



Golden Dreams
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the Vancouver Games



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★ THE OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES are the event of a lifetime for the men and women who spend countless hours training on frigid ice rinks or racing down blustery mountains, measuring their days in hundredths of a second or the slimmest of point spreads. Yet there's no place they'd rather be than somewhere between start and finish, putting their best efforts on the line. • The fact that the 2010 Games are in Team USA's backyard—at the ice rinks of Vancouver and on the mountain slopes of North Vancouver and Whistler—makes the competition even more compelling as athletes expect a virtual hometown crowd of support. • Following are profiles of just a few of the athletes looking forward to the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games, opening February 12, and the 2010 Winter Paralympics, opening March 12.

Apolo Anton Ohno: Speed Skating, Short Track

Back in 1994, it wasn't tactics or intensity that seduced a restless 11-year-old from the Seattle area. Apolo Ohno was mesmerized by the incomprehensible angles of the skaters as they sped around the oval.

"I was watching the '94 Lillehammer Olympics, and short track came on," Ohno

Apolo Anton Ohno, left, is a five-time Olympic medalist. The Vancouver Games will be his third Olympics.

recalls. “I saw these guys leaning so far over, their hands were actually touching the ice. I’d been in-line skating for a while, but this was crazy. I knew instantly I’d found my sport. I became obsessed with re-creating that angle from the moment my dad took me to skate.”

Unbeknownst to Ohno at the time, his unconventional beginning—geometrician first, speed skater second—produced a ridiculously tight turning radius that enabled him to skate a shorter distance than his competitors on the same track. His extreme posture depended upon an abnormally strong turning leg, which he thrusts to acquire speed during periods when most skaters are slowing down.

But skating technique wasn’t enough when he finished last during the 1998 Olympic qualifier. Exhibiting wisdom well beyond his 15 years, Ohno refocused his training, drawing, he says, from his experiences as a child in the Pacific Northwest.

“I really learned to channel my intensity,” Ohno recalls. “I suddenly understood that it wasn’t about who you are or what others say about you, but it’s what you actually do that matters. It’s the same vibe in the Northwest. You might stand behind some guy dressed in ripped jeans and a flannel shirt in some Seattle cafe, and that guy may have made a hundred million bucks inventing some incredible computer software.”

Today Ohno is perhaps better known as a 2007 *Dancing With the Stars* champion than as the five-time Olympic medalist who, if he reaches the podium in Vancouver, will become the most decorated U.S. male winter Olympian in history.

“It’s hard to explain how incredible *Dancing With the Stars* was for me,” he reflects. “I learned so much about myself on so many levels. I was able to open up to others and I realized I would enjoy a post-Olympic broadcasting career.”

For now, until the closing ceremonies in Vancouver, at least, Ohno envisions only his performance in short track, a shoulder-to-shoulder tactical sprint of parry and retreat.

“The sport is so unforgiving,” the 27-year-old veteran explains. “You train so many hours and so many months, and then you make a bad slip or a great pass—it’s all about whether you can outsmart your competitors.”

As the sport’s most recognizable spokesperson, Ohno cringes when asked about short track’s non-existent shelf life in the United States after the Winter Games.



AGENCE ZOOM / GETTY IMAGES

Moguls skier Patrick Deneen took first place at the FIS Freestyle World Championships in Inawashiro, Japan, last March.

“I can’t figure out why short track isn’t in the X Games,” he says. “I mean, c’mon. It must be the lack of rinks, ‘cause it’s plenty edgy and hard-core.”

Ohno says he can’t wait to drive to Vancouver this winter with his dad, a trip they’ve made countless times so that Apolo could train on a real short-track rink with actual coaches. His enthusiasm for having the Olympics—likely his last—so close to home is palpable.

“You gotta go, man,” he exclaims. “The Olympics are one huge international festival with a different kind of energy than any other happening. If I weren’t a competitor, I’d be there for sure. It’s your chance to see the best of everything in the world. And make sure you check out short track.”

Julia Mancuso: Skiing, Giant Slalom

Julia Mancuso is all about water. Whether that H₂O comes in its fluid or crystalline state doesn’t really matter, just as long as she can ride it. For most of her life, the 25-year-old reigning Olympic giant-slalom gold medalist has split her time between Maui and

Lake Tahoe. Her perfect Hawai’i day? Surfing, workout, more surfing. Her ideal winter day? Powder skiing, workout, more powder skiing. The only difference is the width of the boards beneath her feet and a few layers of clothes. Water baby, yes. Mellow, not exactly.

“I’m completely both,” she laughs when asked to describe her disposition. “Being a California girl, I’m definitely laid-back; but I also know when to turn it on, focus and get hypercompetitive.”

