

IT STARTED WITH LOVE OF SNOW

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They walked up to Michael Jankowski, guys not yet 30 and already accumulating regret.

They were together again last September, the Christian Brothers High class of 1993, and many of them were hearing for the first time what had become of Jankowski, the old wrestling demon, the old drummer.

"Definitely it was jaws dropping and people could not believe it," Jankowski remembered.

"Some guys came up to me and said, 'Dude, that is so cool. I'm selling insurance and my life sucks.' "

Jankowski isn't sitting behind a desk selling insurance, that's for sure. No, the youngest of Madaline and Leonard Jankowski's six children had chosen a path so different it stunned people to hear about it.

Michael Jankowski had just flown in from Chile, where he was serving as halfpipe coach for the United States Olympic snowboarding team.

That's right. Snowboarding - the ultrahip sport for grungily attired athletes who surfslide, spin and flip down a corridor of snow, known as the halfpipe, in search of big air and amplitude (really big air).

If all goes as planned, Jankowski, 28, will be in Torino, Italy, two Februarys from now, helping U.S. athletes bring home medals in the most audacious of Olympic sports.

"Isn't it crazy?" said Teri Trotter, his older sister.

"My brother, born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, is the Olympic snowboard coach. Everybody I tell is flabbergasted."

It does seem strange. But if you know Jankowski's story and understand his upbringing, it begins to seem perfectly logical - this Memphis kid teaching people to ride in the snow.

The lessons he learned growing up, and the audacious choices he's made along the way, have given his life serious amplitude.

And no regrets.

Snow in his blood

Michael never saw a ski slope until after high school, but he knew the joys of romping in a winter wonderland, even in a city that averages only 5.49 inches of snow a year.

His parents, Len and Madaline, grew up in South Bend, Ind., and so the family brought a shedful of snow gear with them down South in 1973, along with their deep Catholic faith and passion for Notre Dame football.

Len's parents emigrated from Poland and settled in the Midwest, where they raised their 10 sons and daughters. Like polka and pierogies, there is snow in the Jankowski blood.

On cold nights when all of Memphis hunkered down beneath forecasts of severe winter mayhem, Michael and his brothers would lie awake in their shared bedroom, a cavernous converted attic, and wait. When they saw the flakes dancing on the skylights, they could already feel the rush.

They lived in East Memphis near Sea Isle Park, near Glenbriar, a rare Memphis street that can pass for a slope. Len would show them tricks he'd learned growing up in northern Indiana and the snow secrets his Polish family had taught to him.

"We had wooden sleds with the metal runners and I remember my dad showing me to take a candle and wax the blades for speed," Michael said.

"We'd race. It would ice up, get fast. It was a very good hill."

Len Jankowski, part owner of the High Point Pinch, was proud of his youngest son. All of his regular customers knew that. So did members of Memphis's Polish-American Society, which Len founded. So did anyone who listened to "Roll out the Barrel," Len's weekly polka show on WEVL.

"That was especially for Michael Jankowski, the silver medal winner at the regional wrestling tournament, where he came in second in the 103-pound wrestling class," Jan the Polka Man told listeners in February 1991, after dedicating to Michael a polka version of Credence Clearwater Revival's "Down on the Corner."

Since Len's death in 1997, Madaline has distributed tapes of those shows to the kids. She has tried to give Michael that 1991 tape, but he won't take it.

"I think to listen to it, there's still some pain," Madaline said.

They were close, Michael and Len, and so it was difficult when he decided to forgo his admission at the University of Tennessee and respond to his yearning to live out West.

Len and Madaline objected at first, but when they realized how determined he was to go they helped him hatch a plan.

Michael would go and live with his older cousin, Julie, in Flagstaff, Ariz., get a job and wait a year to enroll at Northern Arizona University.

Before Michael headed west in his 1983 Oldsmobile Omega, he stopped downtown to say goodbye to his father.

Anyone who grew up under his roof knows Len Jankowski gave Michael one thing for sure - his words to live by.

Faith, courage and enthusiasm, Michael. Faith, courage and enthusiasm.

"Any sort of big new change in our lives, he'd throw that out there," Teri said.

Len stood outside on that summer day in 1993, looked up to the Hernando DeSoto Bridge and watched the Omega make its way across the Mississippi River.

Michael had no idea what lay ahead of him. He had only \$300 and his father's advice.

"I definitely had the feeling of leaving home and entering the unknown, which is scary," Michael said.

"But more than that, it was exciting."

Hooked

Michael found work in Flagstaff, collecting grocery carts from the parking lot of a Sam's Club. He fell in love with his new city, surrounded by four national forests and 80 miles south of the Grand Canyon.

