



## A Sled Full of Hope

By Sedona Callahan

Photo by Stephen Zusy

Ildiko Strehli was full of hope in 1994 when she relocated from her native Hungary to the United States to join her new husband, American-born Bob Shell. She took on the many tests a new marriage, language and country typically present with her usual good humor and can-do attitude. But there was one daunting challenge she was not prepared for. Just eight months into her marriage, and at age 30, Strehli discovered a lump in her breast. She was an athlete in excellent health; young, with no history of cancer in her family background.

Stunned to learn the diagnosis of breast cancer, Strehli immediately followed through with the recommended treatment — lumpectomy, chemotherapy and radiation — but she was weakened by the unexpected crisis. “I felt like a backpack on my new husband’s back,” says Strehli. “He had to take care of everything.”

Eventually, Strehli resumed her athletic life in Park City. She returned to her position as ski instructor at Park City Mountain Resort, and developed an interest in women’s bobsledding. But in 1999, the cancer returned. This time a more aggressive treatment, including a bilateral mastectomy, was called for, leaving Strehli shaken in confidence. “I didn’t even tell my family back in Hungary,” she says. “There, the word ‘cancer’ isn’t spoken. It’s an

assumed death sentence.”

Two events occurred that brought Strehli a renewed confidence, reviving her previously hopeful attitude and desire to excel. “I read Lance Armstrong’s book [It’s Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life] and saw how he inspired people,” she said. The other event was the first-time inclusion of women’s bobsledding in the 2002 Winter Olympics.

Strehli felt inspired to enter her team in the competition. “I thought if I could do this, I could help other women who are in a similar situation. I want to let people who have been affected by breast cancer know they don’t have to be afraid to dream big. ‘Have a life after [cancer]. Don’t give up on your dreams. Never give up,’” she encourages.

With recharged determination, Strehli embarked on her plan to pilot a team of bobsledders in the 2002 Winter Olympics for her native Hungary. She began training to overcome the incapacitating effects of cancer treatment and rebuild her strength and stamina. She recruited teammates. Her country applauded her efforts, but wasn’t able to provide financial support.

Strehli and her husband began to finance the Olympic dream themselves. “It’s very expensive transporting the sled to trials held all over the world,” says Strehli. Prior to the Olympic Games, winter training and

competition take place with World Cup events planned in Germany, Austria, Calgary, Canada and Park City. “While some people get loans to buy a house, we get loans for our dream.” As their requests for funding pour out to potential sponsors, maxed-out credit cards and minor sponsors have, for the moment, kept their goal in focus. “I’m desperate for funding. It is a terrible pressure for me,” she says.

Meanwhile, Strehli has dubbed her team’s bobsled “Sled Full of Hope.” The name refers to continued success against breast cancer, as well as her hopes for the sport of women’s bobsledding. She has painted the stylized pink ribbon — the symbol for breast cancer awareness — on the sled’s side.

Out of forty-three women’s bobsled teams worldwide, the top fifteen teams will be included in the Olympic Games lineup. Hungary’s team [pilot Strehli, and teammates Eva Kurti and Eva Barati] was positioned in twelfth place last season.

Hungary’s team faces fierce competition from the top-placed German, American and Canadian bobsledding teams, and Strehli believes it may be too optimistic to think she can win the top prize in her event. However, she hopes to take one of the three positions on the medal podium. “I don’t want to be a survivor anymore. I want to be a winner!”