

Sheila Taormina (BBA '92, MBA '94) is relentlessly refining (and redefining) the product she was born to manage: herself



One Woman, Three Sports, Four Olympics...

BY ALEX GREVAR • PHOTOS BY CARLY CALHOUN



Any Buyers?





One of the people least surprised by Taormina's accomplishments is her former Terry College professor James Cox, who was so enamored with her take on personal productivity that he devoted 20 pages of his book, *Managing Operations*, to a deconstruction of her swimming routine that she wrote for his Management 577 class.

YOU: Marketing Agent

CLIENT: Sheila Taormina (BBA '92, MBA '94), a three-time Olympian who is one of the world's most versatile athletes.

PROFILE: A 13-time All-America swimmer at UGA, Taormina continues to shine more than a decade later as evidenced by the fact that she received the 2007 United States Sports Academy's Jim Thorpe All-Around Award (past recipients include Herschel Walker and Jackie Joyner-Kersey). Taormina won a gold medal as a member of the U.S.'s 4 x 200-meter freestyle relay team at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Following the '96 Games, she toured the country as a motivational speaker. She returned to world-class competition in triathlon (swimming, cycling, running), representing the U.S. in that event at both the 2000 Olympics in Sydney (she finished sixth) and at the 2004 Games in Athens (she finished 23rd).

FUTURE GOAL: Taormina, 38, is attempting to make the 2008 U.S. Olympic team in a third event, modern pentathlon, a grueling regimen that requires an athlete to excel at running, swimming, shooting, fencing, and horse jumping. She was ranked No. 1 in the U.S. in modern pentathlon in 2006, and if she qualifies for the '08 Beijing Games (there's every indication that she will), she will become the first female athlete from any country to make the Olympic Games in three different sports.

STRATEGY: Line up product endorsement deals.

PROBLEM: Thus far, sponsors are not lining up to get a piece of this history-making athlete.

39 when the Beijing Games roll around and she doesn't fit the mold of the fresh-faced Olympic success stories that predominate on NBC telecasts. What she's in the process of achieving is unprecedented in the annals of sport. But only four sponsors (Speedo, Amino Vital, Rudy Project sunglasses,

and Detroit's Carpenters and Mill-

wrights Union) continue to sponsor Taormina from the stable of 10 that backed her when she was No. 1 in U.S. triathlete circles.

It's easy to understand why sponsors might wonder how likely Taormina is to pull off this amazing trifecta. Until 2005, when she sold her house to finance her dream of making the Olympic team in modern pentathlon, Taormina had never ridden a horse, never fired a gun, never even picked up a foil.

But the great equalizer in any equation is the person on one side of the equals sign. And what no sponsor can intuit are the admiring looks that this sculpted, 115-pound Michigan native gets from

In this era of reality TV, where ordinary people become famous overnight just by being themselves, Sheila Taormina's accomplishments in the world of sports should logically have made her a household name already. But they haven't. Her marketing problem is that her latest endeavor, modern pentathlon, doesn't carry nearly the same clout as her original sport, swimming, or other crowd-friendly Olympic events such as gymnastics and track and field. Also, Taormina will be



other athletes as she rushes from an Olympic training pool in Colorado Springs to make a weight room appointment. Or the raised eyebrows when coaches and fellow competitors see how quickly and deftly she has learned to wield a fencing epee. How could anyone expect that as Taormina was learning to pierce the center “10” on a shooting target she would also be mastering the subtleties of making a 1,000-pound animal soar over four-foot jumps?

Answer: no one, save Taormina.

“One thing I learned in my production management class at the Terry College of Business with Dr. James Cox is that paradigms are commonly held beliefs,” she says. “The challenge is to break paradigms and ask, ‘Why do we believe this? Why do we accept it?’”

(Prof. Cox was so enamored with Taormina’s take on personal productivity that he dedicated 20 pages of his book *Managing Operations: A Focus on Excellence* to an analysis she wrote in Management 577. Her topic, not surprisingly, was a deconstruction of her swimming routine and psyche, and those pages overflow with hardnosed, honest, and self-reflective reality-tree-chart ruminations, including moments of self-doubt such as, “I lack confidence when I get to race in important competitions.”)

