

A VISIT TO ANTARCTICA ■ DEANS IN CONVERSATION

# PennStater

JULY/AUGUST 2018

## A FIGHTER'S CHANCE

She's stared down addiction and other demons.  
Now, Rebecca Maine wants to box her  
way to Olympic glory.



By **RYAN JONES '95 COM**

Photographs by  
**RYAN SMITH**

# A FIGHTER'S CHANCE

A straight-A student, all-conference runner, and Olympic boxing hopeful, **REBECCA MAINE** is a model of achievement. But she's done nothing more impressive than survive.



## THE END OF THE WORLD BEGINS

on Rebecca Maine's right shoulder, an apocalypse of skulls and trees and snarling beasts that wraps around her arm until it reaches the back of her hand, where a serpent clenches an eyeball in its jaws.

The scene is a tattoo depiction of Ragnarok, the violent denouement in ancient Norse mythology. Her mother has traced the family's genealogy back to the Vikings, and Maine appreciates the connection to her lineage. But mostly, she says, "I just think it's badass."

Maine began work on the tattoo nearly a decade ago, but only got it finished last year. She's got a number of other pieces—the comic-book heroine Tank Girl on her left arm, others of varying complexity on her neck, legs, and back—but she's particularly fond of that full sleeve. "It's silly," she says, "but finishing it felt like an accomplishment." The greater achievement is that she lived long enough to see it through.

It's difficult to reconcile the 26-year-old dean's-list student-athlete Maine is today with the young woman—still a girl, really—she was eight or nine years ago, the one who left a difficult home life looking for adventure, acceptance, and escape. She carried little more than the clothes on her back and a burgeoning taste for substances that could numb her pain. She ended up hopping freight trains, and for the better part of three years she traveled the country that way, and she fell deep into the throes of heroin addiction that nearly killed her.

This past March, near the end of her first year in the physical therapist assistant program at Penn State DuBois, she celebrated five years sober.

A few months earlier, Maine had completed an award-winning season on the campus cross-country team; in May, she fought in the national Golden Gloves tournament. Her present is so busy and disciplined and filled with achievement, and her future so bursts with possibility, that you could be forgiven for assuming the darkest parts of her past might as well belong to a different person, wounds and scars on a different soul. But they are hers, and they are never far out of mind.

"I feel like I've had to keep accomplishing more and

more, trying to kind of bury all that," she says. "But I can't get too removed from it. I need it, as a reminder."

So she has embraced it, all of it, the pain and loss and anger and guilt, because the future she's set her mind to requires nothing less. Talking about it took longer, because it meant exposing herself to judgment, but she has embraced that, too—reluctantly at first, but enthusiastically now. She sees the value of sharing her experience, both for herself and, she hopes, for others, kids who are where she was: in a small town, without many options, in the midst of a national epidemic of opioid abuse, bearing emotional burdens that few around them are willing or able to understand. "I don't think she recognized how big of a deal her story is—it hits home for a lot of people, especially in our community," says DuBois cross-country coach **Kyle Gordon '11 UC**. "It's a story of hope."

It is that, but it's more, too—a story more proactive than passive. It's about resilience, and toughness, and effort; her story offers hope because of the work she's put in. It's only fitting that she's poured herself into running and boxing, exhausting endeavors that test her endurance and dare her to quit, a possibility she can't even ponder.

**LOUISE MAINE IS ON THE PHONE** from her home in Punxsutawney, listing the qualities that defined her daughter as a child, and she's reminded of all the ways Rebecca hasn't changed. "She was passionate and energetic, and opinionated, literally about anything," Louise says. "She was always active, and when she found something she liked, she'd go all out and really work hard at it."

The older of two kids, Rebecca was born in Virginia and moved with her parents to Michigan before the family settled in Pennsylvania, taking over her father's family's farm south of Punxsutawney. Rebecca was 7, her parents' relationship was already rocky, and the family hoped a return to their roots might help. It didn't. Louise



**HEAVY DUTY**  
Maine took up boxing while still detoxing from heroin addiction. The discipline of the training helps keep her focused.

got a job at Punxsutawney High School, teaching science, and Rebecca and her younger brother tried to adapt.

Rebecca started drinking in middle school, both to fit in, and to cope with the stress of family life: Though close with her mother, Rebecca describes her father as a functional alcoholic who was unfaithful, abusive, and often absent, and it was for the best when her parents' marriage ended when she was in high school. But it was an unrelated incident during her freshman year that helped send Rebecca spiraling: She describes herself as a reluctant member of the popular crowd, hanging with kids who "just drank all the time." Her mother—a teacher at the high school, remember—found photos of a booze-fueled underage party on Rebecca's phone, and decided her best move—the right move—would be calling the other kids' parents. "I thought I should talk to them about what was happening," Louise says. "But they didn't welcome that."

