

# Calgary sport institute draws Canada level with U.S., Germany and Australia

When \$220-million complex is completed, it will give athletes access to everything they need to excel

BY DONNA SPENCER 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 medalist 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. 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 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 medalist 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 toward 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.

WinSport is trying to raise the remaining \$30-million from the corporate community. Now that there are bricks and mortar to see, WinSport is touring company executives

through the site.

WinSport wants them to imagine their name and logo inside and outside the facility.

"We want to name absolutely everything," WinSport president and CEO Guy Huntingford says. "The purists say you shouldn't put your money on anything, it's all wrong, and then you've got the other people who name every brick."

"The mandate is to become the No. 1 winter sport nation. That's the vision and that costs a lot of money. Every athlete will tell you, 'We have to have somewhere to train.' So somebody has to pay for the facilities and somebody has to maintain them.

"Everybody talks about the beer. Nobody talks about the fridge that keeps it cold."

The three NHL-sized rinks and the ice plant to run them are the first phase of the project. They're scheduled to start operating in December.

Those rinks are going up first because they're money makers and Calgary is starved for ice surfaces. Huntingford says skate and hockey organizations already are calling to book time slots.

The revenue from Phase One will help pay for the second and third phases.

Construction has already begun on Phase Two, which is a 3,000-seat international ice surface and the five-storey office tower that will have Hockey Canada as its anchor tenant.

Doctors, therapists, sport-science labs and coaches' offices will be in that building, which will also have its own pharmacy. The second phase is scheduled for completion December, 2011.



If WinSport can raise enough money, the third phase consisting of a high-performance and public-training centre will be completed at the same time as Phase Two. Otherwise, it will be December, 2012, before the AIC is fully up and running.

The high-performance and public-training facility will include a running track, skating simulator, shooting galleries, lounges, kitchen and conference space.

Even if a national team isn't based in Calgary, athletes can be flown in for a block of time for training and testing.

The public and elite athletes will have their own training areas, but there is a crossover component where they can mix. That's important, Bau-

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mann says, because young athletes are inspired by direct contact with their Olympic heroes.

"The advantage we have here is we're mixing the recreational aspect, the development aspect, with the high-performance aspect," he explains.

A separate, but satellite project, is Canada's new Sports

Hall of Fame going up across the road from the AIC. Another long-term plan is to move the National Sport School, where teenagers combine academics and high-performance sport, from its current home in the wing of a Calgary high school to its own building at Calgary Olympic Park.

WinSport estimates that when the AIC is up and running at full capacity it will generate a \$2-million profit annually. Huntingford wants the project to attract commercial development to Canada Olympic Park in the form of hotels, restaurants and shopping.

Not everything runs smoothly with a project of this magnitude. WinSport's vision is for the institute to be the headquarters for all winter sport federations. Skate Canada was initially tabbed to join Hockey Canada, but is now reluctant to relocate from Ottawa.

The optics weren't good last year when construction on the AIC proceeded, even though WinSport's investments from the 1988 endowment fund

were taking a beating during the recession. WinSport could barely pay to keep ice in the Olympic Oval for the national speed-skating team last year.

WinSport officials say emphatically no money from the endowment fund is going into the AIC and that its portion of the cost is coming from the redevelopment of lands around Canada Olympic Park. Also, the organization now has an agree-

ment in principle with the federal government to draw on the principle of its investments to pay for the Oval's operations in the future.

Baumann, a former Olympic gold medalist in swimming, returned to Canada after working in the Australian sport system. Australia established an institute for the country to excel at their own Summer Olympics in 2000 and beyond.

"It's really made a significant difference, not only to their culture, but to their performance," Baumann explains. "We saw that in 2000 where they came fourth at the Sydney Olympics and fourth in 2004 as well."

The winter sport institute may be located in Calgary, but it could be classified as an important legacy of the 2010 Winter Olympics. Canada's attitude toward sport turned a corner at those Games and the institute will be lasting reminder of that.

"One of the challenges of 2010, is 'do we have a love of sport, do we believe in sport and the value of it?' or is it 'just because we're hosting it, we don't want to embarrass ourselves, so let's put some money into it,'" Gibson says.

"I think it's a bigger thing – a larger enthusiasm for sport – and people are starting to see the value of it, as least in terms of inspiring the next generation to become more athletic, or just lead a healthier lifestyle."

) *The Canadian Press*



Alex Baumann, left, head of Own the Podium, tours the site of the new Athlete and Ice Complex with project co-ordinator Steve Palmer in Calgary. JEFF McINTOSH/THE CANADIAN PRESS