Credit Mark Catlin

Olympic Cyclist Kelly Catlin seemed destined For Glory. Then She Killed Herself.

Catlin was lining up for a shot at Olympic gold. And an elite mathematical mind would open up opportunities off the track. But torment lurked behind the success.

By Juliet Macur

WABASHA, Minn. — In the weeks before the Olympic cyclist Kelly Catlin killed herself, she felt her mind slipping.

She could not focus on her schoolwork at Stanford, where she was a first-year graduate student in computational mathematics. In an email she sent to her family, a coach and a friend in January, she said her thoughts were “never-ending spinning, spinning, spinning” as if they were “never at rest, never at peace.”

She wrote that she cried about it, and that made her feel even worse. For years, Catlin, 23, was someone who took pride in holding back tears.

Catlin told her sister, Christine, that seeking therapy meant she was weak and that she would rather suffer. She told her brother, Colin, that she thought she was going insane and she worried that she was a danger to others because she was filled with rage.

She wrote that she was scared of dying.

“What is it like to no longer have a mind?” she wrote in January, just days before a first suicide attempt. She answered the question.

“It is unimaginable,” she wrote. “Terrifying.”

Catlin was poised for stardom at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, where she had a reasonable shot for Olympic gold that eluded her in 2016. With the advanced degree from Stanford she was working toward, she could have her pick of jobs in computers.

How, those who knew her are asking now, could she find no purpose to keep living? How could she be so unknown to the people closest to her?

Kelly Catlin had sought to explain herself and her distress, both over the phone and in notes before she was found dead in her Stanford apartment on March 8. In one note she wrote in January, she even asked, “What do you wish to know?”, leaving a trail of cryptic answers.

Kelly Catlin's brother, Colin, sifts through the belongings retrieved from her graduate student apartment at Stanford, hoping for clues explaining why she took her life last month at age 23.Credit Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

"You think you know your children," her mother, Carolyn Emory, said, "but there was so much about Kelly, especially this secret personal code she lived by, that was startling to me in the end. She was very private."

On Friday, a month after she killed herself, a white van showed up at her parents' farmhouse to drop off her things.

Three bikes. Nearly a dozen boxes of clothes, books and cycling gear. Her carbon-fiber violin. Duffel bags stuffed with cycling gear and United States Olympic team uniforms from the 2016 Rio Games, where she won a silver medal.

Her mother and her brother, Colin Catlin, sifted through the belongings, retrieved from her apartment. Her father, Dr. Mark Catlin, could only join them in spurts because he was so distraught.

Every item provoked a memory, none a clue.

Colin Catlin had hoped to find telling information on her phone, but instead he found the wallpaper she selected for it haunting: an album cover featuring a body with daggers in its back. The album title was "Try to Die."

He broke into tears.

It was hard to absorb that just months before, in November, on the podium at a World Cup track cycling race, where Catlin's squad finished second in the team pursuit, she soaked in the moment: flags waving, fans cheering, adrenaline pumping. A three-time world champion, Catlin considered the victory a prelude to finally winning an Olympic gold medal.

Off the track, she was fulfilling a lifelong obsession with numbers and order through her academics and planning for a career in Silicon Valley.

This solid trajectory she appeared to be on had made her mental downward spiral and death all the more mystifying to teammates, friends and family members.

Catlin's father, who is a pathologist, blames her suicide on a combination of factors, including her success-at-all-costs personality, overtraining, stress, and physical injuries from a January suicide attempt about a month before she was found dead in her dorm. On both occasions, she inhaled noxious gas.

Kelly Catlin, second from the left, and her teammates celebrate a silver medal in the Women's Team Pursuit at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. Credit Bryn Lennon/Getty Images

But the breaking point, he and other family members believe, was a concussion she sustained during a training ride on Jan. 5. They have donated her brain to researchers to find out if the head injury contributed to her behavior changes.

Regardless of the results, nothing can give the family a definitive answer. Suicide is much more complicated than lab results can reveal and multiple factors, like destabilizing life events, brain chemistry and persistent mental struggles, almost always come into play.

“I wake up every two to three hours at night to go through all of these permutations on what could have saved her,” said her father, whose eyes were reddened by weeks of crying. “I can’t help but wonder what she would’ve done with her life.”