Instead, their kids targeted Rebecca for retribution. "It

all came back on me," she says. "They tormented me for it." Louise remembers her daughter coming to her classroom to eat lunch, moody and miserable but desperate to avoid the relentless bullying of the classmates she had once considered friends. Ostracized from her peer group, Rebecca began hanging out with older kids, some of whom had already graduated, and many of whom had already moved beyond drinking to more dangerous substances. She followed suit: "By my sophomore year," Rebecca says, "I did anything I could get my hands on."

Around this time, Louise found drug paraphernalia in Rebecca's room, but she says she still didn't fully grasp the turmoil that was driving her daughter to self-medicate. Remembering it now, she stifles tears. "There was a point when I thought, *I wish she would've told me*—I would've walked out of that school and quit on the spot," Louise says. "But I don't know if it would've made a difference."

Rebecca got a reprieve of sorts when her mother allowed

## A FIGHTER'S CHANCE

her to finish high school via online courses. Louise was skeptical, thinking her daughter was just looking for a way to quit school altogether, but Rebecca stuck it out and finished ahead of schedule—a sign of the persistence she'd show years later. But Rebecca was also entrenched in a social circle that enabled her worst tendencies, including substance abuse, and tethered to a boyfriend who, like her father, she says was physically and emotionally abusive. Not long after she turned 18, she and her boyfriend moved 80 miles southwest to Pittsburgh. Once there, she toyed with the idea of culinary school or a veterinary tech program, but nothing took. And then, she says, "I pretty much snapped. I had suppressed so much, and I just felt like I had to do ... something."

She sold everything she owned, minus a backpack full of clothes, and bought a plane ticket to New Orleans. She felt guilty leaving her mom and brother, and she hated herself for feeling like she deserved the turmoil that defined her life. She had no idea what came next. She only knew that running away felt like something she could control.

**THEY WERE ON THE ROAD** to Scranton last fall, the coach and his three runners, one of them a 26-year-old freshman, an otherwise mundane cross-state drive to that weekend's meet. Kyle Gordon was struck by the fact that the young woman beside him seemed so excited to visit a city famous for its train museum. "I thought it was a little bizarre," he says with a laugh. "That's when she told

us about her train-hopping."

She had left Pittsburgh and landed in New Orleans and spent a couple of months there with friends, thinking she'd hitchhike across the country. And then she linked up with the amorphous community of train-hoppers—"travelers," as she calls them, a group she describes as an underground society, hidden in plain sight. "I was a little punk rocker, and it was the most punk-rock thing I'd ever seen," she says. "I wanted in."

All these years later, there are aspects of her nearly three years on the rails that provide fond memories. She learned all the tricks, like which trains ran faster or offered better hiding places. How to wait until the conductors' shift change, when trains would generally be left unattended on the edge of a yard, and she and fellow hoppers would wait, hidden, until they were sure it was clear. And of course, she got to see so much of the country for free. But it was often dangerous, and always illegal, and it's impossible to fully separate the good parts from the bad. About a month into traveling, she says, she was "eating, sleeping, drinking heroin."

Maine says there were plenty of fellow riders who were clean, free spirits who had homes and lived more conventional lives, for whom "traveling" was a hobby, a part-time pursuit. But there were many others who, like her, were lost and running from something, and among whom drug use and addiction were common. Money was always tight: Maine quickly burned through the money she'd made



## BORN TO RUN

Maine started running to improve her endurance in the ring, but as a freshman at Penn State DuBois, she was one of the best runners in the conference.

at least she'd be far from the roots of her problems, that a fresh start might do her good. But Rebecca could only maintain the facade for so long. "She came home at one point," Louise says, "and I realized what was happening."

More than once, Rebecca tried to get sober. She tried to settle back into life in Punxsutawney, moving back in with her mom until she started using again, then moving in with a friend. She tried Pittsburgh again, even tried Brooklyn, where she was playing in a folk-punk band that hoped to record an album. Each time, she backslid. "She would be OK for a while," Louise says, "but you always know when they relapse. It would be immediate." She tried therapy but hated it. She got a part-time job as a hospital housekeeper near her home. She made regular trips to and from Pittsburgh, scoring drugs for herself and occasionally re-selling the surplus to support her habit. She'd ruined the veins in her arms and started shooting into her neck.

