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- SCOREBOARD
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- [SPORTS TALK](#)
- [TRANSACTIONS](#)
- [DAILY SPORTS SKED](#)
- [UPCOMING EVENTS](#)
- [QUOTE OF THE DAY](#)
- [TRIVIA](#)
- [CANOE SPORTS](#)



Businesses support Canadian athletes

It's a living Olympic legacy like no other.

Maybe Jennifer Heil will become the first Canadian ever to win a gold medal at an Olympics held in Canada. Maybe not. But when her event is done the evening after the opening ceremonies, a part of her will be in play every single day the rest of the way at Vancouver 2010 and, quite likely, at many more Olympics far into the future.

Heil goes to the Olympics in the remarkable position of being able to experience her own legacy when Patrick Chan, Joannie Rochette and Tessa Virtue figure skate.

She'll effectively be in the bobsleighs with Helen Upperton and Lyndon Rush, speed skate with Denny Morrison and Christine Nesbitt, cross country ski with Alex Harvey and skeleton with Jeff Pain and Michelle Kelly.

The queen of bumps and jumps will freestyle ski with teammates Steve Omischl, Alex Bilodeau, Aleisha Cline and Davey Barr, short track skate with Francois-Louis Tremblay and play hockey with Kim St. Pierre.

Heil will have been an inspiration to all her 20-plus 'B2ten' athletes -- Canadians who have been quietly provided significant and substantial help beyond the funding offered to other athletes for these Olympics.

This is a story which features a half hundred heroes, starting with 10 in Edmonton, then 10 more in Montreal, 10 more in Calgary and Toronto and finally 10 more in Vancouver.

Business (that's the 'B' in 'B2ten') people who didn't expect even a mention of their name in return for the almost \$3 million they've put in so far.

"It all was Jenn's idea. It was her unselfish idea. 'If it worked for me, it can work for other athletes' inspiration," said lawyer Douglas Goss of Edmonton, the man who got it all going for the moguls skier expected to get it all going for Canada in Vancouver as she did by winning gold as Canada's lead-off hitter in Torino four years ago.

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PHOTO OF THE DAY



POLL

What best describes your interest level in the upcoming Olympic Winter Games?

- Glued to the TV whenever I can
- Keen on catching most major events
- Just want to see hockey
- Want to check out Canadian medal

"She could have just kept the group we put together to specifically help her, but she unselfishly wanted to focus on other athletes who she felt deserved the same support we created for her. It resulted in a pretty cool group of business guys coming together. Most of them haven't even met each other," he said.

It all began when the Canadian Freestyle Ski Association couldn't deliver funding promised to its athletes.

"In Salt Lake 2002 Jenn missed the medals by 1/100th of a point," said Goss, the current president and co-chairman to the 2010 Grey Cup committee, who was also chairman of the Heritage Classic outdoor game which gave the inspiration to the huge hit that has been the NHL's Winter Classic.

"I've known Jenn's folks, Randy and Heather, since before she was born. They came to me and asked if I could find some help. So I phoned a few guys who put in a few bucks. We raised about \$100,000," he said.

It wasn't money to put in her bank account.

"When I came back after Salt Lake, I was at a crossroads," said Heil. "I needed to do things differently. I felt I had a lack of preparation. I needed to build a team around me. I had injuries. I had been relying completely on my technical abilities and my body was breaking down.

"I started to assemble team of specialists. All funding for training was basically cancelled.

"That's when Doug, a family friend going back to his parents and my grandparents having a cabin beside each other in Wabamun (Alberta), got businessmen in Edmonton to support me. Another group in Montreal emerged. J.D. Miller and Dom Gauthier helped me set up the team in Montreal," she said of the banking and mergers acquisitions consultant (Miller) and her coach and now life partner (Gauthier).

"They allowed me to go to Torino 100% prepared and in the best shape of my life. The best part is that they asked nothing in return. No mention of their names. No logos. No nothing. They were just there to support me and my goals."

Miller mentored Gauthier more than a decade ago and his connection was more than a little reluctant at first.

"It ended up with Jenn living in my house in Montreal from 2003 to 2006," he said with a laugh.

