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After years of sacrifice and hard work she shared with her mom and dad, **Tara Lipinski** achieved an Olympic victory. Now it's time for a new goal, one that might be every bit as hard to reach: learning how to be just a regular kid.

golden girl

BY SHERYL BERK • PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDREW ECCLES

The famed New York City toy store, F.A.O. Schwarz, is a mob scene: Skating star Tara Lipinski is surrounded by hundreds of elementary school children waving Olympic Skater Barbies and clamoring for her autograph. Think Macy's day-after-Christmas sale—with little girls wrestling to be next in line.

"Tara, I want to be just like you," gushes one six-year-old. "But first I gotta learn how to skate."

Lipinski laughs. "Kids are so cute," she says. But the fact is, at 16, she doesn't look much older than her

ing. "I want to meet her just as much," she says. "I think she's terrific."

So do the manufacturers of everything from soup to cars. In fact, since winning the figure-skating gold medal last January, the giggly teen has become a one-person promotional machine. She's scored endorsement deals with Campbell's soups, DKNY Kids, Minute Maid, Mattel, Capezio, Snapple and Chevrolet. Her book, *Totally Tara* (Universe), has sold 45,000 copies, and she has her own CBS TV specials—the first of two will air this season. She's even recently landed a repeating guest spot

that? Tara's popularity is a boon for figure skating as well, especially coming in the wake of the 1994 Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan feud and Oksana Baiul's driving-under-the-influence charges last year (which were later dismissed).

But Tara Lipinski is not a robot. The fact is, she's just a teenager—a kid on the brink of womanhood who loves loud music, boys-boys-boys ("I met Matt Damon at the Academy Awards—he's hot!") and trying on strapless designer evening gowns at photo shoots ("Don't I look glam?"). And like any teen, she feels the pull of the parental apron strings.

Few girls, however, have to deal with such intense fame.

Tara's mother, Pat, is aware of the awkward contradictions in her daughter's life. "You want to protect her, to keep her

from ever being hurt," she explains. Lipinski leads a life in the limelight: Invitations to the Academy Awards, talk-show appearances, even Hollywood parties are all part of being an Olympic medalist. "I want her to become her own person, and I cheer her on," she says. "But it's hard. How do you be both a mother and a friend?" ▶

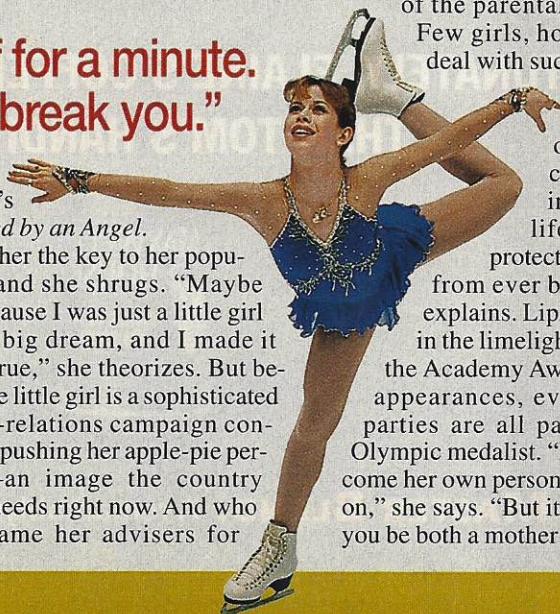
"You can't doubt yourself for a minute. One little mistake can break you."

admirers. Her strawberry-blond hair is twisted into a ponytail; a beaded braid dangles in her eyes. She sports sparkly blue nail polish on her fingers and toes, chunky platform shoes and a slouchy sweatshirt.