Finally, Rebecca says, something—some combination of guilt, desperation, and exhaustion—clicked. She deleted her dealer's number from her phone. She took all the time off she could afford from her job at the hospital, and she went cold turkey. It was February in Punxsutawney, in a house with no heat, and she burrowed into her couch, chain-smoking cigarettes, flinging off the blankets when the sweats came, piling them back on when they passed. Her roommate had box sets of the first five seasons of *Sons of Anarchy*, and she watched every episode. It took two weeks before she was able to function, to keep any food down, and to tell her mom—and for the first time, mean it—that she needed help.

And here Rebecca knows her experience might not be fully transferable: She did this largely on her own. Her mom was a rock, family and close friends helped hold her accountable, but she never felt comfortable in 12-step programs, and so she focused instead on staying busy. She was about a month sober, still wracked with cold sweats, when she took seasonal work as a merchandiser for a garden wholesaler. Around the same time, she and her mom went to watch a local boxing showcase; Louise

selling her things, and the spare change she made playing music on the mandolin she traveled with never lasted long. She remembers one bleak stretch near the high desert town of Twentynine Palms, a few hours east of Los Angeles, when it occurred to her that she'd barely eaten in two weeks. "Del Taco had 49-cent burritos, and I'd get one of those, once or twice a week," she says. "All my money was going elsewhere."

There were other wake-up calls: Maine says she was "Narcanned" several times, referring to emergency doses of the medication carried by police and EMTs to block the effects of opioid overdose. There was the traveling companion, someone she thought she could trust, who she learned had offered to "sell" her for sex. There were friends whose addictions got the best of them, who weren't as tough, or as lucky, and who never made it home.

She never thought of herself as homeless, not as long as her mom was back in Punxsutawney, wishing for her safe return. They would talk by phone, and Louise held out hope that the travel might be good for Rebecca, that



## TIGHT-KNIT

Maine remains close with her mom, Louise, and brother, Ryan. In May, she and Louise ran the Pittsburgh Half Marathon together.



COURTESY THE MAINE FAMILY (3)

## A FIGHTER'S CHANCE

was dating the physician who sat ringside for the bouts, and she thought the discipline and physical activity would be good for her daughter. They were introduced to a trainer, who saw before him a young woman who was, in her own words, “un-athletic and a wreck.”

She told him she wanted to learn how to fight.

Rebecca dove right in, going through an intensive workout her first day at the gym. The next day, she says with a laugh, “I couldn’t walk.” But she went back, and she found she craved the work and the pain that came with it—pain she earned, and that promised not a short-term rush, but long-term gain. She stuck with it, never missing practice, and along the way she found that the sport had a way of helping other issues. She had struggled for years with body image, and she’d battled both bulimia and anorexia; training for fights forced her to eat well, and

## THE TRAINER SAW BEFORE HIM THAT NIGHT A YOUNG WOMAN WHO, IN HER OWN WORDS, WAS “UN-ATHLETIC, A WRECK.”

made her proud of the athlete she was becoming.

Through endless hours at the gym, Maine transformed her body and her life, and before long she’d decided she wanted to try to make a career as a professional fighter. But that hope was nearly derailed with a pair of diagnoses in 2014 and 2015: The first was hepatitis C, a relic from her days of sharing needles. In boxing, the rules were clear: She wouldn’t be allowed to fight. She cried when her trainer told her, then she won a reprieve just weeks later with the release of a new treatment. After three months of chemotherapy and an antiviral regimen, she says her hepatitis was cured.

The endometriosis diagnosis came months later, and it wreaked havoc on her training. She’s since undergone two surgeries for the painful uterine condition, but says the surgeries “are just to keep it at bay.” If there was a silver lining in all this, it was a curiosity about her body—how it worked, and how to take care of it. “Boxing was everything—boxing may have saved my life—but I didn’t realize maybe it was a stepping stone to the next thing,” Rebecca says. It turned out the next thing was Penn State.

**THE LETTER ARRIVED** last August, not long before the start of the school year, informing Rebecca Maine that she could pick up two additional kinesiology credits if

she participated in an intercollegiate sport at Penn State DuBois. *I want to go for a doctorate someday*, Maine thought to herself, *so I might as well get as many credits as I can.*

She had yet to complete a single credit in anything, of course, but Maine was thinking ahead. She was already running as part of her boxing training; joining the DuBois cross country team didn’t seem like too much of a stretch. The team featured just three runners, and Maine was the only woman, a 26-year-old freshman who’d never raced competing against 18- and 19-year-olds fresh off their high school teams. She’d seen and endured so much more of life than most of her opponents ever would, and yet when she lined up for her first race, she was terrified.