“People say, ‘You could never learn a sport in two years,’” Taormina continues between forkfuls of salad and grilled chicken at the Olympic Training Center cafeteria, her energetic tone mirroring motivational talks she’s delivered to companies such as UPS, Dean Witter, Merrill Lynch, Disney, and *The New York Times*. “People say, ‘How can you learn to jump a horse? It takes 10 years.’ Well, part of what I’m trying to do now is say, ‘Okay, it takes a teenager 10 years to learn a sport, but they don’t really care about their sport. They’re just kind of showing up; what they’re really interested in is being out with their friends.’ What if you’re 30 and you really care about what you’re doing? You’re passionate and you work 100 percent

(clockwise from top left) Taormina is crazy about sphynx cats, which help her relax when she’s wrung out from training. Her Olympic gold medal (see p. 17) came in swimming; she was part of the U.S.’s record-setting 4 x 200-meter freestyle relay team at the ‘96 Atlanta Games. Hitting the bull’s-eye in the shooting phase of the modern pentathlon is just one of the new techniques she has been trying to perfect. Running at high altitude at Garden of the Gods in Colorado will aid her in that phase of the competition. Considered by some as a cinch to make the ‘08 Olympic team, it’s important to remember that as recently as 2005 Taormina had never picked up a foil, or ridden a horse, or fired a gun.

six days a week for hours and hours a day . . . does it still take the same amount of time? If you’re a technique hound and you have a coach who is willing to go with you on this road and accelerate the process, maybe you could accomplish it in one year, two years, three years . . . who knows?”

As the technique hound finishes her mini treatise on how she approaches new challenges, she is — after a mere two years of training — the top-rated modern pentathlete in the World Cup standings. From nowhere at age 36 to No. 1 in the world in two years.

“Barring catastrophe, Sheila is a shoo-in to be one of the two U.S. women to go to the Olympics,” says Cecil Bleiker, who is with the United States Olympic Committee’s media and public relations division in Colorado Springs. “And, in my opinion, she’ll be one of the big American stories to come out of the 2008 Games.”

Breaking paradigms is what Taormina’s all about. She’s too short. She’s too old. She’s too inexperienced. And though she readily admits she doesn’t possess the physical traits the public expects of its heroes — which sometimes prompts feelings of self-doubt — in characteristic Taorminian style she’s found a way to make self-doubt her principal motivating factor.

“Lack of confidence might be my gift,” she says. “When you don’t have confidence, you work harder. What I take to the bank in every Olympics, Olympic Trials, and World Cup is that I know I worked harder than you. When I’m in my daily workout and I see people leave early, I say, ‘Sweet . . . go ahead and leave early’ because I know that’s what 99 percent of my competition is doing.”

This relentless work ethic has endeared a string of coaches to Taormina since she started swimming at the age of six. Her childhood swimming mentor, Greg Phill, who would again coach her prior to the '96 Olympics, remembers how, in high school, she raced with a broken wrist and a cast. Unyielding is the way UGA's head swimming coach Jack Bauerle remembers Taormina's stance toward teammates who didn't train as hard as she did. Lew Kidder, her triathlon coach, describes her as an obstinate perfectionist, a person who bought a glove and ball to workouts so she could practice before throwing out the first pitch at a Detroit Tigers game.

Taormina's degrees at Georgia have served her well — though somewhat coincidentally. Her BBA is in production management, her MBA focus was entrepreneurship; add that intellectual train-

Prior to the '96 Olympics — where she would win a gold medal in swimming — Taormina was a quality assurance rep for an automotive supplier in Michigan. She had no coach and was turned down at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado.

ing to her unparalleled work ethic and you have the makings of an achievement dynamo. Which is not to say that the business woman-athlete of today was perfectly scripted from her days as an undergrad at Terry (or for that matter when she was waitressing at the Five Points' Waffle House). She has always been a work in progress.