Kelly’s mother answered, weeping, “Something great.”

‘Never Love’

Catlin and her triplet siblings, Christine and Colin, grew up in Arden Hills, Minn., a suburb of Minneapolis. Her parents — her mother is a former Alzheimer’s researcher — met in a lab dissecting brains.

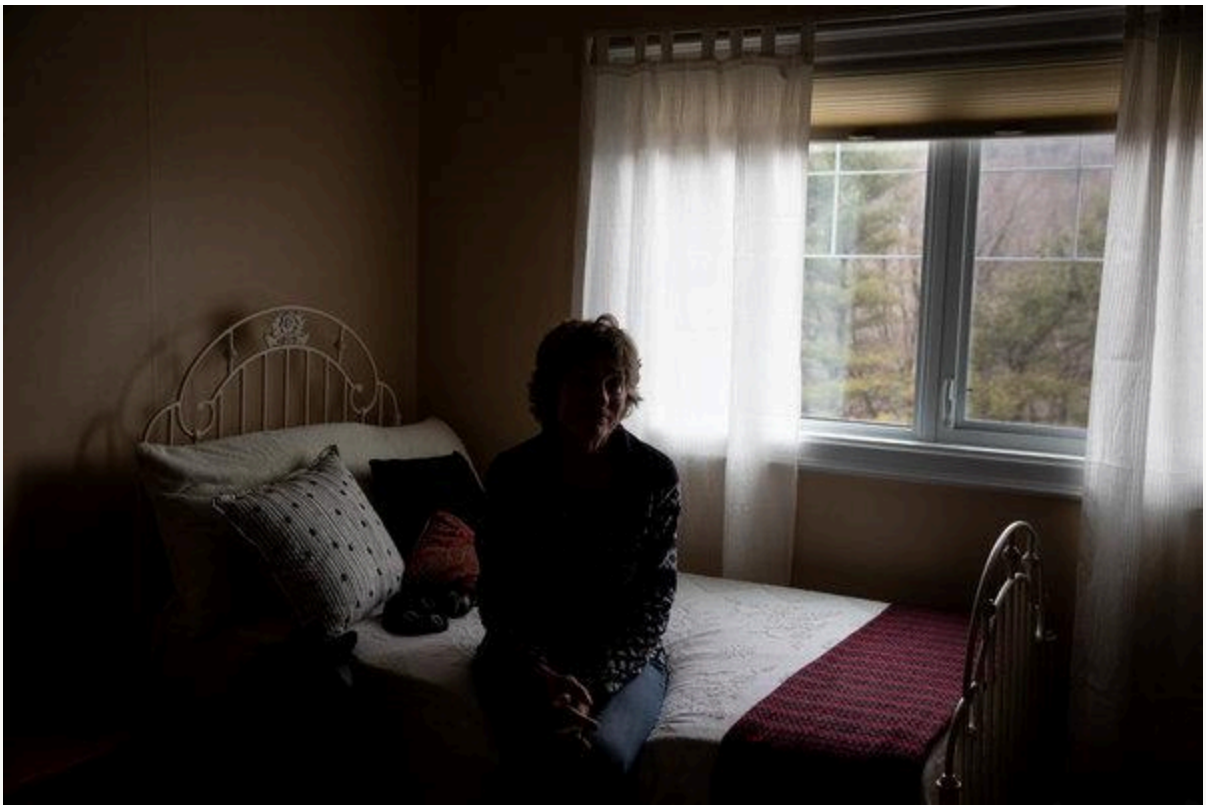
The Catlins lived in a large house with an indoor gymnasium. They took European vacations and roasted s’mores in the backyard. They were a family of introverts who enjoyed staying at home for tea parties. For Kelly, Christine and Colin, school and sports were equally important. They excelled at both.

Kelly was the super-focused athlete, a first-chair violinist who studied nonstop. Christine was the creative writer and runner who played three instruments. Colin was the math whiz who played guitar and rode bikes competitively. In middle school, the siblings tied for Most Likely to Succeed.

“Our parents always told us that we could be great at anything we wanted to, if we worked hard enough,” Christine said. “Looking back, maybe we kind of twisted that into thinking we weren’t worth anything if we weren’t the best. I think Kelly believed that.”