"Dom wanted me to mentor her, too. He came to me and said 'I want you to meet this young lady. She has great potential. I want you to be helpful to her the way you were helpful to me.' He brought her to my house after events at Lake Placid and Mt. Gabriel.

"I'll be honest here. I wasn't excited about it. In my experience, dealing with female individual athletes in sports can be very complicated. But one day Dom asked me to go to St. Gabriel. He said 'You really need to see her.' I said 'OK. I'll drive up there, but after I do, I don't ever want to hear her name again.'

"I took David Campbell, one of the leading athletic therapists, with me. He told me she was like a Lada car in a Formula 1 race. She had great ability but her body was broken down. He felt if she got the right group of people working with her, she could be amazing.

"I talked to her for an hour. She was still a teenager. And I was asking questions aimed at somebody 10 years her age. She was honest and looked me straight in the face.

Get Canadian medal winners

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I could think of no good reason to say no. The next afternoon her mother brought her to my house to live with us."

With the money from the Edmonton group and some more Miller put together in Montreal, Heil got everything she needed in every area including 36 visits with a sports psychologist when only six were paid for by Olympic funding. End result: Gold.

Goss was incredulous when he told Heil the Edmonton group was good to go for another four years and she hit him with the idea to include other athletes.

"I told her 'Our guys put this together just for you,' Goss said of the Edmonton group.

"I just came home and felt 'Well, that was incredible.' I felt just so lucky to go to the Olympics and to be so well supported," said Heil.

"I felt I had done so well because I was supported. I wanted other athletes to experience the same thing. I wanted to try to expand the network across the country.

"I remember the feeling I had at the top of the hill. So confident and so fortunate. I wished other athletes could feel something like that. I was able to turn over every stone to give myself the best shot."

How do you say no to that?

Goss put together a group with banker Barry Heck in Calgary while Miller added the Bronfman family's former chief financial officer, Andrew Parsons, who does the books for free and put a group together in Toronto.

"When Jenn said 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if this kind of support could be made available to other athletes.' I thought 'Sure. Why not add five to eight more athletes?' It ended up more like 18 or 25," Miller said with a chuckle.

"One day J.D. called and said 'Doug, we need some more money -- go find some more, guys,' so I went out and got another group together in Vancouver," said Goss.

"Our budget went from \$100,000 a year to \$500,000 a year. There's not one nickel for administration (fees). And just before the new year, we won new charitable tax status.

"Stephen Bronfman, Andrew Parsons, J.D. and myself are the four directors, but Dom Gauthier is really the lead guy when it comes to running it," Goss added.

"By day he's a freestyle skiing coach. By night he's the program director of 'B2ten,' " said Miller.

Gauthier is the bridge to the athletes and their coaches.

"My vision is to build a Formula 1 team for every athlete," he said. "I want them to have the best person for the brakes and the best person for the motor.

"My role is to make sure the needs of every athlete are identified and they get what they need.

"It is so satisfying, my job."

Gauthier said he came in to the freestyle ski program as a coach in 2001.

"I couldn't believe what I saw. Of the \$3 million we had, only \$42,000 got to the athletes. Jean-Luc Brassard was paying his own airfare to compete for Canada. I never want to see that again in Canadian sport. I hope to be in this position to do what I'm doing for many Olympics to come."

Richard Monette of Banff is the needs assessment guy.

"He's a very special guy," said Miller of his ability to determine where the money should go while keeping politics out of the equation.

"The thing that makes B2ten unique is that we support them on an individual basis," said Heil of the other Canadian Olympians.

"We fulfill needs they have and move on to the next athlete. It greatly varies in the dollar amount. We bought bobsleighs for Lyndon Rush and Helen Upperton."

B2ten owns them. Upperton and Rush drive them. They're worth \$100,000 and \$180,000.

"Our partnership with B2ten has been huge, just huge, in their successes so far this year," said bobsled coach Tuffy Latour.

"Before B2ten came into my life I felt a bit lost in my Olympic preparation and the podium seemed like a blurry dream," said Rush.

"B2ten got it all started. I approached them after talking to Helen Upperton and finding out what they'd done for her. Now that B210 provided me a fast sled and an integrated support team around our team.

"I feel like we can push and slide so much faster. They basically were the agent for making our blurry dream a realistic objective," added Rush, who had dramatically improved results this year.

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