



SHEILA

GET YOUR ... GUN
BLADE
GOGGLES
HORSE
SPIKES

BY CARRIE SHEINBERG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOREFFREY

IN A CLUTTERED, TWO-CAR GARAGE ATTACHED TO her lakeside Michigan home, 39-year-old Sheila Taormina lowers a patch over her left eye, stuffs her left thumb into her front jeans pocket and stretches her right arm straight ahead. She holds a blue Morini air pistol in her hand, rock steady, and calmly pulls the trigger.

Taormina walks over to check her accuracy before reloading. Her target hangs on the wall, 10 meters away, just below her water skis and above the spare bags of kitty litter. Garden hoses and Costco boxes line the shelves behind her, bike frames hang from the ceiling, and to her right, a fencing dummy witnesses her training. Welcome to the unglamorous, mostly ignored and nearly-impossible-to-master world of Olympic modern pentathlon. Taormina qualified for the U.S. team on June 1. Impressive enough on its own, but when she fires her first shot in the pentathlon's first event, on Aug. 22, she will also become the first female athlete in the 112-year history of the modern Games to compete in three different Olympic sports.

Taormina's shot missed the bull's-eye. But, reassured that her water skis will live to ride another day, the 5'3", 115-pound jack-of-all-sports again takes aim at the 6"x6" square on the wall. She pulls the trigger. This time the pellet rips through the

center of the target. "Is that a 10 or a 9?" she asks. It's a 10, a perfect shot. It's what Taormina has pursued every day for 16 years: perfection. And for the past three of those years, she's gotten up at dawn to swim laps at the University of Michigan pool, followed by an hour of agility drills and medicine-ball exercises before 90 minutes of intervals at the track. Having a physical-therapy session, lunch and shooting practice before an evening fencing lesson means her daily regimen isn't over until 9 p.m. And even though she sometimes may want it all to end—so she can sleep in, meet a guy, maybe start a family—Taormina can't stop now. Her odyssey began on an Indiana pool deck in



1992, minutes after she finished 16th in the 200-meter freestyle and missed making the Olympic swim team for the second time. Instead of giving up, Taormina recommitted to the sport, figuring that if her teammates from the University of Georgia could qualify, so could she. "I had thought only superheroes made the Olympics," Taormina says. "But right then I thought maybe I can make it." Since then, she has competed in the 1996, 2000 and 2004 Games. And come this August, in Beijing, Taormina may become, arguably, the greatest athlete in the world.

Don't buy it? Well, imagine for a second that Michael Jordan had hit .300 in the majors after his last NBA championship, then knocked off a top seed at Wimbledon. Or that Floyd Mayweather becomes an Olympic pole vaulter in 2012 and wrestles in 2016. That's Taormina's level of athletic achievement. "If you look for any kind of reasonable, objective standard," says her longtime coach, Lew Kidder, "it would be, Okay, who got to the top of their sport, and then who got to the top of the world in a second sport? Deion Sanders, Bo Jackson, Jim Thorpe. It's a fairly narrow group. Sheila is near the top of the world in a third sport. Nobody's ever come close to that before."

At the very least, Taormina can lay claim to the title of most-accomplished athlete. Or most versa-

House to complete her MBA. She then moved home to Livonia, Mich., outside Detroit, and took a quality-control job with an auto-parts supplier, struggling to keep her Olympic dream alive.

Taormina started training again, and to her surprise she got faster. "She just hadn't gotten the urge to try for the Olympics out of her system," says her mother, Moya. At the swimming trials in 1996, she finished sixth in the 200 free and qualified to swim on the relay team. "That was a miracle," Kidder says. "In swimming, the critical ratio is power generated to drag, so most swimmers are tall and long. For her size, to become an Olympic champion swimmer, that was the real accomplishment."

Gold medal in hand, Taormina retired. She bought a camper and drove around the U.S. giving motivational talks and swimming clinics. But by July 1998 she craved the kind of structure that life on the road lacked. "I was eating fast food and living like a truck driver," Taormina says. "I needed to exercise again." On a whim, she entered the Waterloo Triathlon near her hometown. And won. The event organizer was Kidder.

Stunned by her swimming strength and natural speed on the bike and run, Kidder challenged Taormina to qualify for the 2000 U.S. Olympic triathlon team just two years later. Taormina's

She finished third, then passed out from dehydration. Still, Kidder knew he was working with a unique athlete. In 2000, Taormina not only qualified for the U.S. team, she finished sixth at the Sydney Olympics. In 2004, she won the world championships, then placed 23rd in the Olympics after suffering cramps during the run.

Which is where her story would have ended, except that Taormina has athletic OCD. "I call it the other edge of the knife," Kidder says. "It's what gives her this incredible drive and intensity that's beyond other people's." All it took was a

How crazy is Taormina? Triathlons weren't enough of a challenge for her.



ELAINE THOMPSON/AP IMAGES

SEAN GARNSWORTHY/GETTY IMAGES

PLAYING WAR GAMES

Created by Olympics founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin for the 1912 Games, modern pentathlon may be the most underappreciated comp in all of sports. On a single day, three dozen athletes compete in these five events—which represent skills that military couriers in pre-World War I Europe needed to deliver messages.

