

# Going for Gold

by Carla Caldwell

Some of the most admired athletes and coaches at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, have ties to the U.S. Military.

Bobsledder Steven Holcomb, a former member of the U.S. Army's World Class Athlete Program (WCAP), earned gold piloting a four-man team. The win ended the United State's 62-year gold medal drought in Olympic bobsled competition, and the margin of victory over the second-place German team (0.38 seconds) is considered a landslide in the sport.

"We came out here to show we're the best team in the world," Holcomb said after the win. "It was



Former Utah National Guard bobsledder Steven Holcomb and teammates Justin Olsen, Steve Mesler and Curt Tomasevich bite their gold medals at Whistler Medals Plaza after winning the Olympic four-man bobsled crown at Whistler Sliding Centre Feb. 27, 2010. Photo by Tim Hipps, Family MWR Command

a full team effort. We have fun together, and that's why we come out and dominate."

One of the most respected coaches at the games was Sgt. William "Bill" Tavares, a 26-year veteran of the Army National Guard and bobsled coach with the WCAP stationed at Lake Placid, NY. In Vancouver, Tavares served as assistant coach for the U.S. Olympic Bobsled Team, a role he also held at the Olympic Winter Games in 1998, 2002 and 2006.

Holcomb and Tavares are part of a long-standing tradition of Olympic participants with U.S. Army ties. Many athletes participate through the National Guard's Outstanding Athlete Program (OAP), which provides top-notch athletes with training and support. Athletes, in return, serve in the Guard during their sport's off-season.

Others, including Holcomb, participate through the Army's World Class Athlete Program (WCAP), which provides support and training to outstanding athletes who maintain a professional U.S. Army career. Participants in the WCAP

are chosen from all branches of the Army (Active, Reserve and National Guard).

The 2010 Olympic Games hosted a strong group of soldier-athletes, particularly in bobsledding events. Each of the U.S. men's bobsled teams at the Olympics were piloted by current or former members of the military.

Army Sgt. Michael Kohn who joined the Virginia National Guard in 1999 and was preparing to deploy with his unit to Afghanistan, piloted a bobsled to 13th place with civilians Jamie Moriarty, Bill Schuffenhauer and Nick Cunningham.

Kohn, a strong high school athlete in football and track and field, was introduced to bobsled at age 18 and became the youngest competitor in the 1991 Olympic Trials. After graduating from Virginia's George Mason University, he began racing on the World Cup circuit. In 2002, Kohn won the bronze medal at the Salt Lake City Olympics in the four-man event, marking the first U.S. Olympic medal in men's bobsled since 1956.

Kohn said that while he would have preferred to finish higher in the Vancouver competition, he was thankful to finish safely.

The course at Whistler Sliding Centre, believed to be among the fastest in the world, was the site of tragedy just minutes before the opening ceremony when a men's luger from the former Soviet Republic of Georgia died during a practice run crash.

Complaints had been lodged earlier against host Canada for refusing teams more time to familiarize themselves with the track prior to competition.

One of the many crashes involved USA 2, piloted by Sgt. John Napier, an Army engineer and member of the WCAP stationed at Lake Placid, NY. Others aboard were brakeman 2nd Lt. Chris Fogt, of Utah, who serves in the Army's Military Intelligence branch and is a member of the WCAP, and civilian athletes Chuck Berkeley and Steve Langton.

Doctors convinced Napier to forgo participating in the final two heats because of limited neck mobility from the crash.

Earlier at the Olympics, Sgt. Napier, a member of the Vermont National Guard since 1997, earned a 10th place finish in a bobsled event.

U.S. bobsled coach Brian Shimer, a five-time Olympian, was relieved that the four-man crash wasn't worse. He said he was looking toward the future and suggesting that Napier, the 23-year-old son of an accomplished bobsledder, might be the one to break his record five Olympic bobsled competitions. Napier ranked No. 2 in the 2009-2010 World Cup point standings behind former

WCAP driver Steven Holcomb, who earned gold in Vancouver.

The list of soldier-athlete standouts also included Army Sgt. Jeremy Teela, who entered the Utah Army National Guard in 1997 and is a member of the WCAP stationed at Heber City, Utah. He was in Vancouver enjoying his third consecutive position on a U.S. Olympic Team in biathlon, a combination of cross-country ski racing and rifle shooting from standing and prone positions.

won silver in 2006 in Tornio, Italy, has credited much of her success to her decision to join the Guard. Rohbock, of Utah, a top athlete in college soccer and track and field, was invited to Lake Placid, NY, for a bobsled push championship where a brakeman for the U.S. team would be selected for the 1999 season. She placed third and made the team, but was concerned about the costs and the time involved for training. Several of the program participants and coaches were members of the Guard's athlete program and suggested she join.

*“We came out here to show we're the best team in the world...it was a full team effort. We have fun together, and that's why we come out and dominate.”*

*—Steven Holcomb, former U.S. Army World Class Athlete and gold medal winner for the four-man bobsled in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics*

Teela placed 24th in the Men's 12.5 km Pursuit, 9th in the 10 km Sprint, 29th in the 15 km Mass Start, and 13th (4th leg) of the 4x7.5 km Relay.

Teela's 9th place finish was the strongest ever for the U.S. in an Olympic biathlon competition. He is a seven-time U.S. National Champion.

In another strong showing by soldier-athletes, bobsled pilot Army Sgt. Shauna Rohbock, of Park City, Utah, another member of the Guard's OAP, teamed with civilian Michelle Rzepka in USA 1 to finish sixth in the Olympic women's bobsled event.

Rohbock, who joined the Utah Army National Guard in 2000 and

Rohbock said later that without the financial support and training she received, she would not have had the opportunity to earn a silver medal in Torino, Italy, or compete in Vancouver.

Now, with the 2010 Winter Olympic Games over, many of the athletes are gearing up for military responsibilities and already planning new training regimens for future athletic competitions.

The dual commitments are a natural fit. The traits held by our valued Soldiers are the very characteristics that help create world-class athletes—discipline, leadership, and a commitment to excellence. ●

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