

Katie Uhlaender - Olympian

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Winter Olympics, Sochi, Russia. An American woman is competing in the Olympic event called the skeleton. This woman isn't just representing America, she is especially representing rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Katie Uhlaender is the young Olympian with the Kansas connection. She must have gotten her interest in sports from her father, the former major league baseball player Ted Uhlaender. Ted Uhlaender played outfield for the Minnesota Twins, Cleveland Indians, and Cincinnati Reds. In 1972, his last year playing baseball, the Reds won the pennant and played in the World Series. He went on to be a scout for the San Francisco Giants.

Ted Uhlaender married Karen, a ski instructor. Their daughter Katie grew up in Breckenridge, Colorado.

In 2003, as a high-schooler, Katie discovered the sport of skeleton. This is a timed event consisting of a stripped-down sled on which a single rider hurtles head first down a sheet of ice at speeds approaching 80 miles an hour. It sounds scary, but it appealed to Katie's athleticism and sense of adventure. Katie even won the junior nationals in this event.

Meanwhile, her family had purchased an 800 acre farm in northwest Kansas, in Rawlins County west of the county seat of Atwood, near the town of McDonald. Her dad, Ted Uhlaender, enjoyed fixing fence and working on this farm.

Katie continued to train and compete in the skeleton. She finished sixth in the 2006 Olympics and in 2007 and 2008, she won the World Cup championship. In 2009 she placed second, but as she left the winner's stand she learned the tragic news: Out on the farm, her father had perished from a massive heart attack.

This was very hard for Katie, a self-professed "daddy's girl." He had encouraged her throughout her athletic career. "He would remind me of things he had done in his career and how proud he was," Katie said. "Just the way he spoke to me gave me reassurance that I was on the right path and that I was doing the right thing."

Katie said she suffered without her father's encouragement. Then a month after her father's death, Katie was seriously injured in a snowmobiling accident. After all that, in the 2010 Olympics she finished a disappointing eleventh place.

After the Olympics, Katie and her brother went to the farm to check on things. She said she felt her father's spirit when she got to the farm and she started working on the farm herself.

In a Team USA video, Katie said, "My father left behind a farm in western Kansas, three hours east of Denver. I'm not scared to get dirty, I'm not scared to get work done, and I love seeing the product of my hard work. It's American," she said.

When not on the farm, Katie was training or competing. Then came the 2012 World Cup competition. Katie wore a chain with her father's 1972 National League pennant ring around her neck, and she won the World Cup.

At the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Katie faced very tough competition. In the end, she placed fourth in the event, just four one-hundredths of a second from the bronze medal.

People in Rawlins County, Kansas were watching the Olympics with great interest. Ken Higley said he had not met Katie but owns ground which adjoins the Uhlaender's place. "Her dad was really nice," Ken said. People here seem especially pleased that Katie is celebrating her Kansas connection. "It's been a great thing for us out here," Ken said. "People in Rawlins County and Atwood and McDonald are very proud of her."

It's exciting to find an Olympian with ties to rural Kansas. After all, McDonald is a rural community of 155 people. Now, that's rural.

Winter Olympics, Sochi, Russia. We commend Katie Uhlaender for making a difference by representing the U.S. with her athleticism and competitive fire as she competes in the Olympics. As she hurtles down the ice, she carries two special things with her: Her father's major league pennant ring and the well-wishes of her neighbors in rural Kansas.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.