Sheila T. Inc. was born shortly after her gold medal at the 1996 Olympics, when requests rushed in from rotary clubs, schools, and businesses anxious to hear Sheila Taormina talk about motivation and success. Driven by a desire to give back, Taormina perfected her message and embarked on an 8,000-mile camper tour, hitting small towns and local swim clubs. She also helped create Friends for Athletes Inc., which raises money for Olympians' families, who otherwise could not afford travel expenses to see their sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters compete.

Sheila T. Inc. has become a catchall, which also manages the prize money she earns from sporting events. But the centerpiece of the company is still her motivational speeches, which typically lead off with the question: "What is the definition of success?" Answer: "Take what you've been given in this world and work 100 percent. When you've done that, the results will take care of themselves. You don't need to worry if that means a gold medal or being the top salesperson."

Speaking before a crowd of executives, Taormina is magnetic. But not in the way Tony Robbins is. Her gift is the amalgamation of loose-limbed poise fueled by a mechanized set of brain waves that never stop firing. And yet, she manages to come off as a relaxed person — a trait honed from being the youngest of eight children.

She's also a first-rate storyteller. And though her talks always follow a similar plotline — the road leading to the '96 Games — her success is predicated upon the same time-tested foundation all great motivational speakers use: engage the audience.

At seminars, Taormina breaks the ice by passing around her gold medal from Atlanta — which helps the audience empathize with what she felt on the medal stand. As the medallion is passed around the room — and, yes, it's the real McCoy, which has been dropped, dented, and rubbed smooth in places — she sets the hook with her

back story. What the audience learns, in Taormina's self-deprecating fashion, is that Olympians are not superheroes, as evidenced by her failures at the 1988 and 1992 Olympic swimming trials.

At UGA, where she was inducted into the Circle of Honor along with Vince Dooley in 2004, Taormina was captain of the swim team in 1990-91. In 1990, she won the Jasper Dorsey Award as the university's top female athlete. She was the 1991 SEC champion in the 400 individual medley and an All-American in the 200 and 400 IM, the 1650 freestyle, and the 800 free relay. Her classroom work at Terry earned her Academic All-America awards. She won the Hardest Worker Award and the '89-'91 Most Valuable Swimmer Award. And she earned SEC and NCAA postgraduate scholarships.

But the coup de grace for any world-class amateur athlete is the Olympics. And it is in her '88 and '92 failures that Taormina comes to life.

"A friend of mine made the 1992 team," says Taormina. "I'd never known an Olympian. When I saw him make it, I realized people like me do go to the Olympics . . . a light bulb went on. I started to think that even though I'd be 27, what if I changed a couple of things about my diet and training? Plus, I thought it would be so cool as a Georgia Bulldog to go to the Atlanta Games."

Not that it would be easy. In many ways, the years leading up to 1996 would prove the hardest. For a while — until she decided to focus exclusively on training — Taormina was working fulltime as a quality assurance rep for an automotive supplier in Michigan. She was without a coach. And most discouraging of all, she was turned down as a potential candidate at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado. Then fate — and her old childhood mentor — stepped in.

"She came back to me a little dejected and I said, 'Well, let's go for it,'" says Phill, who admits that the conditions of her workouts were extremely arduous. She covered as much 13,000 meters a day — and did it without a training partner. When she wasn't alone, she swam with high schoolers or with 7-year-olds watching her from the deck. "When Sheila was swimming with me, she understood she was just another athlete in the pool . . . and that's the way she wanted it."

In the end, the anonymity worked. She shaved time off her 200-meter freestyle, secured one of the top six spots at the 1996 trials, and then swam fast enough at the prelims in Atlanta to make the final Olympic relay team.

"It was satisfying — and great — because Jack Bauerle and I were there together [at the '96 Atlanta Olympics] and he deserves a ton of the credit," says Phill. "But the thing that describes Sheila best is what she did after the Olympics, when she came back and talked to every elementary school in Livonia [the Detroit suburb she's from]."

And she never asked for money, says Phill. "She's all about helping others."

For Bauerle, the gold medal in Atlanta was thrilling but not unexpected given what he knew of Taormina.



"I've had better swimmers but I've never coached a better athlete," says Bauerle. "And I've never had a swimmer who worked as hard as T. Her technique is perfect . . . she may be only 5'3" but she swims big — like she's 6'4"!"

