

# Sandra Lee

FLC Alumni  
Snowshoes A Good Road

Late in the winter of 2011, Fort Lewis College graduate Sandra Dawa G. Lee, 92' found herself seduced by the allure of falling snow and the self-awareness exercise in nature brings. Only a few months before taking up snowshoeing as a sport, she happened into a yoga class being taught by wholistic fitness guru Steve Ilg.

Steve recalls, "(Sandra) nervously walked into my High Performance Yoga® class 3 years ago, nearly to the day. She had never done yoga. As she walked to class she was telling herself, 'okay, just walk in, find a clock, and just stay for 30 minutes...' well, not only did she stay for the entire 90-minute class, she has gone on to win back-to-back HP Yogi of the Year awards, which I give to the most consistent, devoted students of each year."

The pair became fast friends, and Steve encouraged Sandra to take up snowshoe racing. Although a competitive sport since 1977, snowshoe racing is really only now coming into its own, with the development of new technology, and an interest in snowshoeing as a pair for

backcountry snowboarding.

"I am so fortunate I had a lot of mentors in my life," says Sandra. Right at this moment, my mentor is Coach Steve Ilg. He has motivated me so much to overcome struggles, he has taken the time to understand who I am, he has broken down a lot of boundaries I had put up, and he has instilled confidence in me. I never knew... or perhaps somewhere deep inside I knew...

"...I want to motivate my people, the Native people, to get out and get healthy."

I could race. I just needed to find Coach Steve Ilg."

Sandra, with Steve in the coach's seat, has gone on to do very well in the sport, and the pair has their sights set on the world champi-

onships in Quebec. Yet, Sandra's success has brought with it the opportunity to go beyond the thrill of winning.

Her prominence as a Native American athlete, (she is Dine', (Navajo), affords an opportunity to bring attention to the epidemic of diabetes and diabetes-related illness that affects so much of Indian Country. At nearly 16.1%, First Nation peoples have the highest age-adjusted prevalence of diabetes among all U.S. racial and ethnic groups. According to 2011 Navajo Indian Health Service statistics, there are approximately 25,000 Navajos that have diabetes and another 75,000 who are pre-diabetic, out of total population of around 300,00 people. Attention to the problem is critical.

Sandra has begun to speak out about the need for proper nutrition and exercise to native groups, and has plans to do more:

"...(I want to) motivate my people, the Native people, to get out and get healthy. I would do this by setting up a website that focuses on health and fitness. And to continue running competitively and enter more mountain/snowshoe races. I would also love to start biking!"

The need to address diabetes education come from a deeply personal place for Sandra: "My mother has diabetes, one nephew has diabetes



Sandra along the Deschutes River near Bend, OR  
Courtesy Steve Ilg



Sandra and coach Steve Ilg before her start at USSSA Snowshoe Nationals

and three nieces have diabetes. One nephew who is over 300 pounds just got diagnosed as being diabetic recently. My niece who has had diabetes for 8 years told him, ‘just control your sugar and you will be okay.’ The other niece who was diagnosed as being a diabetic tells me she does not think she has diabetes. This is an example of how this disease falls on deaf ears.”

FLC Foundation caught up with Sandra and Steve recently to get more details about their activities:

**Where did you grow up, Sandra?**

“I use to run as a kid to past time on the reservation. I grew up in a village name Beclabito near the Carrizo Mountatins. Beclabito in Navajo means: water running beneath.”



Sandra in Paschimottasana I yoga pose. Courtesy Steve Ilg

My father would work outside all day and I followed him around. I was never motivated to compete or to run.

**Tell us about your time at the Fort.**

I came to FLC in 1986, and graduated in 1992 with a BA in Psychology. I studied Education as well. Although I didn’t run track, I loved physical education classes, and I ran by myself. Once I ran with a group of girls but they told me I was “girly” and I would never beat them.. but I did that day!”

**Steve, what sorts of techniques do you use to develop a snowshoe athlete’s abilities?**

“The short answer is:

- 1) Wholistic core strengthening - snowshoe racing is way more core-dependent than running and cycling.
- 2) Plyometrics - snowshoe racing requires great fast-twitch recruitment within the hip flexors/ extensors than many endurance sports because you have to counter and over-come tremendous attenuation during stride gait.
- 3) Pranayama (Yogic breathing) - sustained mental focus is tantamount in snowshoe racing. in a 10k race, most athletes will wither - mentally, thus physically - on the second half of the course. Besides increasing cardio-respiration, ventilatory threshold, and lactic-acid buffering, a consistent pranayama program develops one-pointed mental concentration.
- 4) Yoga-asana - snowshoe racing is - contrary to what most people think - highly concussive. The joints get hammered, pummeled multi-directionally, and stressed (positively) on the various snow/ course conditions inherent to a USSSA Sanctioned Racing Course. Super steep uphill and downhills and traverses require tremendously strong yet supple joints.
- 5) Cardio - lots of running, micro-spikeing, and of course snowshoeing. For Sandra her Wholistic Fitness® training included cycling, yoga, Zumba®, and lots of walking because Sandra - by choice - doesn’t

own a car, ‘I am my car,’ as she says.”

**What are your goals for Sandra and yourself within the realm of competitive snowshoeing?**

World Championships. We’ve got a vital message to spread and we are determined to use (Sandra’s) skills at Snowshoeing to deliver that which must be heard.

There are only two things that have remained knitted within human civilization for over 6,000 years....yoga and snowshoeing. And it was Native Americans which evolved the snowshoe as we know it today. Sandra is being training steadfastly in both of them at elite levels...what higher, more profoundly perfect way to deliver her message?

**Sandra, what is it about snowshoeing that “works” for you?**

“I love being outside, I love to work out, and I love being in the snow! You start a relationship with the snow, with the trees along the route, and with the weather. You start synchronizing your heartbeat and the lightness in your steps with the falling snow.”

**What do you see yourself doing in the future?**

“(to)...continue racing, and make a positive impact on my Dine’ people to become a fit and a healthy nation!”



Sandra Lee training on Winter Warrior USSSA Sanctioned Snowshoe Course in preparation for the National Qualifier held in Durango, February 9th. Courtesy Steve Ilg