

UP CLOSE **Strength** As you read Kevin's story, think about different ways a person can be strong.

He was a champion snowboarder bound for the Olympics when he suffered a near-fatal accident. Coming home has been the sweetest victory of all.



BY LAUREN TARSHIS

It was December 31, 2009, a bitterly cold day on the Utah mountainside. Twenty-two-year-old Kevin Pearce was standing in the snow with his snowboard, but he might as well have been standing on top of the world. The 2010 Winter Olympics were just six weeks away. And Kevin was a favorite for a medal in freestyle snowboarding.

Kevin fell in love with the sport while growing up in Norwich, Vermont. Since the age of 6, he had pursued it with pure passion. Soaring 30 feet into the air, twisting and turning like a jet-powered bird—this was Kevin's joy. Over the years, he'd turned this passion into a world-class career, winning medal after medal. In 2008, he'd beaten the most celebrated snowboarder of all: Shaun White. Would Kevin do it again at the upcoming Olympics?

This was the question on Kevin's mind that December day as he began his training session.

He was practicing on a half-pipe, a U-shaped structure snowboarders use to perform their extreme tricks.

He was working on one of his most challenging tricks, a twisting double back flip known as a "cab double cork." It was a "must-have" move for the Olympics. His rival, Shaun White, was already performing it in competitions. Kevin had been trying to nail it for months. "I'm very close," he'd



Snowboarder Kevin Pearce was bound for the Olympic Games. Following his accident, he spent months in the hospital fighting to recover (inset).



Kevin has won sponsorships from companies like Nike and Burton (above). Kevin and Shaun White celebrate victories (inset).



told an interviewer a few weeks earlier.

Kevin headed down the half-pipe and then up into the air. But something wasn't right. He had too much power going into the trick. His snowboard slipped, and Kevin fell, smashing his head against the icy half-pipe. As always, he was wearing a helmet. But the blow was so violent that he was knocked unconscious.

Within minutes, Kevin was taken by helicopter to a hospital at the University of Utah. He remained unconscious as doctors worked to save his life. They inserted a tube into his throat so that he could breathe. They shaved off most of his famously shaggy hair. And they drilled holes in Kevin's skull to drain the fluids and relieve pressure on his brain.

Kevin was in critical condition. Even experienced doctors didn't know if he'd survive.

Powerful and Fragile

Your brain controls everything you do: the beating of your heart, your ability to read these words, the taste of the gum you're secretly chewing. Everything you experience is the result of chemical and electrical impulses in the brain. This organ—three pounds of gray flesh—controls your body, feelings, thoughts, and memories.

But despite its awesome power, your brain is fragile. Fortunately, it is well-cushioned inside your skull—an inch-thick helmet of solid bone. For extra protection, it floats in fluid and is wrapped in a leathery skin called the epidura.

But even in this protective casing, the brain can be damaged. Every year, 50,000 people die from serious brain injuries. Car

accidents are the leading cause. Bike and motorcycle accidents are right behind. Sports like skiing and snowboarding also bring big risks.

Last year, 60 people in the U.S. died from head injuries caused by ski or snowboarding accidents.

Thousands more experienced less severe head injuries known as concussions. With proper care,

most concussions heal completely (see the sidebar on the next page). But major brain injuries like Kevin's are often fatal. Those who do survive can be left with devastating lifelong disabilities.

50,000 Friends

Day after day, Kevin lay in a hospital bed in a coma. His parents, Pia and Simon, stayed by his side. His oldest brother, Andrew, postponed his wedding so he could be with Kevin. Another brother, Adam, took leave from his job. David, his youngest brother, was in constant touch. An extended family of fans and friends shed tears, sent cards, and left messages on Kevin's Facebook page, which soon listed 50,000 friends.

On day six, Kevin finally began to stir. He opened his eyes. He squeezed his father's hand.

He spoke one word: "Mom." In the coming weeks, Kevin would endure more brain surgeries. Doctors became confident that he would survive. But there were troubling questions. Would he walk again? Would he be able to communicate?

Essentially, would Kevin be Kevin?

The family didn't dwell on this question.

One month after his injury, his condition was stable enough for him to be moved to Craig Hospital, in Denver, Colorado. There, doctors, nurses, and therapists specialize in helping people recover from brain and spinal injuries. They helped Kevin learn to walk and talk again.