"She's bigger than Beanie Babies," says one exhausted mom who trekked two hours from Philadelphia—Lipinski's birthplace—for her eight-year-old daughter to meet her idol. They've been in line for more than an hour, but the mother's not complain-

ing. "I want to meet her just as much," she says. "I think she's terrific."

on TV's *Touched by an Angel*. Ask her the key to her popularity and she shrugs. "Maybe it's because I was just a little girl with a big dream, and I made it come true," she theorizes. But behind the little girl is a sophisticated public-relations campaign constantly pushing her apple-pie persona—an image the country badly needs right now. And who can blame her advisers for



golden girl

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Pat Lipinski may not know the answer, but she's trying to find it: She's equal parts Mama Bear, body-guard and gal pal. Sometimes her roles clash. When Lipinski hobbles into a photo shoot with an injured hip, Pat hovers nervously. The shoot had been postponed



age of three, Lipinski exhibited a talent for roller-skating, and her parents happily nurtured it. After six years of lessons in their hometown of Sewell, N.J., she progressed to national championships. At age nine, she decided she favored blades over

Pat accompanied her daughter while Jack remained at his job. "It was a strain on my mom and dad, I know that," Lipinski says. "It was a strain on me as well, because I missed my dad and my home so much."

As predicted, Lipinski's skating improved dramatically. "Her coach encouraged us to take the next step," Pat says. Lipinski was ready to begin a full-time skating career—and live in

"I was just a little girl with a big dream, and I made it come true."

from the morning so Tara could be X-rayed at a hospital. The injury is minor, but Mom is worried.

"I don't want her to overdo it," she says, then adds a quiet warning: "Tara—the tour." But her motherly concerns (or fears of a multimillion-dollar career in danger) are quickly replaced with an unspoken understanding that Lipinski will know how much to push herself.

"We have this extraordinary bond," Pat says, and Lipinski agrees. "Sometimes my mom knows what I'm thinking without my ever saying it."

Which seems to give Pat some liberties to speak for her daughter when she innocently misinterprets a question. (Q: "How did it feel to wear the gold medal?") Lipinski: "It was heavier than I thought it would be." Mom: "She felt proud.")

"When Tara makes up her mind to do something, she does it," Pat adds. "We've just helped her get where she wanted to go."

Pat and Jack Lipinski knew it would take a lot to help their daughter realize her Olympic dreams—but no one could have predicted the wrenching sacrifices they would all have to make in the process. At the

wheels ("Because they were lighter, I could jump higher"). The nearest ice-skating rink was an hour away, and the Lipinskis made the drive to Delaware four days a week for lessons.

"I would watch from the sidelines as she'd fall, again and again," Pat recalls. "But Tara always had this fierce determination."

When Lipinski was nine, Jack, an oil executive with the Houston-based Coastal Corp., was asked to move from New Jersey to Texas, and the family settled near Houston, in Sugar Land. In her new home, Lipinski continued her lessons at a local shopping-mall rink, but her prospects for becoming a top-ranked skater were slim—Houston simply didn't have the facilities or the coaching talent. Lipinski returned to Delaware during the summer so she could train at her original rink.

