

Calgary sports institute draws Canada even with sports powers

The Canadian Press

CALGARY - Clad in a hard hat and steel-toed boots, hockey player Carla MacLeod imagined what her life would be like at Canada's first winter sport institute as she toured its construction site.

"From an athlete's standpoint, it's like a little taste of heaven," the two-time Olympic gold medallist said as she ambled between concrete pillars.

The 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver and Whistler may be over, but rising from the ground on Calgary's west side is a major step in Canada's evolution into a winter sport power.

Construction on the \$220-million Athlete and Ice Complex at Canada Olympic Park began long before the opening ceremonies of the 21st Winter Olympiad in February.

It was the momentum of an Olympics coming to Canada, however, that sparked the political will in government and sport stakeholders to build something the United States, Germany and Australia have, but Canada didn't.

When the three phases of the 46,450-square-metre AIC are complete, it will exist in concert with the legacies of the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary as a sports hub for both Olympians and the public.

It will resemble the U.S. States Olympic Training Centre in Colorado Springs, Colo., and the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra.

"Once it's finished it's going to be leading edge," says Alex Baumann, who

oversees Canada's Olympians as head of Own The Podium.

"If you take a look at some of the top countries in the world, they have gone the route of institutes."

What an institute means is that athletes have access to everything they need under one roof. They could conceivably spend every waking hour there because all their training, eating, recovering, medical and sport science needs are all met at the facility.

Canada currently has seven sport centres across the country. The centres administrate programs and services to athletes, but they don't provide a single, physical place for them to ply their trade.

Skeleton coach Duff Gibson, an Olympic gold medallist in 2006, says the benefits of not having to drive from one end of the city to the other for medical treatment, massage therapy or video analysis can't be underestimated.

"It's a lot of running around and time that could be better spent or more effectively spent, even if it's just recuperating," he explains. "Sitting in a car driving from site to site is not recuperating."

The federal and provincial governments and the City of Calgary are providing \$130 million towards the project. A condition of that funding is for the public to have access to the institute.

WinSport Canada, which oversees the legacy and investments from the 1988 Olympics, is contributing more than \$60 million.

