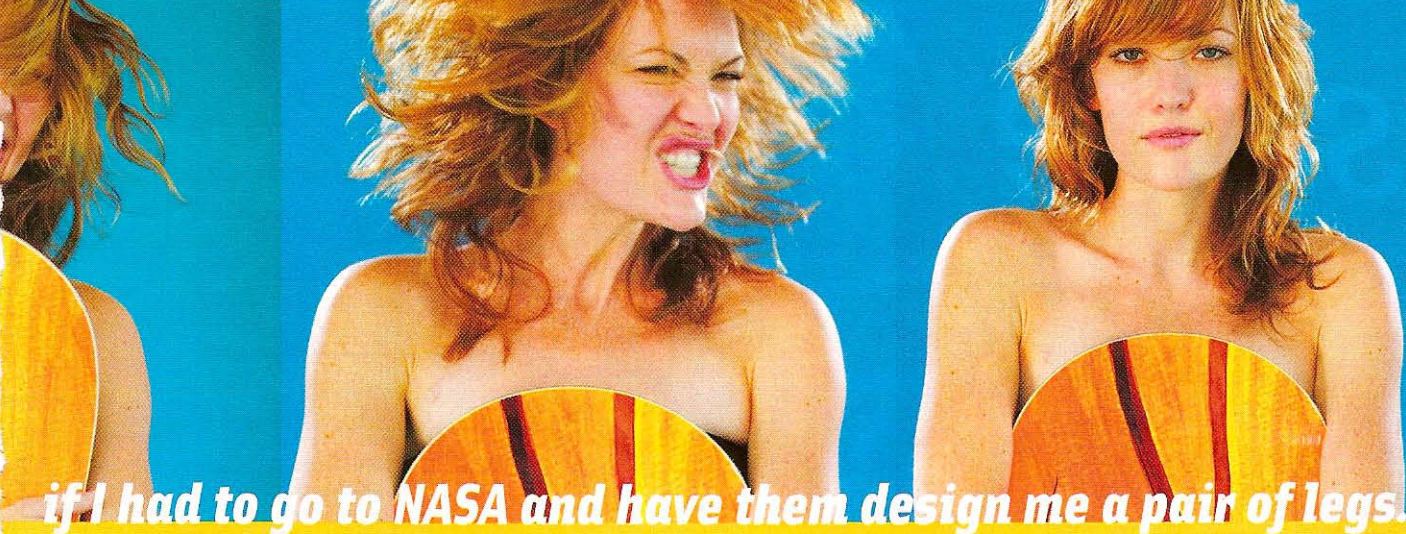
the first laparoscopic kidney transplant in Nevada, her new kidney donated by her father.

Seven months after leaving the hospital, Purdy went snowboarding for the first time since her illness. Despite feeling weak and wearing constrictive and uncomfortable metal legs, she immediately found her balance and rode down the mountain without a single wipeout. With the right pair of artificial legs, she hoped that snowboarding could become a regular part of her life again. She thought there must be other amputee snowboarders out there. What legs do they use? She grew frustrated searching the Web for answers.

Enlightenment came in the form of a TV profile on Thayne Mahler, a pro snowboarder with one prosthetic leg. Purdy reached out to Mahler who put her in touch with his leg company, Ohio Willow Wood. She sent a letter to the company saying: "I don't know if I can snowboard in your legs, but I know that if any double amputee is ever going to snowboard again, it's going to be me. So let's experiment." Soon after, she was given her first pair of \$30,000 shock-absorbent athletic legs.

In early 2002 Purdy put her new stems to use and snapped up the gold medal in boardercross and silvers in both slalom and giant slalom in the adaptive division of the USA Snowboard Association (USASA) Nationals. It was the opportunity she had been searching for: a chance to network with other amputees, to trade war stories and to compete on a level playing field. Aided by a grant from the Challenged Athletes Foundation in 2003, she continued to compete and to teach snowboarding. At the 2003 USASA Nationals she again took home the gold in boardercross and the silver in slalom and giant slalom, a particularly proud achievement as she was the only dual amputee in the competition.