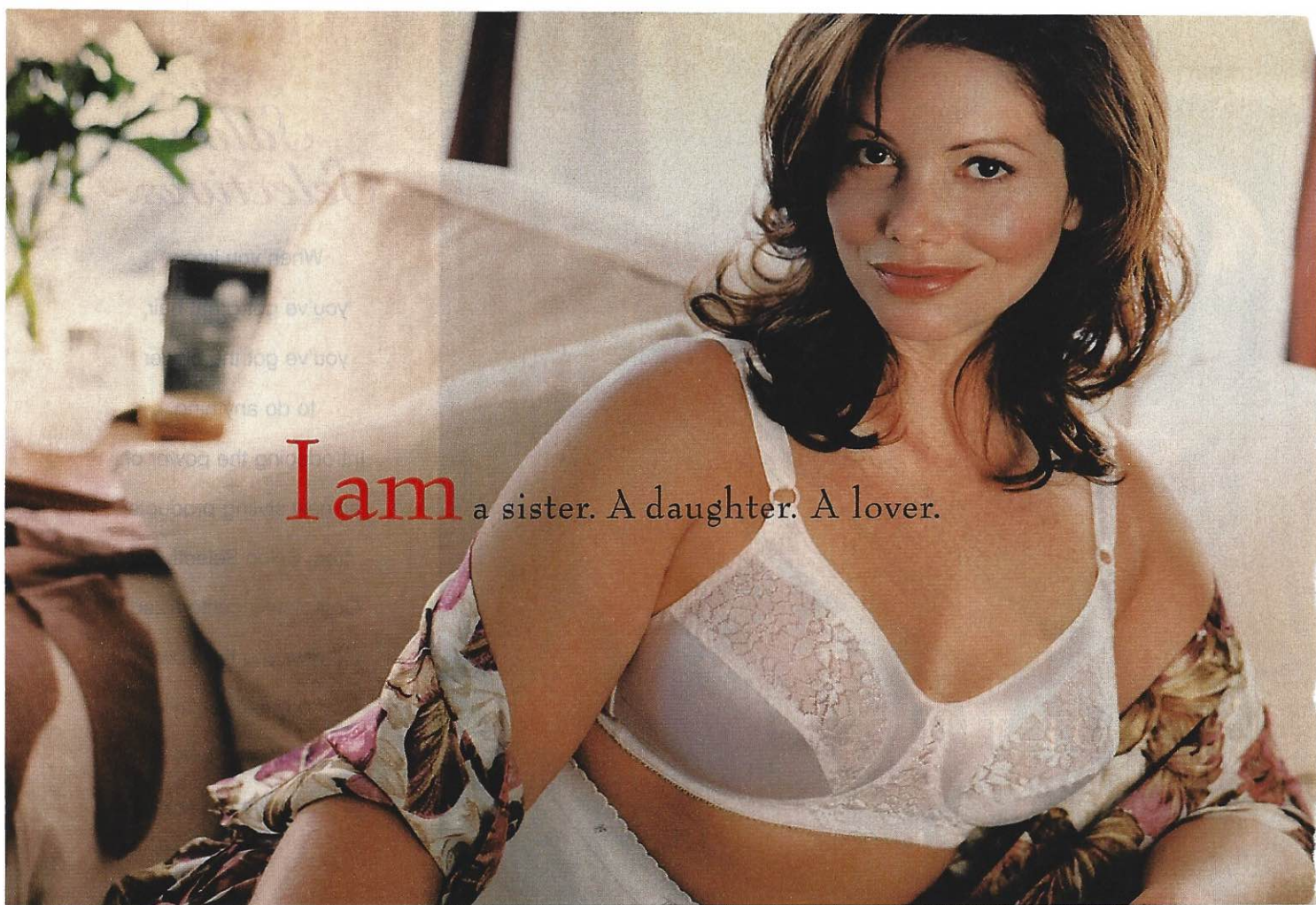
Delaware year-round. She and her mom relocated to a small apartment close to the University of Delaware rink. Practice meant Lipinski would no longer be able to attend school regularly. Instead, she worked with tutors three hours each day.

"It was better for my skating, but I knew how difficult this was on our family, both financially and personally," she says. "Sometimes I worried that I was being selfish, that I was tearing my family apart, but my parents have always supported me."

The hard work paid off quickly: In 1995, 13-year-old Lipinski finished at the top of the national junior figure-skating championships. She and Pat made a second move, this time to Detroit, to work with two new coaches, Richard Callaghan and Craig Maurizi. They taught her the now-famous triple loop-triple loop combination and helped her move into the senior ▶



No business like snow business: Since her Olympic triumph, Lipinski has landed millions of dollars in endorsement deals. **Above:** At age nine, she won her first "gold medal" for roller-skating.



I am a sister. A daughter. A lover.

golden girl

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competitions. She was the surprise winner—beating out world-champ Michelle Kwan—in the 1997 national and world championships.

In 1998, Lipinski was off to Nagano, Japan, to represent her country in the Winter Olympics. She fought back any fears and prayed to



TARA'S TOGS

This set, exclusively designed for Tara Lipinski, is knit in Classic Elite Montera yarn. To receive a free pattern, send \$1.00 for postage to: "Tara Snowflake Sweater and Hat Pattern Offer" c/o Vogue Knitting Magazine, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York, NY 10013.

Thérèse of Lisieux, the saint pictured on the locket she always wears around her neck. "The pressure was intense," she admits. "But you can't doubt yourself for a minute—one little mistake can break you."

It was this mental intensity that carried her through her entire challenging program. "I knew, no matter what happened, I had done my best," she says. And six out of nine judges agreed, placing her first with near-perfect scores. "I remember screaming and jumping up and down—it was all very surreal."