Competition starts early when you’re virtually raised on a ski hill and your preschoolmates often ski before they toddle. Mancuso also enjoyed the advantage of having an older sister, whom she idolized.

“I had to ski pretty fast if I wanted to hang out with April and her friends, because I was four years younger,” she recalls. “This is what motivated me to be the best skier I could be.”

By the time she was 6 years old, Mancuso was chasing her sister all over Squaw Valley. Her determination to join and then lead the pack continued when she began racing the following year. She quickly discovered she was skiing in select company.

“There were three of us who always seemed to share the podium,” she says, “so we became really good friends and usually skied together. We loved to race and push each other.”

She felt no need to share the spotlight in Torino, however, when she won the gold medal. She was skiing very well, having won a bronze medal at the previous world championships.

“Going into the Olympics, my goal was to get closer to winning the first run, and then I won the heat. I was so nervous going into the second run, but then I was having a really good run, and I thought, ‘This could be it.’ I didn’t know that I’d won until I saw the crowd going wild.”

As a U.S. Ski Team veteran, Mancuso has traveled to Whistler many times, but this year, competing as the defending champion, she says things will feel very different. “I’m really excited to have a ton of friends and family coming to the Games, because entertaining and motivating others is really why I love to compete. It’s fun to feel the additional pressure, too, because I thrive on pressure.”

A visitor to Mancuso’s ebullient Website can’t



TIM PENNEY

Paralympian Sean Halsted looks forward to challenging European racers on Whistler’s familiar snow.

help but smile at her perpetually effervescent personality. She’s become a sought-after bikini model, an expression, she says, of her creative energy. She plans to design clothes when she retires; she’s already launched “Kiss My Tiara,” a lingerie line.

It’s clear that, whether riding a curling wave or cutting through slalom gates, Julia Mancuso will remain as bubbly as champagne powder.

Sean Halsted: Paralympic Nordic Skiing

Sean Halsted followed his parents and a brother into the Air Force. The Spokane native was training with his highly specialized unit, whose mission was to enter “nonpermissive environments” via scuba, rock



ALEXIS BOICHARD / AGENCE ZOOM / GETTY IMAGES

Current giant-slalom champ Julia Mancuso skied her first Olympics at age 17, at the 2002 Salt Lake City Games.

climbing or parachuting, when he slipped while fast-roping and fell four stories from the helicopter to the ground. He assumed his highly active life was over when he left the hospital, after a year of treatments.

“I was invited to the Veteran Wheelchair Games,

where about 400 wheelchair-bound veterans compete in everything from sprinting to rugby,” Halsted says. “I learned there was a physical, competitive life after my disability.”

A VA winter-sports clinic reintroduced the former skier to outdoor recreation, where he first tried downhill sit-skiing but discovered he couldn’t recapture the muscle burn he had loved when skiing with his family every weekend at northern Idaho’s Schweitzer Mountain.

Cross-country sit-skiing, a grueling sport that requires “double poling” for the entire race, produced that burn.

“You really earn the downhill sections of a course,” he laughs, “given the amount of arm and abdominal strength you use during the uphill sections.”

A natural athlete, Halsted began training with the U.S. Paralympic Team and was invited to his first World Cup competition in Lillehammer, Norway, just prior to the 2006 Torino Olympics. He assumed his solid showings against his countrymen would land him in the Olympics, so he was perplexed when his coaches appeared less than enthusiastic in response.

“The Norwegians and Russians were unbelievable,” he laughs. “I raced my heart out to finish in the top 30 out of 40 competitors. If you can break into the top 15, then you are pretty impressive.”

Halsted can’t wait to challenge the Europeans on familiar snow where the crowds (and time zone) will finally favor the North Americans. He skied the Whistler course last year and was thrilled by the colder, more compacted condition of the snow.

But the competition—even medaling—is just one small facet of why Halsted loves to represent his country. “I’ve gained so much international experience,” he says. “It’s awesome to compare services and access for the disabled abroad with home. I would also like to say that every door is open in Whistler. It’s amazing!”

Halsted, whose 5-year-old son, Ethan, says he wants to grow up to be a sit-ski cross-country skier, admits that what drives him most is not his competitors, but unseen faces in the crowd.

JEFF VINNICK, COURTESY: USA HOCKEY



Forward Karen Thatcher is a two-time member of the U.S. Women’s National Team.



DOUGLAS C. PIZAC / AP PHOTO

Bobsled pilot Bree Schaaf enters the Olympics as the U.S. team’s 2009 Rookie of the Year.

“I know that every time I compete there may be someone in a wheelchair watching me who was positive his life as an athlete was over.”

Like this Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, paralympian, they may be beginning their own trails to success.

