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PENINSULA**

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SPORT

Could This Be the World's Greatest Athlete?

Meet Chris Waddell, Paralympic skiing legend cum sprinting hopeful



AT HIS HOME IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS, 28-year-old Chris Waddell is mulling a decision that a year ago wouldn't have caused him a moment's hesitation: whether to resume training this month to continue one of the most distinguished skiing careers in Olympic history. "It's a big question for me right now,"

he says. "I don't know if I'll keep competing."

Ironically, the soul searching has little to do with skiing and everything to do with a setback in his other sport: wheelchair racing. Twenty-five seconds into the men's 4-by-100-meter relay finals at last August's Paralympics—Waddell's fifth and final chance to become the most decorated year-round athlete of our time—he lost his balance and careened into the chair of teammate Scot Hollonbeck, knocking the Americans out of the race. And leaving himself a void that has him contemplating life as a full-time track athlete.

Waddell, a four-time gold medalist in alpine skiing at the 1994 Paralympics in Lillehammer, was trying to become the first person, able-bodied or disabled, to sweep a sport in the Winter Games and then medal in the following Summer Games. With two golds in the 1993 National Track Championships and ten silver and bronze medals collected over the last three years, he arrived in Atlanta with high hopes in five events. "Chris is without doubt one of the world's greatest multisport athletes," says U.S. Paralympic track coach Kevin Hansen. "He combines pure speed with phenomenal concentration and skill."

Not that it's come easy. As a sophomore at Middlebury College, Waddell was on his way to becoming a Division One All-American in the slalom until a December 1988 skiing accident left him paralyzed from the waist down. Amazingly, he was back on the slopes the following winter and just three years later won two silver medals in Albertville. Since starting his track career that summer, Waddell has maintained a grueling schedule that—depending on the season—combines more than 100 road miles or 25 hours on the slopes per week with a strict weight-training regimen, while still finding time to teach at the Vail Monoski Camp, which he cofounded in 1993. In Hansen's eyes, however, this intense two-sport commitment betrayed him in Atlanta. "He was close in all his events," Hansen says, "and I know he would've medaled if he'd started training earlier in the spring."

Which, Waddell says, is precisely what he intends to do the next time around—whether or not he decides to hang up his monoski. "I'll be closer to my peak four years from now," he explains, "and unlike in skiing, on the track I still have a lot to learn. Even with the success I've had, every race still feels like a shot in the dark." —KATIE ARNOLD