SHOOTING

In the first event, athletes take 20 shots with a 4.5mm air pistol at targets 10 meters away. Top score, for the bull's-eye (less than half an inch in diameter), is 10 points, which converts to a perfect pentathlon score of 1,196; Taormina's goal is 1,096.

FENCING

Next, athletes duel every other competitor in one-minute, sudden-death épée matches. If neither scores a touch, both lose. Winning 24 matches earns 1,000 points; Taormina needs 17 wins, worth about 804 points, to stay in the hunt.

SWIMMING

Next, athletes race for time, which is converted to points. If Taormina hits her pentathlon record of 2:07, she could gain nearly 100 points on her top opponents.

EQUESTRIAN

Competitors are assigned a horse 20 minutes before they have to ride a show-jumping course with 12 obstacles. Riders start with 1,200 points and are docked for mistakes. It's Taormina's weakest event; she needs to score 1,100 points to keep her medal hopes alive.

RUNNING

The 3,000m cross-country run is the final event. Athletes start at intervals based on points from the previous events, and every four points is worth a one-second head start. The first finisher wins. A strong runner, Taormina should medal if she starts among the top 12.

tile. Whatever the case, though, the idea makes her squirm. "I would feel sick to my stomach claiming that," she says. "What does that mean, anyway?"

Nothing, of course. And everything. Taormina already owns an Olympic gold medal in swimming (she swam the third leg of the 4x200 relay in 1996), a world championship triathlon title and Olympic triathlon team berths in 2000 (she finished sixth) and 2004 (23rd). She hopes to contend for a medal in the pentathlon in 2008. (See chart above.)

Ironically, she never wanted all of this. When Taormina's coach at Georgia gently told her in 1992 to move on with her life, she ignored him and swam one more year while waiting tables at a Waffle

response: "What the heck?" She'd never ridden or run competitively, so she had to learn the bike-racing tactics of pack riding and drafting, all while saving enough energy to get off the bike and run a 10K at about six minutes per mile. She didn't hesitate. "With Sheila, everything has to be done now," Kidder says. "When she gets in that state, just stand back. She's a force of nature."

Eight months later, Taormina raced in the pro division for the first time, but her inexperience showed when she decided to race without water. "I was so afraid I wouldn't keep up on the bike that I decided to shed weight. I thought, It's only two hours—I'll be fine."

comment from U.S. pentathlete Eli Bremer. He suggested that Taormina could make history if she qualified for the Olympics in a third sport. Instantly, she knew what she'd be doing for the next four years.

Although accustomed to enduring pain, Taormina still wasn't prepared for the emotional and physical agony that awaited in training for her new sport. "I felt like everything I did was wrong," she says. "Fencing, shooting, horseback riding—they're all so technical. I'm much more stressed. I'm either completely wired and tense, or I'm passed out on the couch. I didn't used to be that way."

Taormina practices each pentathlon discipline as many as four times a week, on top of cardio, weightlifting and resistance training. She makes time to grab coffee with friends, as long as it's after her track workout and before horseback riding. She rests on Sundays, after church and a stop at her favorite pastry shop.

The routine is wearing on her. "Things started getting rough when no sponsors signed on," Taormina says. "When Michael Phelps' agent says, I can't get a dime for you, you're not marketable, and I was going to default on my home loan—it took away the fun." So Taormina's wild world of sports, an athletic heaven of sorts, has also become a professional hell. She lives in a prison bound by her own determination and grit, a universe powered by her own genius but built from someone else's suggestion. "I'm trying to make history and do

something nobody's done. I love these new sports, I think they're cool. I just hate the fact that I might be in it for the wrong reasons."

Right or wrong, she can't stop and can't help wanting to win more. Consider that before 2005, her first year of modern pentathlon competition, she had never been on a horse, never shot a pistol, never fenced. The first time she faced an opponent with a blade was when she tried out for the U.S. national team. Having never seen a fencing bout, she grabbed her opponent's épée with two hands in a logical but illegal attempt to stop the beating. Less than 12 months later she won the Pan Am Championships.

Still, those victories were tempered by almost daily humiliation. She suffered 15 straight fencing losses in one competition, and she fell off unfamiliar horses as they jumped at full canter over four-foot barriers. "It's hard to take when you've been a world champion in one sport and an Olympic champion in another," she says. But the

mental free fall of going from elite swimmer to novice fencer taught her a lesson: Success would come from learning to use sudden mental shifts to her advantage. "Before, my philosophy was 'Be tough, be willing to hurt,'" she says. "But in pentathlon, being tough doesn't count as much as focus and composure. I've got to train my mind to be process-oriented, not product-oriented."

All the training has her thinking about the end of her journey. "I'm completely worn out," she says. "I'm almost 40 years old, I have no husband, no kids. Those are the choices I've made." But typical of Taormina's bold, even blind, determination, she is still proud and upwardly focused. "The message I want to convey is that I stuck it out. I didn't give up, and I was brave enough to put my ass on the line. I'm here now, and I have a shot."

While Taormina remains focused on the finish line in Beijing as the symbol of her emancipation, those who know her well aren't so certain it's the end. "She told me recently she loves horseback riding," her mother says. "That she might like to race in the Kentucky Derby. I said, 'Don't you dare!' She said, 'No, I'd never do that to you.' I hope I can trust her."

Don't bet on it.

Is Taormina the best athlete in the world? E-mail us at post@espnthemag.com.