Bree Schaaf: Women’s Bobsled

Who hasn’t watched some of the more obscure events of the Winter Olympics and wondered how America became involved in such a sport? Bree Schaaf pondered this question as she watched the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. The Portland State University volleyball player became intrigued

West Coast Medal Favorites to Watch at Vancouver 2010

Not every team has selected its Olympic competitors, but following is a list of other West Coast athletes expected to spend time on the awards podiums.

Alpine Skiing

- Stacey Cook, Mammoth, CA
- Hailey Duke, Sun Valley, ID
- Scott Macartney, Redmond, WA
- Marco Sullivan, Lake Tahoe, CA
- Lindsey Vonn, Vail, CO

Freestyle Skiing—Aerial

- Jeret “Speedy” Peterson, Boise, ID

Men’s Ice Hockey

- Scott Gomez, Anchorage, AK

Ski Cross

- Daron Rahlves, Truckee, CA

Snowboarding

- Adam Smith, Bend, OR
- Shaun White, Carlsbad, CA

Biathlon

- Jay Hakkinen, Kasilof, AK

Cross-Country Skiing

- Torin Koos, Leavenworth, WA

Figure Skating

- Sasha Cohen, Corona Del Mar, CA

Snowboard Cross

- Nate Holland, Sandpoint, ID

by bobsledding's combination of speed, strength and technique. A few months later, when a USA Bobsled and Skeleton Federation representative came to campus recruiting women athletes, the Bremerton, Washington, native signed up.

Schaaf soon found that Division I volleyball training hadn't prepared her for shoving 500-pound sleds, so she spent five years on the skeleton team, hurtling headfirst down ice courses at breakneck speeds, on a "food tray with runners." She transitioned to bobsled at the beginning of 2007, finishing sixth in her first World Cup event at Whistler last winter. She was the 2009 U.S. National Champion and recognized as the 2009 USA Bobsled Rookie of the Year.

"My mom, who had pretended I wasn't actually doing this, first watched me at the Whistler World Cup," Schaaf laughs. "It's the fastest track in the world, very fun and very technical. Now my mom is super excited, especially because it's essentially a hometown event. People in Bremerton are finally figuring out what I've been doing for the past seven years."

Schaaf trains 12 months a year: She says she'd lose her strength (and weight) too quickly if she took a hiatus. Schaaf is also a one-woman information kiosk. She'll explain the intricacies of the sport—the exacting blend of speed and technique, the dramatic effect of a shoulder shift or an inch stray offline—to anyone who asks.

"Bobsledding is a unique women's sport," she says. "I'm essentially sprinting while pushing a quarter-ton sled, then tucking into a tight ball to steer down an icy chute at upward of 70 miles per hour."

Schaaf says she still can't believe that a tall, skinny volleyball player has a chance to be part of the Winter Games. "Hopefully, when I walk into opening ceremonies," she says, "it'll suddenly hit me that all my incredibly hard work has paid off."

Kikkan Randall: Cross-Country Skiing

Discussions about elite athletes as role models too often focus on athletes who are anything but. Then there are athletes such as Olympic cross-country skier Kikkan Randall, who devotes herself as much to



Kikkan Randall won a silver medal in the sprint competition at the Nordic World Ski Championships last February.

exceptional causes, such as Fast and Female, as she does to training for what is arguably the most rigorous sport in the entire Winter Games.

“My good friend and gold medalist Chandra Crawford started Fast and Female in Canada to empower girls through cross-country skiing,” Randall explains. “So I started an Anchorage chapter. We had 160 girls at our orientation!”

The Anchorage, Alaska, resident admits she was surprised by the attendance. She had expected about 30

girls to enter the program, which encourages girls to employ the sport’s physical and mental discipline in their everyday lives.

Randall actually started out as an alpine skier, but realized when she was a teenager that she preferred the physical challenge of Nordic training. Her intensity was always obvious to her cross-country-

running teammates, who started calling her “Kikkanimal” when she was 16.

“There are moments when you’re skiing that you just want to fall down,” she says. “So you play mind games with yourself to go up the next hill or around the bend. When you get to the finish line, you realize that every little touch got you there.

“I feel like the luckiest kid in the world to ski first in Salt Lake City where I was born, then in Whistler,” says the nine-time national champion. “It really feels like Alaska’s backyard, and I know there’ll be a lot of friends and family there. I’m also excited for the people who’ll become acquainted with my sport, as well as beginning the legacy of an incredible trail system.”

Randall trains outside of Anchorage at the Thomas Training Center on Eagle Glacier, one of the great facilities in the world. She trains 11 months a year, including five months on the World Cup circuit, where she won the Rybinsk Sprint in 2008, becoming the first woman in U.S. cross-country ski history to win a World Cup event.

Even with her rigorous training and event schedules, she still finds time to ride her unicycle. “It’s a great way to make an impression on a gym full of

kids," she laughs.

