GUEST COMMENTARY

Belmont High School alumna gives back

By Harry Lane

Can Emily Cook ski, soar, flip and land on her feet? She sure can.

Cook is a freestyle skier, an aerialist, who is a three time Olympian (2006, 2010, 2014), six-time U.S. champion and nine-time World Cup medalist (including three gold). Born in Belmont, she began skiing when she was 4 years old; started to compete in the sport of freestyle at 14; and made the U.S. Freestyle team at 17.

She attended Belmont High School, Carrabassett Valley Academy in Maine and the University of Utah. She currently lives in Park City, Utah. One of her mantras is "chin high, work hard, smile." This attitude developed in her days as a young athlete.

"As young gymnasts, my teammates and I would stand in a line, chins held high, tummies tucked in and big smiles on each of our faces. Whether we had just had our best performance, were injured or had trouble at home, we would do everything in our power while at practice and competition to hold this pose. This armor protected us, it kept us strong and resilient and was vital when obstacles got in our way. Positive things that come out of sport: perseverance, dedication and an unwillingness to give up. But often times this grit, which has been so engrained, can prove challenging, especially after retiring from sport. As an athlete at the Olympic level it's easy to define yourself by your sport. When you retire, who are you? The challenges of major transition in life can be tough for all of us, not just athletes."

What has Cook been doing since she retired from skiing competitively? Perhaps her updated mantra should be "chin high, work hard, smile and give back." Cook currently works for the audio brand, Skullcandy, as their manager of sport and human potential. Though the majority of her work takes place in Skullcandy's high performance lab working with local and elite level athletes, her role also has led her to works closely with scientists who study Alzheimer's disease and memory loss. "One of the things we've noticed is that people [with Alzheimer's] have far more vitality, happiness, and just have a better day when they are listening to music." Although these research projects do help to contribute to the new product development process, Cook says the main goal is to drive an important part of Skullcandy's overall mission as a company, which is to encourage people to "live life at full volume."

Cook also manages programming for the nonprofit Classroom Champions, which matches athletes with under-served classrooms around the country and coaches young athletes at the Utah Olympic Park. She is an ambassador for Right to Play and Kids Play International, and has traveled to Rwanda, Jordan and Tanzania to help bring the life lessons of sport to the world's most disadvantaged children. Cook has also spent time on the board of The Speedy Foundation, a philanthropic organization dedicated to understanding mental illness through education, research and advocacy, founded in honor of her friend and Olympic medalist aerialist Jeret "Speedy" Peterson, and currently serves on the board of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association spending extra time coaching U.S. team development athletes who are looking to break through on the World Cup circuit.

Cook was asked, "why do you feel it is important to give back and why did you choose the activities you now?"

She replied: "growing up in a family and a community in which contribution and giving back was a natural and consistent occurrence was definitely something that influenced the choices I have made as an adult. I am really thankful to have had such positive and influential people in my life. I was provided so many opportunities when I was young and to me it only makes sense to pass that support along. I truly believe that young people should all have the chance to play and to thrive, and one thing I know is that sport is a very effective avenue to teach the life lessons that are so vital to success in this world. Through sport and play as well as having solid role models, kids can learn lessons such as goal setting, confidence, leadership, teamwork and healthy conflict resolution and also have fun. These things are essential to success and happiness in life."

—This biography is presented by Alumni and Friends of Belmont High School Inc., which is the official alumni organization of Belmont High School. Founded in 2007 by BHS alumni, its goal is to establish a permanently endowed scholarship fund for the benefit of Belmont High School students. Every year AFBHS presents to Belmont High School a check for $12,000 to be used to give $3,000 scholarships to four college-bound seniors. A committee of BHS teachers and administrators select recipients based on both outstanding accomplishment and financial need. For information: afbhs.org/.