

"I'm not used to staying in one place for so long," says Pearce (in his family's Vermont backyard).

Competing at the 2009 FIS World Cup finals.

"I have no recollection of what happened," says Pearce (in January).

BACK ON EARTH

Preparing for the Olympics, snowboarder Kevin Pearce suffered a brain injury that left him in a coma. Now, with the help of his family, he's learning to take life more slowly, even as he dreams of returning to his daredevil sport

BY JOHNNY DODD

He hasn't been on his snowboard in more than six months, yet Kevin Pearce can recall with clarity the sensation of soaring 30 feet above the ground, lingering for a few weightless moments, then pivoting into a controlled descent in preparation for the next takeoff. "It feels free, out of this world," he says. "Like

you don't have any boundaries."

But this morning, sitting outside his physical therapist's office, his memory is playing tricks. A shaggy young man starts talking to Pearce as if he knows him. "Welcome home, dude. We missed you," he says. Pearce, unsure if this is a fan he's never met or an old friend, hedges: "Thanks, man, you've got no idea how good it feels to be back." After they knuckle-bump and his well-wisher leaves, Pearce whispers to his mom, Pia, "Do I know him?" "It's okay," she tells him. "You don't need to worry about that now."

Last year Pearce's sole concern was the Olympics in January. He was one of the few to have beaten snowboard deity Shaun White, 23, a friend and rival. But during a Dec. 31 practice in Park City, Utah, Pearce, 22, was coming down from a high-flying double-cork move when his head slammed the edge of the half-pipe course. "Kevin sustained a severe injury to the heart of the brain, the part that controls bodily functions, movement, memory, problem solving and decision making," says his neurologist Dr. Allan Weintraub. For more than a week, he lay in a coma under a tangle of feeding, breathing and drainage tubes. "It was harrowing," says Pia. "No mother should have to see this."

Her son, like most pros, had had his share of concussions and broken bones before, but she had never known one to suffer a traumatic brain injury. Coming out of the coma was a long process. "I felt he could hear me before

"The muscle memory came back," says Pia of Kevin (with therapist Kate Janczak).



“

Doing everything slowly is hard for me. It's the opposite of how I live my life”

—KEVIN PEARCE

he opened his eyes,” she says. But encouraging milestones came regularly: He squeezed his dad’s hand; he said “Mom”; he recalled some favorite Neil Young lyrics. In all he spent four more months in hospitals in Utah and Colorado, undergo-



ing surgery, relearning to walk and watching from bed as White won gold in Vancouver—thinking at the time, “I should be there.”

After thriving on high speed and solo flights, Pearce now must slow down and lean on others. “It’s hard. I never want to stop.” Fortunately he is surrounded by people eager to help. Pearce has returned to the Vermont family home with the skate ramp in the yard, where two of his brothers got him into boarding at age 6. Adam, 25, took a leave from his job as a school sports coach to help care for Kevin. Andrew, 29, an engineer, postponed his wedding. And leading by example is Kevin’s third brother, David, 24, who was born with Down syndrome. “David has taught me life isn’t always easy,” says Kevin. “He taught me how to be patient for him and, now, for myself.” Growing up, adds David, “he was there for me.” And lately “I have given him support.”

David, who has competed in Special Olympic skiing, basketball and swimming, lives nearby, on his own with a caretaker, and works part-time at a hospital and at their father Simon Pearce’s renowned blown-glass factory. Still, some tasks occasionally present hurdles, not just for him, but for loved ones. “Almost everything is much slower for David,” says Adam. “Now it is the same with Kevin. He forgets the little details he needs to get through the day. It’s easier for us—we’ve gone through it with David.”

Dr. Weintraub says Pearce’s rehab is progressing as expected: “His recovery will continue over the next one to two years, or longer.” For now, even



TOP: JONATHAN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

“

We try to live in the present and find ways to make little things fun”

—KEVIN’S MOM, PIA PEARCE

small milestones are notable. “I cooked my first egg this morning,” Kevin announces. “The best egg Kevin’s ever had,” jokes Adam. Getting here has meant seeing five specialists to improve his vision, balance, speech, motor skills and

winning competitions. “He shreds so smoothly, like no one else,” says fellow pro Danny Davis. Besides his grace, Kevin was known for spectacular come-from-behind victories. “It was amazing to watch,” says dad Simon. “This trait will stand him in great stead with his challenges now.”

Kevin says that he often feels like the guy he used to be. Indeed, one day the skate ramp in the yard proves too tempting. “You’re not dropping [down the ramp’s wall], I want that to be abundantly clear,” Pia tells her youngest son.

“Can I pump back and forth?” pleads Kevin, hoping to ride the ramp’s flat bottom. “I won’t fall. I promise.” Reinjuring his brain could be devastating, and Mom wins this one. He concedes, “That’s what a mom is for.”

If he seems blithe about risk-taking, it may be because Kevin, unlike his family, remembers nothing of his early days in the hospital or of the accident. “I’m dying to see it,” he confides. “It was on YouTube, then they took it down. I just want to see what I did wrong.” Will he ever revisit those soaring heights? He doesn’t know. “Flying is a

pretty addictive feeling,” says Kevin. “I think about it a lot.” Hearing this, Pia says, “My greatest wish is for him to continue doing the things he loves.” She adds quietly, “But the half-pipe is dangerous for someone with an injury like Kevin’s.”

“Maybe I’ll start riding powder,” he says, referring to a more earth-bound style of the sport. “It’s softer.”

“Powder,” his mom agrees. “Powder would be nice.” ●



“To be close to all four sons through this has been very powerful,” says Simon (in apron with, from left, Pia, Kevin and Adam).

memory. “He’s doing remarkably well,” says physical therapist Kate Janczak. “But it can be frustrating going from training for the Olympics to learning how to do everything.”

Years ago Kevin was a turbo-charged, dyslexic kid who saw snowboarding as a way to help him cope—and excel. “I could get all my energy out, then sit for a full day of classes,” he says. By age 15, he was