One night during that year at a crowded watering hole in Crested Butte, Colo., Purdy locked eyes with Daniel Gale, a Western State College of Colorado recreation major and adventure tour guide who invited her out for a snowboarding session the following day. Although very proud of all she'd accomplished as a dual amputee, she didn't want her ordeal to define her, so she didn't tell Gale about her prosthetic legs until after their snowboarding date. Upon seeing her legs for the first time, Gale says, "I was kind of stunned, but that wore off after a second. I was more impressed than anything."



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Eventually Purdy and Gale decided not only to start a life together, but also to join forces to help other disabled athletes. As an amputee who enjoys snowboarding, wakeboarding and rock climbing, Purdy felt she had fewer support systems or sponsorship opportunities than an adaptive athlete pursuing more traditional sports like swimming, running or cycling. Adaptive sports equipment is also expensive and hard to find. Artificial limbs don't last forever and because of the high price, which is rarely fully covered by health insurance, amputee riders often use duct tape to MacGyver their disintegrating legs back together.

"We both realized there was a niche that needed to be filled," she says.

Now engaged and living in Los Angeles, Purdy and Gale run Adaptive Action Sports, a non-profit they founded in February 2005 that provides financial aid and encouragement to permanently disabled athletes who want to participate in action sports. So far, AAS has raised funds to send five adaptive teens to Woodward Skate Camp in Pennsylvania and contributed to Lovers Leap Guides rock climbing camp for disabled people in Strawberry, Calif. Each year, AAS sponsors athletes for the adaptive division of the USASA Nationals. Last year, AAS paid for the housing and entry fees for 12 adaptive riders, including a veteran who lost his leg in the Iraq War, two blind snowboarders and Chad Crittendon, a single-leg amputee who was a contestant on "Survivor: Vanuatu."

"AAS brings together this amazing, dynamic group of people who have been through unbelievable life experiences, and everyone has the same love and passion for snowboarding," says Purdy, who continues to compete in slalom, giant slalom and boardercross. "I'm pretty good at carving," she admits.


The slender, auburn-haired beauty is also pretty good at attracting the attention of modeling and casting agents. In 2003 Purdy was recruited to play a model for Madonna's "American Life" video, which, unfortunately, never aired because of its controversial anti-war message. In 2004 she snagged a lead role in the award-winning indie flick "What's Bugging Seth?" that earned national acclaim on the film festival circuit.

Even after all her physical hardships, she credits acting as

one of her greatest learning experiences. "Being in front of the camera, there were times I wanted to dig a hole and bury myself," says Purdy, who was the only non-professional actor on the set. "It's just such a challenge to learn something new like that."

Purdy is now pursuing acting with as much determination as she does snowboarding medals. In addition to being the spokesperson for prosthetic manufacturer Freedom Innovations, she has enrolled in acting classes and hopes to move beyond playing the girl with the prosthetic legs.

While it's still difficult for Purdy to ride half pipe or slope style because of the rigidity in her knees and ankles, she's not one to be daunted by limitations.

"Who wants to leave this world completely perfect?" asks Purdy. "You want to go out with memories and experiences and scars. I have to believe that things happen for a reason." 

Jessica Ridenour is a Southern California-based freelance writer for Whole Life Times, Women's Adventure and Foam, among others.

timeline

AUGUST 1999: Legs amputated.

MARCH 2002: First USASA Nationals win on prosthetic legs, taking gold in boardercross, and silver in slalom and giant slalom.

FEBRUARY 2003: Featured as a catwalk model in Madonna's "American Life" video.

MARCH 2003: Again earns gold in boardercross and silver in slalom and giant slalom at USASA Nationals.

SUMMER 2004: Stars in "What's Buggin' Seth?"

FEBRUARY 2005: Founds Adaptive Action Sports along with partner Daniel Gale.

MARCH 2006: Representing AAS at the USASA Nationals, takes gold in slalom and giant slalom, and silver in boardercross.

JULY 2006: Given Jeffrey Winfield Green Award at Orlando's Extremity Games for her work in the adaptive sports community.