

# Olympic Challenges

By Louise Hodgson-Jones

Photography by Ewan Nicholson

Our athletes going to Athens this summer face many obstacles, not just from other countries but also from within their own sport. IMPACT talks to some of our Olympic hopefuls about their challenges.

In high-profile sports our athletes competing in the summer Olympic Games are often not able to match the performances of their winter counterparts. However, looking at the medal count for the last winter and summer games the final tally is close—17 medals at Salt Lake City and 14 at Sydney. But can you name the three athletes who received gold at Sydney? Or do the six we won at the winter Olympics stand out more? Probably the latter.

Why is this? In some ways the answer is obvious. Because of our geographic location and climate we are a winter sport nation, so naturally those sports get a higher profile. Calgary has hosted a winter Olympics, and subsequently we have first-class training facilities in the city, which are the envy of many sporting nations.

So, we embrace winter sports here, we provide a state-of-the-art training climate, and because of this most of the funding initiatives go to winter athletes. Right? Wrong. Funds and grants are directed towards performance-based athletes. If you're doing well, you and

your sport will receive more money than one that isn't. Is this fair? "When you have limited resources, you concentrate on those that may get to the podium," explains Dale Henwood, president of the Canadian Sport Centre Calgary (CSCC). "We have seven top-tier sports—six winter sports and one summer—and the deciding factor on funding is performance and pathway; that is, do the individual sports organizations have a system in place that we think will get them athletes in the future?"

He admits that this system in Calgary is skewed towards winter sports because that is where we are seeing the top performances right now. Bobsleigh, for example, is doing exceptionally well and consequently will receive top funding. From a federal standpoint, however, summer sports have the upper hand, receiving 70 per cent of available grants. "This is because there are twice as many summer sports as winter," says Henwood.

In May, Sport Canada announced that an additional \$20 million would be invested in high-performance sport, on top of the \$10 million announced in the federal budget. "The downside of this is the money has to be spent by next March. We are into long-term development, so when you have funds that have to be allocated in the short term it's hard to convince a coach to come

on board with us when his term is so limited."

Provincially, the Alberta Sport, Recreation Parks & Wildlife Foundation donates \$19.6 million—\$13 million to sport and \$6 million to sport organizations. A 10-per-cent increase last year was the first increase since 1988.

Corporately, a lot more companies are realizing that investing in sport is not only good public relations, but by being involved in high-performance sport they are also investing in excellence. "Most of these want to be associated with athletes who are producing," says Henwood.

But these types of financial assistance often do not help the up-and-coming athlete. There are athlete-assisted programs available, and sports organizations have some development funds, but many of our athletes going to this summer's Olympic Games aren't classified as high-performance and so do not benefit from the funding or sponsorship initiatives.

Kyle Shewfelt one of Canada's top gymnasts received \$5,000 from the Canadian Olympic Committee for his performance at the world championships last year—he won bronze in two events. He receives funding from one of the athlete-assisted programs—See You In Athens fund—and from the Alberta Gymnastics Federation. Despite being financially stretched he looks on the bright side. "I manage. Living at home and not hav-

ing to buy equipment really helps," he says.

Coming back from a foot injury Shewfelt is highly motivated to do well at the Olympic trials, which take place on July 10. To him, it isn't a matter of if he qualifies but how well he is going to do in Athens. He did compete in Sydney, but at 18 felt he was overawed by the whole experience. Now, four years later, he has definite goals. "Our team goal is to make the top eight." (They came ninth at the last world championships.) "Personally I want to make the finals on the floor and vault and become the first Canadian gymnast to medal."

Fellow gymnast and highest-ranking Canadian Kylie Stone also has high hopes for Athens. The petite 16-year-old came 14th at the world's last year. Competing since she was nine, she started gymnastics when she was five. She trains five hours a day, six days a week, and is looking forward to going to her first Olympic Games where she will perform her new dance routine. "I would like to make the top 10 and make the event final," she says optimistically.

While some athletes won't know that they are definitely going to the Games until July, one athlete quietly qualified in March. Six-time world champion wrestler Christine Nordhagen will be representing Canada in women's wrestling, which will be seen at the Olympics for the first time. She is odds on to medal, and it should be an exciting competition as she has beaten and has been beaten by her two rivals in the last year. "It will be close, but my goal is to win," she says. Nordhagen is keeping herself in form right up the Games. "We're working on technique now, and then later on we will get into competition phase to peak for Athens." Despite not having a major sponsor—she receives some support from CCS Energy Trust—Nordhagen has decided to reverse her original decision to retire after the Olympics. Excited to see women's wrestling at the Games she feels she has a "few more competitions" left in her although this will be her only Olympics.

For one Calgary-based athlete this could be her fourth Olympics. Joanne Malar came out of retirement in 2003—giving up a lucrative career in the health and wellness industry—and is making an astonishing comeback. Since winning gold at the Pan Am games last year, she has intensified her training. "My coach and I decided I needed to train more and harder. From September to December I went through the most vigorous volume of training in my life," she explains. "I was doing 80,000 metres in a week, sometimes 20,000 metres in a day, which is almost half a marathon." In May of this year she raced well at two meets—in Los Angeles and Vancouver—coming within a second of the standard qualifying time. When she qualifies she says her goal will be complete. "I am confident I will

make the Olympic final. If I can go into the Games without the pressure of being a medal hopeful, then I know I am capable." Her main rival is defending Olympic champion and number one in the world Yana Klochkova, from the Ukraine. "She is an unbelievable swimmer, but she is beatable," Malar says with confidence.

