

ATHLETE PROFILE

Antoinette O'Donnell



by Jenna E. Caputo



ED BURKE/SARATOGIAN

Balance. That is the one word that Antoinette O'Donnell tries to keep in the forefront of her mind. As a wife, mother, nurse and athlete, it's often hard to achieve that perfect balance in life. And as a woman, that balance tends to be even harder to achieve when you are bombarded with the world's "no you can't's," but Antoinette is proof that, "yes you can."

Growing up in a family with ten children, Antoinette quickly learned that in life, you have to get out there and "just do it." Involved in several sports, Antoinette's main passion is skiing. Being the youngest child in her family, Antoinette often tagged along with whatever her older siblings did. At the age of two, that meant learning to ski. Luckily, that was the time when Gore Mountain began their season passes which provided an affordable option for Antoinette's family – the Riedy clan – to have all 12 of them ski for the season. She quickly grew to love the sport and would have loved to compete, but it just wasn't an option for her family. "My father always said that if he couldn't do it for all the kids, then he couldn't do it for just one."

But she found other ways to enjoy her wintertime passion and is now one of the few senior-level alpine female members of the ski patrol at Gore Mountain for her eighth season. Out of the 130 listed patrollers, only 25 are women. Antoinette's family hold five of these spots with her brother's wife and three nieces joining her on the ski patrol. All 25 of the women are athletic, driven women who really enjoy what they do. They'd have to because it is a big time commitment.

To be an alpine patroller involves 180 hours

of classroom instruction on outdoor emergency medical care and a year of mountain sponsorship for outdoor emergency care, skiing and toboggan training and development. Upon successful completion of a year candidacy, you graduate to patroller level. Advance levels of patrolling include Senior and Certified. These include more specialized training in resort management, medical, mass casualty, expert search and rescue (including avalanche training) and instructor courses. "Everyone should feel very safe when on the mountain because the patrollers are well trained and very dedicated. They share their passion and want to provide a safe environment so everyone can enjoy their skiing and riding there," Antoinette says.

It may be an uncommon venue for a woman to get into, but oddly enough the whole concept of ski patrol began with a woman. The 1930s marked the start of the ski train – trains bringing skiers in from New York City and Schenectady up to the North Creek Ski Bowl area. Lois Perret Schaefer, a registered nurse at a local hospital and soon to be wife of Schenectady Wintersports Club founder, Vincent Schaefer, was asked to set up the first aid committee. She organized a committee and made individual first aid kits with emergency aid supplies to be carried by some of the experienced skiers. She also arranged a first aid station with toboggans and a doctor at hand in one of the train cars parked in North Creek. Having her and her committee as available medical personnel on the mountain became the first concept of the ski patrol. An annual memorial award is given to a deserving ski patroller every year in name, in honor of the contribution she made to this important safety feature. Since the national patrol was established in 1938, there is now a ski patrol presence in all 50 states and parts of Europe as well.

Age: 48
Residence: Saratoga Springs
Occupation: Coordinator Audit, Compliance and Communication for CDPHP; Co-Owner of Celtic Treasures in Saratoga Springs
Sport: Alpine Skiing
Other Sports: Cycling, Hockey, Fitness Boxing
Family: Husband, Paul and Son, Eamonn, 18

Obviously not one to bend to the "conventional" picture of a woman's role, besides skiing, Antoinette also participates in other sports that can be an intimidating venue for a woman to get into, like hockey and boxing. Although she is no longer able to balance playing hockey with her other responsibilities, Antoinette became one of the "founding mothers" of the Arctic Foxes during her six-year run as a hockey player. Falling into the sport after talking to another mother at a work party, Antoinette joined the women who donned the equipment and played between periods of their kids' hockey games. The group soon outgrew their smaller accommodations and began to play at the Clifton Park Ice Arena. They have now grown into a solid league open to all ages and experience, with various levels of play from a recreation league, to a practice squad, and a competitive league.

After a New Year's resolution to try to achieve more balance in her life, Antoinette realized she needed to cut out the time-consuming hockey, but has stayed active off the slopes with spinning classes and a fitness boxing class in the evenings. Since she doesn't enjoy the monotonous cycles of "standard" exercising, Antoinette was intrigued by the concept of the full-body workout that boxing provides. Her class is not all about throwing punches. It includes a boot camp regimen that works the core, quad, and upper body strength to prepare the body for the sport and to add strength to the punches.

Antoinette was quick to state that the atmosphere in both sports is very open and supportive, and women should not be intimidated to try these sports. Her boxing class has a lot of women in it, and the men that are there are very encouraging and supportive, often offering tips for proper form and punching technique. Within both sports, she has also found that the younger generation has been very receptive to having older participants there. "It is wonderful to now have these same opportunities as the younger generation that we never had at their age. You'd be surprised at how NOT intimidating it is... You need to just try it and see if it is for you," she remarked.

In fact, she was much more intimidated when she decided to try the Lake George Triathlon. Being primarily a cyclist, she did not feel comfortable doing the whole Olympic distance triathlon herself, so to introduce herself to the sport, she joined a team where each woman took a section of the event in their own "power position." It was a great introduction to the event, but after seeing the accomplishment and thrill of those that did the whole thing themselves, Antoinette decided to give it a try for the next year.

Knowing that swimming would be her weakest point, she started by going to the YMCA to learn how to properly swim. Her first lap was laughed at, but she entered a Total Immersion program and also practiced open water swimming, which she highly recommends for anyone thinking of doing a triathlon. "Training in the pool just can't prepare you for the choppy water, splashing, and needing to breathe on both sides that open water can." Antoinette recalls her first minutes in the open water during the triathlon like being in a washing machine. She pointed out that having a friend there to encourage you and share their passion for the event makes such a difference. She had a friend that stayed with her every step of the way on the day of the event, and through this encouragement she managed to shave 15 minutes off her swim personal record, and crossed the finish line with a smile on her face.

Antoinette describes the experience as thrilling and challenging. She was most surprised, though, at the amazing camaraderie. She was floored at how supportive everyone was – the competitors urged each other forward even if someone was passing them. Besides being an incredible workout, Antoinette describes the event as "such a sense of accomplishment," and a workout that makes you less prone to injury than just running since you are hitting all three areas.

Antoinette has accomplished so much in her life already. Besides juggling a full-time day job, ski patrol, family, and her other sports, she has been able to constantly try new things and follow her dreams. While still keeping up with her other responsibilities. I asked her if she had any tips on how to juggle it all despite what stage of life you are in. Her advice, much like her, is very encouraging – "As women, it is really hard for us to say no. But you need to make a little bit of 'me time.' For me, I do yoga, and sleep in one morning on the weekend. No one is going to take care of you but you. Follow your dreams, enjoy your passion – and find balance. These things are doable by actually trying to maintain balance in your life so you can have a happy and healthy life." ▲

Jenna Caputo (silverpenproductions.com) is a freelance writer and ballroom dance instructor based in Ballston Spa. She also enjoys yoga, cross-country skiing and curling.

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