“I’m on the starting line, and there’s all these young people—all these young *athletes*,” she says. “I was scared. I didn’t know what to expect.”

And yet she thrived, finishing sixth in her first race, and first among runners from Penn State campuses. She went on to finish fourth in the PSUAC championship meet, earning a spot on the all-conference team and a trip to nationals. And it was there that her coach finally convinced her to tell her story. Gordon asked Rebecca if she’d mind him nominating her for a conference award. As they’d gotten

to know each other over the course of the semester, she had grudgingly offered Gordon bits of her past. For this, she agreed to open up a bit more.

It was in Virginia Beach in November, at the U.S. Collegiate Athletic Association banquet, that strangers first heard pieces of Maine’s story. In the write-up honoring her as the USCAA’s Student-Athlete of the Year, the key details stood out: *addicted to heroin... hitchhiking and train-hopping... boxing as a means to turn her life around.*

When we first spoke last winter, a few weeks after the awards ceremony, Maine was reeling, her eyes welling a half dozen times as she laid out her story to a stranger for the first time. “It was things surfacing that I’d repressed, things I don’t want to remember,” she said then. “All the positive things people are saying now, it’s new to me. It’s very alien.” But by the spring, having had time to process her feelings and appreciate the value of her story, she had come around. She knew the stigma around issues like mental health and addiction, knew how it felt to believe there was something “wrong” with her, and not that she simply needed help. She understood that her story could help others, and that telling it could help her, too.

Where boxing was concerned, she had also narrowed her focus. She had moved on from the gym in Punxsutawney to one in Pittsburgh, where she’d linked up with



### RIGHT-HAND MAN

Since hooking up with Pittsburgh trainer Jack Mook, Maine has committed herself to prepping for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

semifinals. With just 15 fights under her belt, she says she had 25 or 30 fewer fights than most of the women at the tournament. Mook believes that with steady improvement, his newest fighter has a real shot at Tokyo.

Even without the training, she’d have plenty to keep her busy, including another year of cross country, and her second year in the two-year PT assistant’s program. (Maine was recognized for posting the highest GPA among first-semester freshmen at DuBois; she finished the year with a 3.94.) She was teaching a weekly fitness kickboxing class, and spent the spring running film for the campus basketball teams and interning as a trainer for a local semi-pro hoops team. She’d also started a campus PT assistant’s club, and helped lead the campus LGBTQA support group. “They wanted me to do student government, too,” she says, “but I didn’t have enough time.”

Rebecca’s story is undeniably a happy one now, but that’s not the same as a happy ending—or any ending, period. Life keeps going, new challenges emerge, and sobriety requires vigilance. She was reminded of this a few months ago, when

her mother learned she’d been offered a new job—in China. Louise Maine has been teaching for 30 years, the last 20 of those in Punxsutawney, and she’s been eager for a new challenge. In July, she’ll begin teaching at an English-language school on the other side of the world.

Rebecca is thrilled for her mom; she understands the sacrifices she made in her marriage, and knows what she endured in the years while Rebecca was lost, wondering if she’d ever get her daughter back. She knows her mother deserves to be happy; she knows just as well how much she’s relied on her. She calls Louise “my best friend” and “my rock,” and she’s afraid to see her go.

In May, mother and daughter ran the Pittsburgh Half Marathon together; side by side in a post-race photo, finisher medals around their necks, they could pass for sisters. Rebecca promised Louise that they would get the matching race tattoos they’d talked about—her mom’s first ink—just as soon as she’d gotten past her Golden Gloves fights. It only meant waiting a few weeks, which they both knew was nothing at all. ♥

Jack Mook, a bald, brawny Army veteran of the first Gulf War who went on to serve 25 years with the Pittsburgh police department. Mook had his own gym in Pittsburgh, and he’d seen her in the ring. “Rebecca’s a fighter, not a boxer—she just went straight ahead and relied on her athleticism, speed, and strength,” Mook says. “Her determination caught my eye, and I told her, ‘You need to learn to box. You need to learn strategy, the geometry of the ring. She was like, ‘I don’t even know what you’re talking about.’”

Mook saw quickly that Maine could figure it out. “She’s very intelligent, and when you have somebody with toughness, drive, and determination, along with that intelligence, that’s hard to find in a fighter,” he says. “As good a student as she is, I think we can go far.”

Sixty-five hundred miles, give or take—that’s the approximate distance between Pittsburgh and Tokyo, host of the 2020 Olympics. Maine took a first step in May, when she traveled to Omaha, Neb., for the 2018 Golden Gloves national championships. Fighting in the 132-pound weight class, she won a pair of fights there before falling in the