Canada will be sending a smaller swim team to Athens than previous Olympics, but it's a lot more talented, according to Canadian record-holder Morgan Knabe. "As a team we're a lot closer knit, and there is a better chance for everyone to make a second swim." Although he did make the 100-metre breaststroke final in Sydney, he was very disappointed in his performance, and he won't be content with anything less than a medal this time around. Competing in the 100- and 200-metre breaststroke and the 400-metre individual medley relay, his goal is to "go right to the top." Like Shewfelt, Knabe receives a performance grant. He has a matter-of-fact attitude about sponsorship and realizes that it won't come to him on a plate: "I know I have to be positive and market myself."

This attitude should be adopted by a lot more athletes, according to Earle Connor, Canada's top Paralympic sprinter. The recipient of the prestigious 2004 Laureus World Sport Award feels that the onus is on the athlete to be proactive and get sponsors. "We should be aware that we are amateur athletes, so there aren't any multi-million NHL-type deals around. We can't sit back and wait for things to

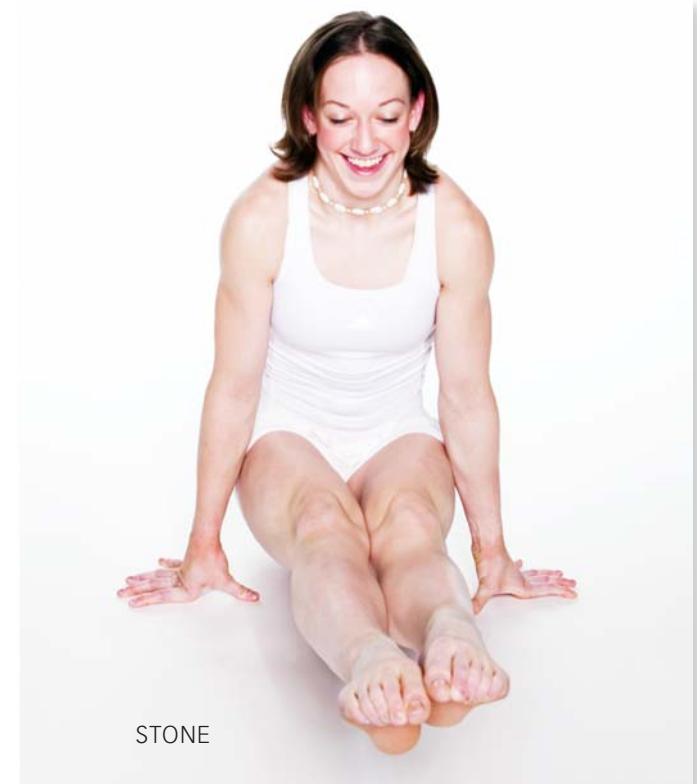
happen. You don't do it in training, and you don't do it in business. I go after people to support me, and that is the way things get done."

Connor will be running the 100-metre and 200-metre dash at the Paralympic Games, which take place from September 17 to 28 in Athens. His goal is very clear cut—two gold medals and a new world record in the 100-metres (under 12 seconds). "I just hope my body stays healthy, and then everything should go according to plan." Connor is a role model for many young athletes. "If I can do what I am doing on one leg, just think of the abilities and opportunities that disabled and non-disabled people have."

Track and field has always been one of the most popular sports in the Olympics, and Canada has some exciting athletes to look out for. Two British Columbia athletes who have made the Olympic standard are Gary Reed and Diane Cummins, who both train and live in Victoria. At 22 years old, Reed is just at the beginning of his athletic career. Ranked first in the 800-metres in 2003, his goal is to make the 800-metre Olympic final. "I had a good year in 2003 with my best time being 1:45:34." The tough Canadian standards mean that both he and Cummins have to come within the top four at the national trials in July, but neither foresees that as a problem. Cummins is the 800-metre Canadian record holder, but she also runs 1,500 metres. "In my career I have been a better 1,500-metre runner, but the 800 is such a great event that I really love it." She ran her personal best of 1:58:39 in 2001 and came fifth in the world



SHEW FELT



STONE



NORDHAGEN



MALAR



KNABE



CONNOR



CUMMINS



REED



ELMORE

championships in the same year. She is working hard at getting back to her 2001 times and is structuring her training with her coach so she can peak in August.

Malindi Elmore will be carrying the flag for Alberta in the 1,500-metres. She has been racing a lot in Europe to ensure she can also make the standard prior to the nationals. She admits it is tough to stay in peak race form because of the late qualification period. "A lot of people have to time their training to make the standard, and then if they make it have to get ready to go in August." Coming off Canada's bronze-medal placing at the world cross-country championships in March—Elmore ran in the women's four-kilometre race—she has honed her training to peak in Athens.

Making the required standards in their respective sports is a challenge for most of our athletes. It's well known that international standards are relatively easy compared to the Canadian standard, which is one of the highest in the world. Why is it so tough? "The Olympics are about excellence," says Henwood. "We don't send people to participate; we send the best athletes we have to hopefully medal. If you set high standards it will elevate your performance."

Despite the intense, demanding, and sometimes stressful environment that this high-profile competition causes, our athletes in Athens will be focused on performance as they embark on their individual quests, while staying true to the Olympic ideal. ●