Flagstaff is a short drive from the Arizona Snowbowl, a ski resort where many of his new co-workers spent time. On the first day of the 1993-94 season, Michael made a decision that would change the course of his life.

He borrowed a board and went up the mountain by himself, determined to learn to snowboard. He wore army-surplus wool pants, which grabbed the snow and ice like Velcro, a flannel shirt, thermal underwear underneath, and scratched-up motorcycle goggles.

When he got there, he realized he had no idea how to get on or off a ski lift.

"I watched and watched and watched and finally got the courage to get on it," Michael said. "Then I had to watch how people got off, and I just went for it."

He strapped into the board boots and pointed down the hill. When he wanted to slow down or stop, he just fell.

"I was sore as I can ever remember; couldn't even get out of bed," he said.

Even so, the old Brothers wrestler had found a calling.

"I was hooked from the beginning," Michael said.

"It's just the feeling of flying down the mountains and the air and the beauty of the surroundings."

As soon as Michael mastered his new sport, he applied to teach it to others. He was hoping to get a free lift pass and more chances to learn all the acrobatics that go with advanced boarding - the spins, the reckless velocity, the flips.

His first student was a teenage boy, maybe 14. He was hearing impaired. His overprotective mother kept close watch. Michael had the kid sliding and smiling in no time. The mother delighted in her son's newfound confidence.

She turned in a glowing comment card. Michael got his lift pass and something else - a love for teaching.

"I felt a definite sense of accomplishment and achievement, helping to teach this guy how to ride," Jankowski said.

Michael graduated from Northern Arizona in May 1998, 10 months after his father died of a heart attack at age 62, and three months after snowboarding debuted as an Olympic medal sport, in Nagano, Japan.

He landed a summer job as a coach for halfpipe snowboarders at Windell's Snowboard Camp on Oregon's Mt. Hood. That led to a full-time position at Vermont's Stratton Mountain School, considered the best for aspiring snowboarders.

Michael's athletes won world championships. Soon, half the U.S. Junior National Team came from Stratton Mountain, and Michael became the coach.

That's when he started traveling - to Finland, Switzerland, Chile, New Zealand. By last summer, Michael's reputation among athletes and coaches led to interviews with the U.S. Olympic snowboarding team.

Michael had come a long way since his days in prep wrestling, a culture that enforces harsh discipline and strict regimens. Snowboarding follows a completely different ethic.

"It's a very touchy situation if you are taking things too seriously," Michael said.

"People will call you out and smell it from a mile away. Be serious, get your objectives done and remain nonchalant about it."

Michael told the Olympic coaches that his philosophy mixed the serious side of competition with the inherent play that defines snowboarding.

"Snowboarding at that level is a gamble - a calculated gamble but a gamble for sure," he said.

"They know what they have to do, they know how to do it, but they have to do it bigger and better and in a more spectacular way than they ever have before."

Put another way, it takes a lot of faith, a lot of courage, a lot of enthusiasm.

Michael got the job.

Long career journey

Michael's coaching career has already brought him more rewards than he could have imagined from sports.

In February 2003, he got chills when Lindsey Jacobellis, an alpine skier he converted to snowboarding at Stratton Mountain, stood on the podium at the Junior Worlds in Italy as the national anthem was playing.

Last month, two of his athletes triumphed at the XGames, the Super Bowl of snowboarding. Hannah Teter, one of the few women in the world capable of doing a 900 (2 1/2 revolutions off the halfpipe), won the gold. Then Steve Fisher unfurled the run of his life.

Listening to Jankowski describe it brings home how far removed bigtime snowboarding is from sledding down Glenbriar.

"His run was a backside 540, to front side 900, to backside air, to front side 1080, to switch 720, to a crippler 720," he explained. "It was unbeatable."

Madaline watched the XGames on ESPN, hoping to get a glimpse of Michael during the telecast. She did.

At the end, he stood at the top of the halfpipe with Fisher, who was holding his gold medal.

"How do you explain a feeling like that?" Madaline said. "I'm just overwhelmed with pride and joy."

Two Februaries from now, the Jankowski clan hopes to see Michael standing on top of the world, in the Italian Alps, with his athletes winning Olympic medals.

It's not hard to imagine Len Jankowski - aka Jan the Polka Man, aka Dad - bragging on his youngest son and sending out one more dedication.

"That was for Michael Jankowski, the coach of our Olympic snowboard team."

Might call it the Memphis Snowboard Polka.

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- Caption: photo (2)Michael JankowskiCAPTION: Michael Jankowski took his love of snowboarding to the ultimate level when the former Memphian became the U.S. Olympic snowboard coach.

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