The months following her triumph brought big decisions for Lipinski. "I felt as if I had finally reached my goal," she says. "I didn't want to turn 21 and realize I never knew my dad." While her father flew to most of her major competitions, she saw him barely once a month and was home in Sugar Land a total of two days in a year and a half. "I'd like to win another gold in 2002,

but I couldn't ask my parents to live apart for another four years. I have my dream, and I know what the cost of a second one would mean."

In April, Lipinski made the announcement official, telling NBC's *Today* show she was going pro and giving up the competitive life—including the next Olympic games. She joined the Campbell's Soups Champions On Ice Tour and later Discover Stars On Ice, skating alongside greats like Scott Hamilton and Kristi Yamaguchi. She wants to put her recently acquired driver's license to use and to go to college in two years.

These "normal kid things" are what Lipinski craves, not the life she has known for the past six years. Her skating schedule made socializing—besides with her team or tour mates—nearly impossible. Her parents, sensing she was lonely, often flew her friends (especially her best buddy, Erin Elbe) around the country with her—a traveling slumber party of ▶

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEN DELESSIO

No Food Coloring Required



Double Chocolate Walnut Drops

- ¾ cup (1 ½ sticks) butter or margarine, softened
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- ¾ cup firmly packed light brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 ¼ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 ¾ cups "M&M's"™ Chocolate Mini Baking Bits
- 1 cup coarsely chopped English or black walnuts

Preheat oven to 350°F. Lightly grease cookie sheets; set aside. In large bowl cream butter and sugars until light and fluffy; beat in eggs and vanilla. In medium bowl combine flour, cocoa powder, baking soda and salt; add to creamed mixture. Stir in "M&M's"™ Chocolate Mini Baking Bits and nuts. Drop by heaping tablespoonfuls about 2 inches apart onto prepared cookie sheets. Bake 12 to 14 minutes for chewy cookies or 14 to 16 minutes for crispy cookies. Cool completely on wire racks. Store in tightly covered container.

Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

For more colorful and delicious recipes, visit our web site at www.m-ms.com



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golden girl



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sorts. Now there are long stints of time off. Lipinski plans to be home in Houston for Thanksgiving and also to be there for Christmas and for several weeks between tours. "I can lead a real life," she says. "I can be home 50 percent of the time. That's what made up my mind for me."

And there'd be little reason to doubt her sincerity—except for the fact that these pro-skating tours will take her to dozens of cities coast-to-coast for most of the year. Morry Stillwell, until recently president of the U.S. Figure Skating Association, questioned her motives at the time of the announcement: "I don't follow the thread. She says she wants to spend more time at home, yet on tour, she'll be busier than if she was [training for the Olympics]."

any child—with love and trust and good values. Oksana Baiul had problems adjusting because she didn't have a mother and father to turn to. Tara has us, and she knows we'll always be there for her."

But like Baiul, Lipinski has found herself the subject of numerous tabloid stories, despite her camp's efforts to maintain her squeaky clean image. "There's just nothing bad to write about me, so they have to make it up," she says. But it's clear from the defensiveness in her tone that the articles are painful. There have been rumors—all of which she denies—that she's prone to temper tantrums and that she has an eating disorder that stunts

"How do you deal with a star kid?" asks her mom. "Like any child—with love, trust and good values."

Critics say sheer dollars and cents might have been behind her decision—a gold medal is worth millions in commercial endorsements, and Lipinski will reportedly make several million for each tour. But she defends herself. "I know what people think, but they don't know what it means for me. It means more time to relax, to not need to impress judges, just to entertain people."

As for the money, Lipinski says she has no idea what she's worth—her parents keep her earnings safe and will continue to do so until she's old enough to manage them herself. "I don't really want or need anything," she says. And she's not kidding—perks abound. One car company even gave her a red convertible for her 16th birthday.

Her mother shakes her head. "People ask me, 'How do you deal with a star kid?'" she says. "You deal with her the way you deal with

her growth. At barely 5 feet tall, she weighs 95 pounds.

"I would hate to think that girls who look up to me would get eating disorders because they had read something like that," she says. "That makes me upset."

The only other subject that touches a nerve is the very real threat of an injury on the ice. "I won't talk about it—I freak when people ask me about having an accident. I don't want to jinx myself."

And what if she couldn't skate? "Couldn't is not a word in Tara's vocabulary," Pat says, beating her daughter to an answer.

The Olympic gold medalist nods her approval. ■

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