

Bobsledder Cyrus Gray brings the thunder to Whistler

VANCOUVER ISLAND ATHLETE ONE OF SEVERAL CANADIANS RACING AT WHISTLER SLIDING CENTRE THIS MONTH

BY DAVID SONG

I HEARD IT before I saw it.

Standing amidst a throng of viewers at the Whistler Sliding Centre on Saturday, Nov. 12, my ears picked up a rumbling noise from further up the track. It started faint, but rapidly gained in both volume and intensity. Something big was inbound.

Down it came through the Gold Rush Trail, leaving a row of protective tarps flapping vehemently in its wake. Had I blinked at the wrong time, I would've missed it. Had I closed my eyes, I would've thought it a locomotive, such was the noise and power it possessed.

'It' of course, was a four-man bobsleigh, a sleek steed bearing a quartet of burly, twitched-up athletes weighing at least 200 pounds each. Add the mass of the sled itself and you have nearly 1,400 pounds (635 kilograms) hurtling down the track, mere metres away from my fixated eyes. I could have reached out and touched the thing—not that any sane person would do so.

GRAY DAY Duncan, B.C. bobsledder Cyrus Gray is one of several Canadian athletes racing at the Whistler Sliding Centre this month.

PHOTO SUBMITTED

In two seconds, tops, the vehicle roared across my field of vision and through Thunderbird Corner, the Whistler Sliding Centre's epic final turn. At that point, it had reached its top speed of over 150 kilometres per hour. Corner 16 is arguably the best place on track to watch the action, but sometimes it needs to be tarped up to prevent sunlight from damaging the carefully conditioned ice.

On Saturday afternoon, however, Thunderbird Corner was open for business, and everyone watching was lucky for it.

The North American Cup event from Nov. 7 to 13 was the first time the Whistler Sliding Centre had hosted official races in three years, and Canadians were well-represented. Cyrus Gray from Duncan, B.C. placed third in four-man bobsleigh on Nov. 12, alongside pilot Taylor Austin and fellow brakemen David Caixeiro and Davidson de Souza. He added a gold medal the next day, this time with Austin, de Souza and Chris Ashley.

"It's always a young Canadian's goal to represent their country and be with the best of the best," Gray said.

Fresh off an appearance at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, the Vancouver Islander already has his sights set four years down the road on Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo. He knows that every race between now and then is an opportunity to solidify his place as one of Canada's best.

FROM BASKETBALL TO BOBSLEIGH

The Whistler Sliding Centre offers introductory bobsleigh programs for those as young as 16, but Gray did not start quite so early. Basketball was his first athletic passion, from Grade 10 at Cowichan Secondary School to his first year as point guard for Camosun College. It was always Gray's goal to represent his country at the highest levels of sport.

"Every time I watched the Olympics, I was like, 'Oh, I'd love to play basketball one day at the Olympics,'" he said.

Yet Gray eventually realized that hooping against world-class athletes was not in the cards for him, and he spent a few years trying to figure out what was next. That next step came in the form of RBC Training Ground, a development program that has produced numerous Canadian Olympians, such as fellow bobsledder Mike Evelyn, silver medallist sprinter Jerome Blake and Olympic champion track cyclist Kelsey Mitchell.

Gray admittedly "didn't want to do it" at first, but his mom saw potential and signed him up for Training Ground anyway. A mother's instincts about her children are often sound, and in this case they were.

In 2017, Gray proved himself to be among the top 100 RBC Training Ground athletes in B.C. He didn't know much about bobsleigh at that point, though he

remembers watching past Canadian icons like Kaillie Humphries and Lyndon Rush at the 2010 Winter Olympics. When the opportunity arose for Gray to climb into a sled himself, he took it.

The Vancouver Islander wasn't considered an elite prospect at first, but he developed steadily under the tutelage of athletes such as Justin Kripps, who won two-man bobsleigh gold at the 2018 Winter Olympics and four-man bronze in 2022. Kripps, who retired this August and is now a technical coach for Bobsleigh Canada Skeleton (BCS), praise Gray for "growing a ton" and "coming out of his shell" since his early days.

Whistler-based veteran Canadian pilot and four-time Olympian Chris Spring is likewise proud of how far Gray has come.

"Cyrus is a real success story, I'd say," Spring remarked. "When he came into the program, he hadn't had very much coaching, didn't really know much about the sport, and to be honest, didn't test very well when he first came out. And to his credit, he had this goal of becoming a national team member competing at a World Championships, Olympic Games... and he did everything he could possible.

"He's literally changed himself into the athlete that he is today."

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Whistler skier Marcus Goguen goes from big mountain to big screen

LOCAL FREERIDER FEATURED IN PROLIFIC SNOWSPORTS FILM, *DAYMAKER*

BY DAVID SONG

MARCUS GOGUEN HAS always been an athlete. Now he can call himself a movie star—in a manner of speaking.