Kelly’s parents said she was an intense child who grew socially awkward with age. In elementary school, when she could not figure out addition or subtraction, she would scream for hours in frustration, they said, and refused to take a break.

For years in her youth, she was obsessed with horses. She studied the 512-page book, “The Ultimate Book of the Horse and Rider,” so much that she had to tape the binding because the book was so worn. She maintained a collection of dozens of model horses that she did not allow anyone to touch because they were arranged in a certain order.



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Christine Catlin described her sister as a once outgoing, friendly girl who began closing herself off in middle school because she was “so obsessed with success.”

Kelly Catlin also began to limit her social interactions to “robotic social motions,” as Catlin herself put it in the January note to family and friends. Around third grade, Catlin established her lifelong code to live by and included some of it in the note, which was shared with The New York Times:

Fear not physical discomfort. Never love. Never engage in a relationship that could be defined as having a significant other. (In my case, a so-called “boyfriend.”) Never allow yourself to become close enough to another that their actions or inactions might cause you (any amount of) distress or pain. If kindness and gentleness are at all an option, they are the only option.

“We all knew that she didn’t like to express her emotions,” Christine Catlin said. “She never really told anyone how she ever felt, until the very end, that is.”

Cycling Calls

Colin and Christine Catlin were cycling for a local development team, NorthStar, when Kelly quit high school soccer and joined them, at Colin's prodding. She loved long training rides and used cycling as a way to practice memorization, another passion.

She would remember dozens of license plates of cars passing her and would recite the number pi to hundreds of decimals, Colin Catlin said. She mapped out training routes in her head.

"She liked that cycling kept her mind focused, but I think she liked it most when she started winning everything," said Colin, a data scientist. "Her mentality was, if you wanted to be an Olympian, all you had to do was train hard."

And Kelly did make it seem easy. Within two years of starting to race, she was invited to the United States Olympic Training Center in Colorado, where coaches put cyclists through testing to see if they are national team material. Kelly was that, and more.

Her power output on the stationary bike was higher than every other recruit and higher than several athletes on the national track cycling team, said Neal Henderson, one of the coaches back then.
Track cyclists compete on a banked oval, called a velodrome, and Catlin seemed suited for it because it required both power and precision.

Kelly Catlin, second from left, with Jennifer Valente, Chloe Dygert and Kimberly Geist, during the women's team pursuit final at the world championships in March 2018. The U.S. team won the gold medal. Credit Peter Dejong/Associated Press

She was drawn to the science of cycling. She wasn't comfortable with the social aspect of it. In the notes she wrote in her final weeks, she acknowledged not having many friends.

"It's not that she didn't want friends," her brother said. "It was just a matter of priorities. And her priority was to be successful and respected."

Like her siblings, Catlin could not stand to be hugged, family members said. She would rather bury herself in a book than chat with peers. She had a playful sense of humor — often dark humor — within her family circle, but rarely showed it to outsiders.

Although she exuded confidence, she described in a note having a "phenomenally powerful fear of social embarrassment," and also long worried that she would not be able to keep up with other cyclists, said Charlie and Sherry Townsend, the co-founders of her development team. It was a classic impostor syndrome, they said.

"But she changed because of cycling, she really did," said Sherry Townsend, a psychologist, adding that Catlin's self-esteem rose after she competed in the Olympics. "She was slowly learning how to be better engaged with people, slowly learning how to share her thoughts with others. But it was still hard to really know her. ."

Catlin's nickname at the Olympic Training Center, where she lived before the 2016 Olympics, was Roy Orbison, because she always wore dark glasses. She wore her hair short because it was practical for the sport, so short that she was sometimes mistaken for a young man.

Chloé Dygert, an Olympic teammate, said she was thrilled when Catlin started to open up, even occasionally agreeing to a quick hug. Dygert and a teammate once convinced Catlin to play the violin for them.

"It was, like, whoa, so good that it was jaw-dropping," Dygert said. "Kelly was just amazing. She read a book every day, even while brushing her teeth, and it was hard to keep up. She was a lovely girl on the inside."