Her motivational talk ends at the Atlanta Games. But the updated version, when rejiggered, could include how she won the first triathlon she ever entered. She could also incorporate her 1999 bout with rhabdomyolysis — a rapid breakdown of skeletal muscle likely brought on by severe dehydration — that sidelined her for more than three months. Nine months later, she surprised the field at the U.S. Olympic triathlon trials with a wire-to-wire win, and, in turn, earned a trip to the 2000 Sydney Games. And she won a gold medal at the 2004 World Triathlon Championship, which secured her ticket to the '04 Athens Games.

Early in 2005, Taormina won the first modern pentathlon event she entered: the Pan American Championships. A year later, she won the U.S. Nationals. In March 2007, after almost two years in the sport, she turned in her best performance with a silver medal at a World Cup event in Cairo. The field included the 2004 Olympic gold medalist, the 2006 world champion, and the 2006 World Cup finals champion.

In a career loaded with TV interviews and press clippings, Taormina plays down her accomplishments. She doesn't even keep track of her rankings; when asked, she refers the curious to others.

"I don't think I'm embarrassed to be an athlete . . . but it's kind of a weird job to have," Taormina laughs. "I feel like Olympians don't have a special gift that anyone walking down the street doesn't have. When I fill out an application for a bank loan, I always write down *self-employed* or *speaker*."

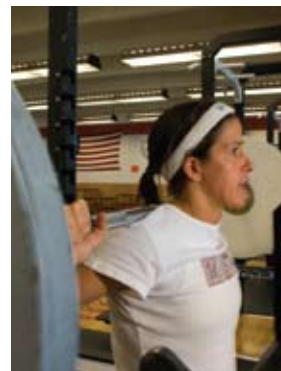
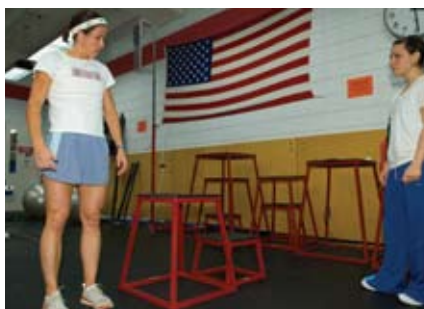
No one devotes themselves to the pursuit of Olympic glory without taking on a good deal of risk. In Taormina's case, trying to make the Olympics in a third event necessitated selling her house. It wasn't until two years later that her performance in modern pentathlon qualified her for funding and Olympic Training Center privileges.

Keeping things in perspective has proven invaluable as Taormina has grown older and learned that the road to victory can, at times, be potholed. In 2002, a man claiming to be a triathlete in need of coaching began sending her threatening phone messages and sexually explicit letters. Over the course of a year, the harassment intensified and after breaking a restraining order, James Conyers was sentenced to prison. He is scheduled to be released in 2008.

In 2005, after encouragement from another pentathlete resulted in a promising tryout before U.S. coaches in San Antonio, Taormina committed herself to mastering a third sport and trying to make a fourth Olympic team. "I didn't want to do it just to be the first to go to the Olympics in three sports," she says. "But I didn't want to not do it and never know if I could."

What Taormina soon discovered, after nearly 10 years at the top of the sporting world, was that few supported her dream. Sports agents weren't interested. When she called on sponsors, many said they first needed to see if she'd make the Olympic team. The result was humiliating, and made more so because she had to sell her house in order to finance a proper training regimen. "I thought when I started, 'This is a fun challenge,'" says Taormina. "And then, I couldn't believe when sponsors didn't embrace it."

That's not to say there weren't positive indicators along the way. Amy Stanton from the New York-based Stanton Shade agency, which specializes in women athletes, called to say she wanted to represent Taormina regardless of the outcome. Because of her showings during the first two years in the sport, Taormina has qualified for U.S. Olympic funding and performance incentives. And though six



One reason Taormina succeeds: She outworks everyone else. And her current workout Mecca is the Olympic Training Center, which is equipped with a sports medicine/sports science facility, as well as aquatic and shooting centers. Taormina trains there from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. six days a week. Besides the five skills that make up modern pentathlon, she also does a lot of weight, agility, and strength training.

former sponsors did bow out, four major ones believed in her track record and stayed the course.