The 18-year-old Whistlerite is one of more than 30 skiers and snowboarders featured in *Daymaker*, the latest snowsports film by Warren Miller Entertainment. The movie, which screened Nov. 18 at Whistler Secondary School, depicts athletes throwing down tricks and carving their way through breathtaking backcountry playgrounds in Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Greece, Switzerland and, of course, British Columbia.

“Oh, it was great,” Goguen said. “A totally new experience being up with, like, the big dogs and the big filming crew. We hit it right with the snow conditions. We

got 100 centimetres when we went up to Mustang Powder and it was game on.”

Weather and snow conditions are crucial for freeriders like Goguen, who trade the safety and control of artificially curated ski resorts for the untamed, infinite white of the open backcountry. They are trained in avalanche safety and often carry various forms of precautionary gear, especially in Europe, where outside supervision tends to be limited.

Freeride skiers and snowboarders are *not* to be confused with their freestyle counterparts: the latter, who compete at the Olympics and X Games, perform tricks on man-made elements. There can be overlap between the two: for instance, Olympic medalists like Canada’s Mark Morris and New Zealand’s Zoi Sadowski-Synnott are

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CYRUS GRAY FROM PAGE 52

TAKING OWNERSHIP

So, who is Cyrus Gray today? At 27 years old, he is a senior member of the Canadian national bobsleigh team. He helps crew the top four-man sled in the nation, continuously acclimating himself to the intense G-forces that bobsledders experience.

Pilots don’t have it quite as harsh, but brakemen can feel up to six Gs (or six times the normal force of gravity) when speeding down a track like Whistler’s, considered the fastest in the world. The further back you sit in your sled, the worse it gets. To put that in perspective, military fighter jets like the F/A-18 Super Hornet featured in the Tom Cruise blockbuster *Top Gun: Maverick* are rated to handle 7.5 Gs in a turn.

Kripps knows firsthand that to conquer such intense G-forces on world-class tracks, you need both explosive physicality and ice in your veins. Competitors must switch immediately from an all-out aggressive push at the start to a calm “flow state” of mind that helps them navigate the track at breakneck speeds. The foundation of it all is courage, for bobsleigh can be a scary sport.

“Mental fortitude, I think, really starts to separate the really successful people from those who aren’t,” Kripps said. “You can start to see that with Cyrus: he’s got a very confident, calm demeanour.”

Something else that many are unaware of is the fact that high-level bobsledders such as Gray must both compete and care for their own equipment. Mechanics are available to deal with significant breakdowns, but day-to-day maintenance falls to the athletes themselves, who polish

their sled’s runners for up to 90 minutes ahead of each event. It’s a lot of work for a few fleeting moments in the spotlight, but it’s part of the process.

Gray’s leadership off the track has earned recognition as well. Two-time Olympian skeleton racer Mirela Rahneva praised him for making posters to help advertise the North American Cup and the season’s first World Cup event from Nov. 24 to 26.

“BCS is very lean,” she said. “There’s not a lot of staff. There’s not a lot of volunteers. Athletes are recognizing that there’s a lot of work to be done and they’re stepping up.”

Kripps and Spring have both seen firsthand the fruit of Gray’s labour.

“We actually had a bunch of fans come out for [the North American Cup],” Kripps said. “Usually, you don’t have fans other than people’s parents at these kinds of development-level races.”

Gray is well aware of younger eyes on the national team looking his way, and he strives to be an example to them the way that Kripps and Spring have been to him. With World Cup action right around the corner, the Vancouver Islander is honoured to represent both country and province here in Whistler.

“Being [able] to say that your home track is the fastest track in the world?” Gray said. “That puts some pride on your shoulders for sure. Can’t take that for granted.”

For more information and the full schedule of IBSF World Cup events, visit whistlersportlegacies.com/whistler-sliding-centre/this-week-on-track. ■



Resort Municipality of Whistler

2023 Budget Open House Thursday, December 1, 2023 Whistler Public Library

Lunchtime Open House: 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Presentation and Open House: 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

You are invited to join Council and staff for the 2023 Budget Open House. During the informal lunchtime session, information boards will be on display and staff will be on hand to answer questions. The evening session will include a presentation and a Q&A portion.

Resort Municipality of Whistler
whistler.ca/Budget



The Whistler Racket Club & WYSC Presents...

World Cup - Canada

SOCCER DAY

SUNDAY, NOV. 27TH

WORLD CUP BREAKFAST VIEWING PARTY

8am - 11am
Team Canada VS Croatia

- Big Screen Viewing
- Fireside in the WRC Lounge
- WRC's Pancake & Breakfast Buffet!
- Halftime Penalty Kick Contest with Prizes & MORE!

- TICKETS -
\$20 (Kids 13 & Under)
- \$30 Adults

THE WHISTLER INDOOR SOCCER CUP

11am - 4pm
Youth U13 & U11
Indoor Soccer Tournament

4 on 4 Round Robin -
Play & Playoffs
Ticket Includes -
Hot Chocolate &
S'mores Post Game

- TICKETS -
\$20 / Player

ALL TICKETS CAN BE PURCHASED AT
MYWRC.CA/EVENTS
SOME PROCEEDS GO TO WYSC