A Concussion, Then Changes

The concussion that her family said changed everything happened on Jan. 5 when Catlin crashed while riding with her professional road cycling team, Rally UHC Cycling. A team spokesman said there was "no indication that she hit her head or had a serious injury" when the team evaluated her.

Catlin's father, Dr. Mark Catlin, blames her suicide on a combination of factors, including her success-at-all-costs personality, overtraining, stress, and physical injuries. Credit Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

But at a national team training camp two days later, Catlin felt dizzy and could not continue working out. She told the team about her crash. Medical personnel at the Olympic Training Center placed her on concussion protocol and suggested rest, said Guillermo Rojas, a spokesman for USA Cycling.

Yet Catlin continued to complain to her parents of headaches, sensitivity to light and trouble sleeping. And this was coming months after a fall in October that left her with a broken arm and weakened interest in the national team.

"There was this profound apathy," her father said. "She didn't care about winning medals anymore."

Life at Stanford was much different than she was used to. She moved into a dorm there after living with her brother at the University of Minnesota while finishing her undergraduate degree. Colin had cooked her meals and often had to trick her into taking breaks from studying and training, playing episodes of the television show "Stargate" because she could not resist science fiction.

At Stanford, she spent a lot of time alone because her roommate, a law student, was often not there.

After the concussion, Catlin simply could not focus anymore on school or cycling — or anything. In late January, she wrote that she had started planning her suicide before her crash and concussion. But her family thinks that was not true.

“For the first time in her life, Miss Stoical couldn’t force herself to go on,” her father said, choking up. “This is when she began planning her suicide.”

After her first suicide attempt, Catlin spent about a week in a hospital psychiatric ward. When she left that treatment, she began attending group therapy sessions, which she deemed useless, her parents said, and she said she could not find an available psychiatrist who met her needs.

When Catlin moved back into her on-campus apartment, her parents flew home to Minnesota to give her space, telling her, “We love you, we want you alive,” her father said. They banked on her assurances that she wouldn’t try to kill herself again. She had given her word, a part of her personal code they knew.

“She fooled us all,” her mother said.

The suicide attempt and concussion had damaged her brain and heart, her family said, so competing at the world championships on Feb. 27 was not possible. The day the championships began, Catlin wrote a blog post in which she described managing her cycling career with her graduate studies as “juggling with knives” and said, “I really am dropping a lot of them.” In a note she wrote in March, she said, “If I am not an athlete, I am nothing.”

Kelly Catlin's grave at Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis. Credit Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

Looking back, her father said, it was clear she needed time for her brain to heal, but it appeared nobody could impress that on her.

He said her lifelong resolve played a big factor in trying to kill herself again.

“She was furious that she survived her first suicide attempt,” her father said.

A Last Call

Christine Catlin’s phone rang in late February, and it was Kelly. They had not spoken at length in years because they were busy with their own lives after high school, but now Kelly wanted to talk. Christine found it strange. It was nothing Kelly would have done before her concussion.

Kelly said she worried that the physical effects of her concussion or her first suicide attempt — or both — were affecting her judgment.

She asked: What could Christine see her doing in the future?

The sister answered: You could do public speaking about suicide awareness and help people. Or you could do remote computer programming so you don’t have to be around people. You could own a farm and be around horses all day.

“You could bike, if you want to,” Christine said. “Or not.”

Kelly seemed to feel better after the call, which lasted two and a half hours.

Still, she told Christine, “If things don’t change in a month, I’m probably going to kill myself.”

Christine begged Kelly not to do it.

“O.K.,” Kelly said, with a tone Christine now realizes was less than convincing.

The call was over. Christine rushed to call her parents, and for days afterward the family repeatedly checked on Kelly. Two weeks after that conversation, Catlin’s life was over.

At a memorial service in Minneapolis on March 23, Kelly Catlin was dressed in the uniform the United States team wore for the Rio Games opening ceremony, and the majority of her pallbearers were her cycling teammates. She was buried at the foot of a 50-foot oak tree at Lakewood Cemetery, near one of her favorite bike paths.

Before the coffin was closed, her sister, Christine, slipped in a handwritten note that included these words:

Kelly, if I could trade my life for yours, I would. I love you without all your accomplishments.