"Typically, you want to show a return on an investment in one year instead of saying, 'OK, we'll have to wait until 2008 and we don't even know if it's going to happen then,'" says Keiko Tokuda of Amino Vital, which makes amino acid-based sports supplements and drinks. "But with Sheila our approach was this is an incredible athlete, she's got a huge dream, and we have a huge opportunity to support her. She is the ultimate Olympic dream. It's about a person who sets her mind to it and goes after it. Three sports and four Olympics — that's an incredible story."

Obscured by all the drama surrounding Taormina's whirlwind success in her new sport is the fact that there are other women pentathletes — and, frankly, more experienced ones — also chasing their own Olympic dreams. And though she's head and shoulders above her competition in the swimming and running disciplines — and her riding (equestrian show jumping) has of late been stellar — Taormina routinely ranks in the middle to bottom of the pack in shooting and fencing.

"She is one of the top 10 girls with a chance to win Olympic gold, but there are a lot of factors: first you have to be good but also you need luck, and you need to have a good day like she had in Cairo," says Taormina's coach, Janusz Peciak, a straight-talking Polish pentathlete, who was the 1976 Olympic gold medalist and was twice elected Poland's best athlete.

"Pentathlon is a very complicated sport — not just physically but mentally," Peciak continues. "You can always be in the top three in swimming or running but with the skill sports — fencing, for example — you could have a good day one day and the next time

you could be last. It's the same with shooting. For Sheila, the biggest challenge is mental — she has to be tough and she can't be shaky or nervous."

Today's pentathlon is called "modern" to differentiate it from the ancient version, which became an Olympic event in 708 B.C. The Greek pentathlon included running, jumping, discus, javelin, and wrestling. With regard to the sport, Aristotle wrote: "The most perfect sportsmen, therefore, are the pentathletes because in their bodies strength and speed are combined in beautiful harmony."

In 1912, modern pentathlon made its first Olympic Games appearance in Stockholm, where a young American lieutenant named George S. Patton placed fifth. Like the ancient form, the idea was to combine five diverse disciplines. Romantically, the sport is based on the concept of an officer whose horse has gone down behind enemy lines. After defending himself with both his gun and his sword, he must swim across a river and then run to deliver an urgent message.

During competitions athletes begin by firing 20 shots from a distance of 10 meters with a 4.5-millimeter air pistol. Next comes fencing, where every competitor has a one-minute bout with each of the other pentathletes (there will be 36 women at the Olympics); the winner is the first to score a hit. A 200-meter freestyle swim is the third event. The riding event comes next on a course with 15 jumps that reach a maximum of about four feet. Starting times for the run correspond to points accrued during the first four events. The competition's final result, therefore, is the order in which pentathletes cross the finish line.

"In the pentathlon you have to be a good actor to go from being very quiet to being very physical. Because of that it may be the most complete sport," says Peciak. "In the region I come from, the winner of the event is considered the king or queen of the Olympics."

Asked to describe Taormina, Peciak doesn't hesitate. "She's a

warrior. If she wants something, she'll do anything to get there. In Poland, we say someone wants something so much they will kill to get it. I joke and say even if she trained in basketball she would probably be good. If she had to grow, she would grow."

Lucille Ball once said: "If you want something done, ask a busy person to do it. The more things you do, the more you can do." The first lady of comedy would have loved Sheila Taormina, though it's doubtful she could have kept up. Following Taormina around the U.S. Olympic Training Center is a sport in its own right. Any momentary miscalculation of her schedule — which changes according to which sport she's focusing on that day — can leave a visitor in the lurch.

A typical day begins at around 7 a.m. with an hour at the firing range. Then it's off to the pool. An energy drink later, Taormina

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fences with members of the modern pen and fencing teams. To the nearest phone booth for a speedy costume change — off with the mask, gloves, jacket, chest protector, pants, and into sweats — and she's just in time for an appointment with a chiropractor. Lunch, surrounded by gargantuan wrestlers and pubescent figure skaters, is piggybacked with a coach's meeting. Finish a cup of tea, grab the gear bag, and hurry to the weight room, where a trainer leads her through agility drills, barbell lunges, military presses, hanging ab crunches, and deadlifts. A moment of solitude is quickly supplanted by a drive to the nearby riding facility. There, in the shadow of Pike's Peak, she has to brush her horse, clean its hooves, saddle, bridle, and lead it to the ring before her riding lesson.