Soon Kevin faced a different sort of challenge. On February 18, 2010, with his family around his bed, Kevin watched the TV broadcast of the snowboarding competition at the Vancouver Olympics. He watched athletes do what he should have been doing: competing for medals as millions of people watched. He saw Shaun White win the gold. Kevin's close friend, Scott Lago,

won the bronze. Kevin felt an agonizing mix of emotions—he was grateful to be alive. But, as he later said, "The Olympics was the thing that mattered most to me. It was hard to watch."

But Kevin moved on. With the same focus that led him to the top of his sport, he set his sights on recovering. Seven days a week, often six hours a day, he worked to strengthen his body and his mind. The therapy was frequently painful. His balance was so bad that if he looked left or right while standing up, he would crumple to the floor. His vision was a blur.

YOUR BRAIN BY THE NUMBERS

- ▶ **1.5 million** Americans sustain a serious brain injury each year.
- ▶ Wearing a helmet while biking cuts your risk of serious head injury by **88%**.
- ▶ You have **100,000** miles of blood vessels in your brain.
- ▶ Your brain weighs **3** pounds.
- ▶ You have about **70,000** thoughts per day.



Not Just a Bump on the Head

Even mild concussions can be dangerous

Twelve-year-old Ben James had taken hits in football before. But never anything like the one he took last fall, when he was blindsided by two older and larger players during a game. Ben went down hard, hitting his head. Until recently, such bumps were considered part of the game. But not anymore. Researchers have found that even minor head injuries can cause lasting damage. The

biggest danger is when kids with minor concussions go back into the game. A second hit to a bruised brain can be fatal.

Luckily, Ben's coach noticed that he seemed confused and took him off the field. His parents brought him to the hospital, where tests confirmed a concussion. Ben couldn't play football for weeks while his brain healed. He missed playing. But it was a small price to pay for a full recovery.

Go to Storyworks online for more info about kids and concussions.



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Shutterstock, Courtesy The James Family

Kevin tackles his physical therapy sessions with the same determination that made him a top athlete. They help him rebuild his strength and balance. Kevin's family is always there to support him.



He was spooked by the fact that he remembered nothing from the weeks before or just after the accident. "It's like a part of my life was blank," he says.

But as his body got stronger, so did his mind. Special glasses helped correct his blurred vision. His memory and balance improved.

Scientists can never predict how a person will recover from a brain injury. But Kevin's

progress exceeded his doctors' hopes. Why did he improve so quickly? The quality of the care he received was high, and he was in top physical shape before the accident. His positive attitude was also key. But to Kevin, the secret weapon was his family, who remained with him "24/7."

No Regrets

Today, one year after his accident, Kevin is living with his family in Vermont. His memory and reflexes are still improving. But if you met him for the first time, you would never guess he had suffered a near-fatal brain injury. You would see a healthy young man with funky glasses, a warm smile, and a quick wit.

And what about that sport he loved so much? "Snowboarding has brought me so much happiness," he says. "I knew what the risks were. I don't regret anything."

In fact, he vows he will return to the sport. Perhaps he won't be trying the cab double cork again. But, he says, "Snowboarding will be a part of my life. It has to be."

WRITE TO WIN!

What are different ways a person can be strong? How do Kevin and his family members show their strength? Write a paragraph explaining your answer. Send it



to "Kevin Contest" by February 15, 2011. We'll send 10 winners a copy of Sharon Draper's *Out of My Mind*. See page 2 for details.

GET THIS CONTEST ONLINE

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WRITE A PARAGRAPH

Sentence Chef



Directions:

1. Read "The Fall and Rise of Kevin Pearce." Then reread the section **50,000 Friends** and do the Sentence Chef activity below.
2. Use the color-coded boxes and lines as guides to help you write each part of the paragraph.
3. Remember to back up your statements by including information and details found in the article.
4. When you're finished, copy the entire paragraph onto a separate piece of paper.

THE PROMPT

What kinds of support helped Kevin Pearce recover from his brain injury?

Topic Sentence

Kevin Pearce got support from both professionals and his family as he recovered from a terrible brain injury.

Supporting Sentence 1

Explain how Kevin's family and friends supported him after his injury.

Detail Sentence 1

Provide a detail about this. (Hint: What sacrifices did his family members make?)

Supporting Sentence 2

Explain how a group of professionals helped him recover from his injury.

Detail Sentence 2

Provide a detail about this. (Hint: What kinds of therapy did he do?)

Concluding Sentence

Repeat the topic sentence, but in different words.