

## Sports

# Remembering Kelly Catlin: Concussion questions follow death of beloved Olympic cyclist

By [Cindy Boren](#)

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Pressure was Kelly Catlin's constant and silent companion. That pressure helped boost Catlin to great athletic and academic heights, turning her into a "warrior princess," as her father called her. After Catlin ended her own life in her Stanford University residence last week, those who knew her were left thinking about both that constant pressure and whether a head injury she suffered late last year contributed to her suicide.

Family members this week recalled Catlin as a fierce competitor, but also expressed concern about whether several crashes and a concussion she suffered in December were related to the apparent mental and physical decline that preceded her death. Taylor Twellman, the ESPN analyst and former soccer player who, like Catlin, hails from Minneapolis, [raised a similar question](#) as he reacted Monday to news of her death at age 23.

"My heart aches for the family today, but people don't fully understand how dark & scary [traumatic brain injuries]/concussions can be," he wrote on Twitter. "If you truly are 'educated and aware' of the injury, then you must support the need to change and evolve. So sorry Kelly left this way."

Catlin was a champion cyclist, winning a silver medal with the U.S. in the 2016 Rio Olympics in team pursuit and three consecutive world titles in team pursuit between 2016 and 2018. In her spare time, she competed with the Rally Cycling road team and excelled as a violinist and artist. Academically, she soared, getting a degree in mathematics at the University of Minnesota and advancing to postgraduate work in computational and mathematical engineering.

But over the last six months, she dealt with what her father, Mark Catlin, called "a perfect storm" of issues: Depression, the concussion, overtraining, "not being able to say no," and possible cardiac issues — all of which, her family members believe, may have been linked. She also suffered from headaches and light sensitivity, family members said.

"After her concussion, she started embracing nihilism. Life was meaningless," Mark Catlin said in a telephone interview. "There was no purpose. This was a person with depression. For her, she could no longer concentrate on her studies or train as hard. She couldn't fulfill what she felt were her obligations to herself, she couldn't live up to her own standards. She couldn't realize that what she needed to do was get away and rest, heal. We were all searching for the magic words, that life was worth living."

Her death was a stunning loss to her friends, who spoke of her accomplishments and her drive.

"Of course, Kelly being Kelly, she never pursued excellence in only one category," Andy Sparks, her national team coach at the Olympic Training Center from 2015 through the Olympics in 2016, wrote in a tribute. "She had the highest expectations and work ethic of anyone I have ever met: An accomplished violinist, fluent in Chinese, a degree in Biomedical Engineering, all packaged in a person who always put others first."

Charles Townsend, Catlin's first coach with NorthStar Cycling, recalled that when Kelly joined her triplet siblings, Christine and Colin, in training in 2013, her spirit and determination were on full display.

"Kelly only knew one way to ride [full on] so we were stunned when we saw all three triplets come flying out of the final corner 2 minutes before we expected them," Townsend wrote in an email provided by Mark Catlin. "They may have passed most of the group ahead in that short lap. [We] were like... 'Uh, okay.' There weren't any shortcuts on that course so we knew we had some talent to deal with."

Like others, Townsend is seeking a way to take some sort of lesson out of Catlin's death, writing that his organization will re-examine its approach to head injuries.

"[R]ight now, I'm so sad, confused and overwhelmed that I can only offer the two small resolutions I made to deal with this," he wrote. "This year we're going to consider how NorthStar can best deal with concussions in our sport. And like you, I'm going to fondly remember and appreciate the time I got to share with Kelly."

"Kelly also put the most amount of pressure on herself of any athlete I have worked with and often we would have disagreements on me trying to get her to take on, and do, less. Kelly wanted to achieve perfection in everything she did, she never wanted to show weakness, she always wanted to make everyone proud, and first and foremost, she NEVER wanted to let anyone down. Unfortunately, Kelly was exceptional in everything she touched except for taking care of herself. And as someone who cared about her, that was the only fault I ever really saw in her. Kelly, you made us all so proud, we just wish you would have taken better care of yourself. You were special, with or without the results."



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The sisterhood of pro cycling is absolutely devastated to hear the news of [@kelly\\_catlin](#)'s death. Suicide claimed this amazing woman, Olympic silver medalist, world champ, Stanford grad student. We'll never know the weight she carried, but we will carry her in our hearts forever.

Her recent health struggles led her to withdraw from the cycling world championships last month in Poland despite being on USA Cycling's initial roster. She attended the Rally team's January training camp in Oxnard, Calif., but had not competed this season with the team she first joined in 2017. The Rally team [wrote on Twitter](#) that her death had "hit the team hard. Losing an incredible person at such a young age is very difficult. Kelly was our friend and teammate."

"We are deeply saddened by Kelly's passing," Rob DeMartini, the president and chief executive of USA Cycling said in a statement. "We will all miss her dearly. Kelly was more than an athlete to us and she will always be part of the USA Cycling family. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Catlin family. This is an incredibly difficult time and we want to respect their privacy. The entire cycling community is mourning this immense loss. We are offering continuous support to Kelly's teammates, coaches and staff. We also encourage all those who knew Kelly to support each other through the grieving."