As good as she is, it's hard to say "the sky is the limit" with regard to Taormina's modern pen future. No matter how hard she trains or how many visits she makes to the sports psychologist to slow her thoughts and increase her shooting proficiency, having a finite amount of time to get her skills Olympic-ready is not an ideal formula for producing a world champion. Frankly put: with roughly a year remaining until the 2008 Games, there's a nerve-racking amount of improvement to be had in 60 percent of Taormina's disciplines. Yet, almost unbelievably, she's got a real chance to win gold.

"I always question with the three skill sports [fencing, shooting, riding] if I'll learn enough of it in time," says Taormina. "Both Janusz and I think the same — we can only do the best we can do with the amount of time we have. We'll just have to see. Janusz always says I could be so much better if I went on until 2012. But I say, 'No, buddy, that ain't gonna happen.'"

There is still the sticky matter of making the 2008 Olympic team. The least complicated way to earn a berth would be "based on results from an official Olympic qualification competition: 2007 World Championships, 2007 World Cup Final, 2007 Pan American Games, 2008 World Championships," according to the U.S. Olympic Committee's USA pentathlon athlete selection procedures. The other route would be via her position on the Pentathlon World Ranking List as of June 1, 2008.

"Traditional literature tells us it takes eight to 10 years to train an

athlete . . . it's a paradigm that exists," says Scott Novak, USOC's high-performance manager for USA Pentathlon. "It'll be interesting though because it's still playing itself out and Sheila has definitely proven she's at a world-class level. She also has three Olympics under her belt and you really can't duplicate that experience. Her experience allows her and her coaches to understand that though they don't have the standard timeline to work with, they can think outside the box."

Of course, breaking paradigms is what Taormina does best. Watching her work, undaunted by the steep learning curve, makes one realize her most valuable trait may be the ability to take the question "What if?" and quickly turn it into "Why not?" It's that innate competitive engine that has convinced more than a few that Taormina deserves comparison with mythic legends such as Jim Thorpe and Babe Didrikson.

"At first blush, Sheila Taormina would be an unlikely candidate for any list of great athletes . . . but think about it," writes

Taormina's triathlon coach Lew Kidder in an e-mail. "Sheila rose to the top (or arguably very near the top) of the swimming world with her gold medal at the 1996 Olympics . . . then eight years later, she won the world championship in the sport of triathlon. How many others — you name the sports — have even equaled that feat?"

Having left the door to her athletic future slightly ajar, Taormina has a new admirer in yet another sport. Before deciding to pursue pentathlon, she called cross-country skiing instructor Lee Borowski, thinking she might give that sport a try. In her first race, less than two weeks after putting on skis, she was the top female finisher and 12th overall amongst a group of some of the best college skiers in the Midwest.

"If she switched to skiing, within a year or so she'd be a threat with the top U.S. women," says Borowski, who has coached national champions, All-Americans, and Olympians. "She wouldn't be a lock, but she'd have a better than 50-50 chance to make the Olympics. She's got the most amazing tenacious attitude . . . quite frankly, she's got the best genetic ability I've ever seen. As far as I'm concerned, she's the greatest female athlete — not only that I've ever seen, but that I've ever heard of."

Taormina states unequivocally that 2008 will be the finale of her competitive sports career. But it must be pointed out that she's said that three times before.

"I have the entrepreneurial spirit more than ever," says Taormina. "Because I've felt the rejection from sponsors and agents, I have this desire to build people up — which I could do as a woman with her own business. I've thought about being an agent for athletes on the second or third tier. We have to get women in obscure sports out in the public so little girls can relate to them and go into something that's healthy and good. I believe that any gifts we are blessed to have should be used to the best of our ability. If I don't use what I have, then it should have gone to someone else." ■

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