

A Look Behind the Curtain: Durango's Olympic Duty

by *Ben Brashear*

The aspen leaves are changing, the high peaks of the Weminuche Wilderness hold snow, and the upcoming XXIII Winter Olympic Games Feb. 9-25, 2018, in Pyeongchang, Korea, already garner the attention of the Durango community and nation alike. And, with this year's Olympic slogan "Passion Connected," it is fitting to see just how the small community of Durango, Colorado, is playing a vital role in the fast-approaching Winter Games.

It is no secret that athletic legends and world-class Olympians call this area home. Longtime resident Adolph "Dolph" Kuss was a member of the Olympic Training Squad in the 1950s and later went on to coach the U.S. Ski Team and Olympic cross-country and Nordic combined. Mike Elliott, coached by Kuss, participated in three Winter Olympics in a variety of distance and relay cross-country ski events, and now his son, Tad Elliott, continues to write the family legacy, this year as an Olympic hopeful for cross-country. And, may we not forget the Barnes twins and their remarkable story of sisterly love, when in 2014 Tracy willingly gave up her spot on the Olympic biathlon team convinced that her sister Lanny would be the best bet for the U.S. to medal at the Sochi Winter Games.

The limelight shines bright upon this echelon of sport and it is easy to become enamored by all they have accomplished. Not to diminish their talent and dedication to sport it is, however, important to marvel the effort of those who work equally hard behind the scenes, ensuring that the nation's athletes make it to race day prepared and in good health.

Dr. Patrick McLaughlin (50) of Animas Spine is one such individual working behind the curtain doing what he calls his "Olympic duty." He is a volunteer medic for the U.S. Ski Team and, this year, for what was the women's super-G and slalom Olympic training camp hosted in Corralco, Chile.

This year's training camp was remote and located within a national park, leaving McLaughlin more concerned about on-sight medical emergencies. "It's over two hours to the nearest Level 1 trauma center and to get air rescue by helicopter is a big ordeal in trying to get government approval to even fly into the national park," he says.

In the past, medical volunteers came from a select group of Steadman Clinic fellows like McLaughlin, but in 2011, with the incorporation of freeskiing and snowboarding into the USSA, they now draw from a much larger pool of over 200 volunteers. Volunteers must maintain a USSA certification in medical emergencies in skiing and snowboarding (MESS), must travel with the U.S. Ski Team once every three years and they pay their own way.

McLaughlin utilizes non-surgical methods, including cutting-edge plasma-rich-platelet (PRP) therapy and stem-cell therapy to treat a variety of ailments in his daily physiatry practice, but on the mountain in Corralco, it's down to triage basics— a 40-pound medical pack full of tourniquets, splints, bandages, chest tubes and even a cricothyrotomy kit. "They're skiing at tremendous speed and I've seen some crashes but nothing traumatic," he says. "I do get nervous before the events and it often brings back memories of playing semi-professional soccer; I think those butterflies help me relate more to the athletes and keep me in focus so that I will be ready in a medical emergency."

He has traveled to Finland and Italy for super-G and slalom races, and now Chile. He's worked with Lindsay Vonn, Julia Mancuso, Stacey Cook, and has even spent time chatting with Bode Miller. "It was the strangest thing, like a time warp. You grow up watching these events on TV and then I was right there at the starting gates," he says. "And then the next day I was talking about kids and family with Bode over breakfast; it's crazy."

This year's training camp was medically uneventful with the exception of treating a few colds, which left McLaughlin grateful and with plenty of opportunity to aid in other ways. Consistent 40-mph winds had the coaches and volunteer staff "slipping" the course, sliding downhill sideways on their skis to scrape off any snow accumulation. At the speeds the skiers would reach, says McLaughlin, any amount of fresh snow or incongruity in the grooming could be disastrous.

It was not the athletes that left the greatest impression on McLaughlin in Corralco, however, but the ski techs and coaching staff that maintained and tuned countless pairs of skis, stayed up past midnight to repair snowmobiles, and then woke at dawn to flag the downhill course. "They are jacks of all trades really, and it made me more aware of the effort it takes to get the athletes to the Olympics. Stories should be written about these guys," he laughs.

Be on the lookout for the selection of the women's downhill and super-G team Jan. 22, 2018, at the Utah Olympic Park in Park City, Utah. U.S. team selections for alpine, cross-country and biathlon events will also be made.

Lee Hee-beom stated before the International Olympic Committee that he hopes the Winter Games will be the best ever, showcasing Korea as a global leader in sports and as the new hub for winter sports in Asia. It has been 30 years since the games have been in Korea and will feature 102 events in 15 sport disciplines.

* * * * *