Whether by tire or by ski, this champion athlete will leave impressions of a better world in her path.

Patrick Deneen: Freestyle Skiing, Moguls

It's the three days that matter. Patrick Deneen didn't start skiing when he was 11 months old; he was 11 months and 3 days when he first traversed between his mom and his dad, who was general manager of the former Hyak Ski Area east of Seattle. At 7, the Cle Elum native joined the race program at Idaho's Silver Mountain, but it wasn't until he was 11 that he discovered the bumps.

"When you're a little kid and you see these guys going super fast and taking big jumps," says today's fastest moguls skier on the planet, "well, I wanted to start doing it right away."

Deneen's career caught major air when he made the U.S. Ski Team in 2007, medaling in four World Cup events, capturing the No. 1 U.S. ranking and taking home World Cup Rookie of the Year honors. Deneen won the FIS Freestyle World Championships for moguls in Inawashiro, Japan, last spring, and he heads to Vancouver as a favorite for the top of the podium at the 2010 Winter Games.

Few athletes can claim "local hero" status like the affable Washington native, who turns 22 on Christmas. Though he raced in Idaho, Deneen considers the Summit at Snoqualmie Pass his home mountain. In addition, he trained at Oregon's Mount Hood as a teenager, during the summers. Heading to Vancouver's North Shore to compete in his first Olympics adds the final carat to his Northwest diamond. He credits the Cascade Mountains with providing critical terrain for a moguls ski champion.

"It gives you an edge to ski all the different snow types, and we also have snow year-round at Mount Hood, which gives you a tremendous advantage."

As a kid on his family's ranch, Deneen spent almost as much time in stirrups as he did in ski boots. He competed in the equestrian event called "reining," a compe-

tition in which the rider maneuvers his steed through a series of intricate moves and sudden changes of gait. Not surprisingly, he won several championships.

Deneen's February ski date in Vancouver will feel more like his youthful excursions to regional tournaments than like his present career as a globetrotting world champion.

"It's so cool that I get to drive with my parents to the Olympics!" he gushes. "As a local freestyle skier, I'm also really lucky to compete at Cypress Mountain because the atmosphere in Vancouver will be incredible."

Deneen remains determined to treat the Vancouver Games like any other competition. "I ski because I love it, to ski the best I can and to be the best in the world every single day," he says. "Essentially, the Olympics should be no different than the World Cup."

Spoken like a true champion.

Karen Thatcher: Women's Hockey

U.S. hockey player Karen Thatcher considers Blaine, Washington, her hometown, even though she grew up and played intercollegiate hockey in New England. The Thatcher family began taking vacations in the Pacific Northwest when Karen was 4. When she graduated from Providence College as one of the most decorated hockey players in school history, her blades pointed back to Blaine, so that she could play competitive hockey in Vancouver, just across the border.

"I just always loved the enormous trees and the big mountains," Thatcher remembers. "After I moved back and was loving it here, my parents asked each other why they were still living in New England, when they had always loved the Northwest, and my brother, who lives in Portland, and I were both here. They followed four months later."

Many winter sports fill the final spots for teams just days before the Olympics, but the women's hockey team roster was set in August so the players could train together and play test games for the next six months. And unlike in previous Olympics, Team USA will enter

CONTINUED ON PAGE 125

ranked No. 1 in the world, having defeated rival Canada 4-1 in the 2009 World Championships last April in Finland.

In hockey strongholds such as New England and Minnesota, women's national-team players are revered by young female hockey players who dream of their own Olympic moments. Thatcher, however, tries to move around Blaine in relative obscurity. She practices three to four times a week, playing pickup games in Bellingham and Vancouver, increasing her workout rate as seasons approach. She played the 2006-'07 season with the BC Breakers in the Western Women's Hockey League.

"Growing up, I idolized Cammi Granato, the best American player ever, and Katie King, who played on three Olympic teams," Thatcher says. "It was pretty cool because I went to Brown for a year, where Katie played, and then to Providence, where Cammi played."

Thatcher says Blaine residents are pretty surprised when they learn she plays hockey for Team USA. "They always ask where I skate in Blaine, because we don't have a rink," she laughs.

The forward knows attitudes are different 30 miles away in hockey-mad Vancouver, and she can't wait to get there.

"I actually know my way around Vancouver much better than Seattle," says Thatcher, who plans to pursue a Ph.D. in psychology or exercise physiology when she retires. "I had a blast playing tour guide and taking my teammates to English Bay and up Grouse Mountain to see the city's lights during the test games in September. These are really home games for me." ▲

Crai S. Bower is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

getting there



Alaska Airlines and its sister carrier, Horizon Air, offer daily service to Vancouver, British Columbia, as well as Seattle and Bellingham, Washington—primary gateways to Olympic venues. Book tickets online at alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAIR.