

The Crazy Canucks

Canada's famous downhill foursome dominated the World Cup for a decade. Their podium results were legendary, but was their legacy lasting?

BY MICHEL BEAUDRY

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEN READ



The Canadian men's alpine ski team at a 1982 World Cup event in Val d'Isere, France. "Ours was a Cinderella story," says downhill racer Steve Podborski. "It never should have happened. But it did, because we were able to build on each others' success."

The spectators couldn't believe their eyes. How could this be happening? Especially here, in the country's temple to skiing culture...How dare these young upstarts run away with the race? What the heck were these mad, new-world skiers up to? Still, there was something seductive about their performance.

No matter that their country's history of success was negligible in the sport, particularly on the men's side. No matter that their team's budget was miniscule compared to their rivals'. Or that nobody followed this kind of racing back home. These young Canucks were burning up the track. Together with their coaches, they'd worked hard to devise a campaign that maximized their considerable strengths while mitigating their just-as-considerable weaknesses. And now they were reaping the results.

But it was more than results—it was attitude. They took wild risks. Fought hard. Reached for impossibly high goals. Yet they didn't take themselves too seriously.

And when they won, they played to their new fans like media veterans. Smiles. Waves. Hurrahs. The spectators ate it up. And why not? The winners looked great: fresh-faced kids with confident, fear-nothing gazes. Athletes who actually looked like they were having fun out there. Who truly appreciated what it meant to stand on the top step of a world-class podium.

And it brought to mind an earlier

era. When Canadians Devon Kershaw and Alex Harvey teamed up last March in Norway to win their country's first Nordic World Championship gold medal in the sprint relay, the two skiers unleashed a flood of questions. Canadians? Winning gold? In Nordic skiing? You gotta be kidding!

It was *déjà vu* in full flower, a sporting flashback. It was like watching the rebirth of those crazy (like a fox) Canadian downhillers—only this time, the guys were racing on skinny skis. And instead of Kitzbühel's vaunted Hahnenkamm, they were winning at Oslo's Holmenkollen Park. But their rise to prominence featured hauntingly similar scripts.

Like their Nordic counterparts nearly four decades later, Canada's most famous downhill foursome jumped to prominence at a relatively young age. By the time they were in their early twenties, Ken Read, Dave Murray, Dave Irwin and Steve Podborski were the darlings of the White Circus. In Europe, where most of the downhill racing occurred, they were bona fide stars, with their own fan clubs, groupies and hangers-on.

From 1975 to 1984, the Crazy Canucks posted more than 100 top-ten World Cup finishes. Three of the four skiers scored multiple wins (with Murray just missing by a hair). Their legacy includes a dozen World Cup victories, countless podiums, and Podborski's 1980 Olympic bronze medal and 1982 overall downhill World Cup title. Still, it was in Austria's Kitzbühel—site of the revered Streif course—where the boys' legend was burnished. Racing in front of 50,000 screaming Austrians on what is widely considered the pre-eminent speed course in the world, Ken Read started the 1980s with a victory there that led to a four-year winning streak by Canadian downhillers.

A stroll through Kitzbühel's storied streets back then was like a visit to a Canadian ski museum. Every store window, it seemed, had a Canucks' face staring out from it. Every ski shop advertised autograph



PHOTO BY A. HILL / COURTESY CANADIAN SKI MUSEUM

Above: Dave Irwin flies down the course at the 1980 Winter Games in Lake Placid, New York. He was a member of the Canadian ski team from 1971 to 1982 and competed in 35 World Cup downhills during his career. Right: Irwin celebrates a World Cup win in December 1976 at Schladming, Austria.



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sessions with the northern stars. No other skiing nation had ever featured such an engaging—and successful—alpine foursome.

Which brought them attention wherever they went. On the hill or in the bars, in the betting booths or the media tent, everyone wanted to be part of their scene. And the funny thing was, the Canadians were considered way more approachable than their rivals. Way more relaxed about everything. They just seemed to take victory in stride.

But like all "overnight" success tales, this one has a backstory. And that's where it really gets interesting. For like their Nordic counterparts this past season, Read and his cohorts had to overcome near-impossible barriers to get to where they got. Had to virtually re-invent their sport and the way they trained. Had to work harder and smarter than their

continental rivals. Had to ruthlessly watch their spending, find ever-more imaginative ways to stretch their inadequate budgets.

But diligent preparation can only get you so far. To win—and to win consistently—they also had to believe in themselves.

So what was their secret? How did they manage to hoist themselves from the indiscriminate ranks of the also-rans to the pantheon of skiing's near-immortals?

MAKING THE GRADE

"We were all very good technical skiers," Steve Podborski explained in a recent interview with *Skiing Heritage*. "And that's often overlooked in the Crazy Canuck legend. We were all damn good athletes. And we all came from very well-established skiing families."

He smiles knowingly. "But we



Dave Murray raced for the Canadian men's alpine team from 1971 to 1982. He competed in two Winter Olympics (the 1976 Games in Innsbruck, Austria and the 1980 Games in Lake Placid, New York). His best season was 1975–1976, when he captured four top-ten World Cup finishes. He died of skin cancer in 1990.

were also extremely competitive—and smart, too. We realized that none of us could win individually if each acted on his own.” He lets a beat float by. “If we wanted to be the best, we had to subordinate our individual needs and work together. That was a lot easier said than done. There were some strong egos on that team. But we made it happen.”

The deck was stacked against the young Canucks. Culture, advertising, travel—the entire World Cup system was structured to favor Europeans. The big players back then had names like Klammer and Russi and Mueller and Colombin. American skiers, particularly the men and particularly in the speed events, barely registered. (The Mahre brothers hadn't hit their stride and the country's downhill program hadn't been updated in years.) “Ours was a Cinderella story,” says Podborski. “It never should have happened. But it did, because we were able to build on each others' success.”

A Vancouver-based executive



with Telus (a national phone provider with a long history of sport involvement), the 53-year-old looks a decade younger than the age given on his driver's license. Fit and tanned—and still wearing the little-kid grin that so endeared him to fans when he was beating the likes of Switzerland's dour Peter Mueller—the former champ is still deeply involved in his sport and sits on a variety of ski-racing related boards. And his competitiveness is never very far below the surface.

“Nobody made it easy for us,” he says. “At least not in the begin-

ning. I remember going to one race in the early 1970s and the hotel had beds that sagged at least a foot! But that was nothing. Our showers had only one temperature: cold.” A long pause. “And forget about ski-prep rooms. They didn't exist in our hotel. But our hosts thought that was okay for Canadians. As far as they were concerned, we were ski trash... which only made us hungrier to prove them wrong.”

It also encouraged the northerners to re-evaluate their ski-training methods. “The decision to focus our efforts entirely on downhill was a very conscious one,” explains Podborski. “We knew that there were hundreds of good slalom and giant slalom skiers in Europe. Working your way into the first slalom seed was hell. It took forever.” Not so in downhill. “It was a much simpler thing to reach the first group there. Not so many racers. And a better track.” He laughs. “Remember, there was virtually no hill prep in those days. You got to ski whatever was in front of you.”

So the Canadians decided to concentrate on speed. “At first, I struggled to get my head around it,” admits Podborski. “As a junior, I was a slalom specialist. I still wanted to race the technical events!”

But the argument made sense. Led by coach Scott Henderson, the four worked out a new training and race strategy. “We were doing a lot of things differently,” says Podborski. “We used the system wherever we could. You know, like racing in South American to boost our FIS points in order make the first seed in World Cup. Nobody had really done that as a team before.” But their unorthodox methods worked.

The baby of the foursome, Podborski remembers well the first time a Canadian man climbed onto the top step of a World Cup podium. The year was 1975. The site was Val D'Isere in France. “It was the Franz Klammer era,” he explains. “People forget just how good the guy was back then. I believe he was the best downhiller the world has ever seen. Work ethic, will to win, athleticism, touch: the guy had it all.”



Steve Podborski racing in a World Cup event in the early 1980s. He was the first Canadian male to win an Olympic medal in downhill (bronze in 1980 at Lake Placid) and also the first to win an overall World Cup downhill title (1981–1982).

Indeed, Klammer was considered virtually unbeatable in those years. So when Canuck Ken Read managed to draw the number one start for the first World Cup race of the season, few gave him much chance against the far more experienced Austrian. Sure, the Canadians were improving. Sure, they took risks that others didn't. But they were still a long way from challenging the best. Weren't they?

Not on this day. While Klammer crashed 100 yards from the finish, the 20-year-old Read rode his number one bib straight to victory. His three Canuck companions were close behind (4th, 10th and 13th). But few fans took the result seriously. “After the race,” recalls Podborski, “our ski tech came over and told us: ‘If Klammer hadn't fallen, he would have won the race. Ken was just lucky.’” A long pause. “That made us so-o-o mad.”

He admits that the insult still stings. “We knew it wasn't about luck,” he insists. “We knew Ken had won that race fair and square. We even compared video runs to the spot where Franz fell. And even there, Ken was ahead.” Still, the Canadians badly wanted to show the world they could win when Klammer stood up.

They didn't have long to wait.

Two weeks later, in Schladming, Austria, yet another Canadian found his way to the top step of the podium. And this time there was no doubt. “Dave Irwin beat Klammer by nearly two seconds in Schladming,” says Steve, clearly enjoying the memories. “That didn't leave much room for talk of ‘luck’.”

But not everyone was happy with the outcome. “When we tried to leave the finish area in our team car,” he continues, “the Austrian fans started rocking our car and yelling at us. They were angry at our Austrian ski reps (Fischer) for giving us fast skis. And they were serious!”

THEY'RE CRAZY, THOSE CANUCKS

And thus was born a legend. “They're crazy, those Canucks,” World Cup czar Serge Lange was reputed to have said later that winter, meaning ‘They really don't know what they're doing, poor boys.’ But the subtly derogatory moniker soon became a badge of honor for the skiers from the Great White North.

As for respect, it still took a while, even in Canada. “After those first two victories,” remembers Steve, “we went back home for the national championships. We had a meeting with the CBC [Canada's national broadcaster] and asked them



Podborski (left) and his teammate Ken Read (right) pose for a Canadian Ski Association photo.

what it would take to get ski racing on TV. ‘Five victories,’ they said.” He shrugs. “And that's exactly what it took. It wasn't until 1980 that downhill made it to the small screen here in Canada.”

It was also in 1980 that Canadians started paying attention to Pod. At the Lake Placid Games that winter, he snatched victory from defeat with a surprise bronze medal performance after his teammate (and gold medal favorite) Read lost a ski in an early turn.

“It's funny how much that Olympic medal shaped my career,” says Podborski. “Remember, until that moment there'd been virtually no televised ski coverage in Canada. People weren't watching us on TV every weekend. They didn't know how well we were doing.”

After Lake Placid, Steve Podborski became a household name in his country. By the time he'd assured the overall downhill title in 1982 with a powerful second-place surge in Canada's lone World Cup speed event of the season (on a course that favored his rivals), Pod and the Crazy Canucks had become a mar-



Ken Read during a 1979 World Cup event in Lake Placid, New York. A member of the national team from 1973 to 1983, he had five World Cup victories, including a 1975 first-place finish in Val d'Isère, France—the first World Cup downhill win for a Canadian male.

keting phenomenon. More importantly, they had made skiing—and ski racing—cool for a whole new generation of kids.

“Winning comes down to attitude,” concludes Podborski. “You have to be able to look around at the guys in the starting area. And you have to be able to ask yourself: ‘Have I done everything—everything!—I can to beat all these guys?’ If your answer is ‘no,’ then you’re only hoping. And in World Cup ski racing, ‘hoping’ is not ‘winning.’” Clearly, you’d get no argument from Pod’s Nordic contemporaries today.

THE CRAZY CANUCK LEGACY

There was a time when the Canadian ski-racing story was all about women. Nancy Greene, Anne Hegveit, Lucille Wheeler—these were the giant killers from the Great White North who could be counted on to beat the Europeans at the ski game. And the Canadian men? Not so much...

But that all changed with the advent of the Crazy Canucks. By the mid 1980s, it seemed everyone in the country had gone downhill-mad.

An exaggeration? Maybe. But consider: “A dozen years after I’d retired,” Podborski recounts, “my wife

and children were catching a taxi at the Vancouver airport. And the Sikh driver noticed her last name. ‘Are you related to Steve Podborski?’ he asked her. When she told him she was, he proudly announced that he’d named his first-born son ‘Steve’ in honor of me and my skiing victories.” A long pause. “That story really blew me away.”

And as for their lasting influence on the domestic ski-racing scene, there’s no question that the Crazy Canuck era heralded a revolution in the way that the sport was promoted, managed, coached—and even raced—in Canada.

“They set the bar in just about every category,” says former national team member and World Cup winner Rob Boyd. “We were the new kids on the block. They were the masters. They’d opened the funding floodgates. Shown us how to be real professionals.” He pauses. Shrugs. “But they’d also left us with a lot of responsibility,” he says. And then he laughs. “I mean, if you were a Canadian downhiller, you couldn’t be a wimp...”

Boyd still remembers watching Ken Read race in Innsbruck in the 1976 Olympics. “The timing for me was perfect,” he says. “I was ten years old and really into speed. The fact that these guys were kicking butt in Europe inspired me to dream, too. I internalized the thought that winning World Cups wasn’t just reserved for Europeans.”

A direct beneficiary of the increased funding that came from the Canucks’ success, Boyd also had to contend with the heightened expectations. “Ironically,” he says, “I really didn’t appreciate their impact until I’d retired. But yes, during the years I raced on the World Cup (1985 to 1995), people did expect us to win.” He laughs. “And when we didn’t, our fans were disappointed. No matter that we still didn’t have the kind of budget that our European rivals had. We were Canadian downhillers. We were supposed to make it to the top step of the podium.”

A member of the national coaching staff between 2005 and 2010—and currently alpine director of the

Catching Up With the Canucks

Numerous Canadian fans celebrated the Kershaw-Harvey victory at the Nordic World Championships last winter (see pages 18–19). But none were more excited than Ken Read. The current director of winter sports for Own The Podium, the government-backed funding arm for Canada’s Olympic sports development program, Read shied away from taking direct credit for the duo’s groundbreaking performance in Norway. But, as he says, “those of us who have been part of OTP from the beginning feel we did help author part of the story...”

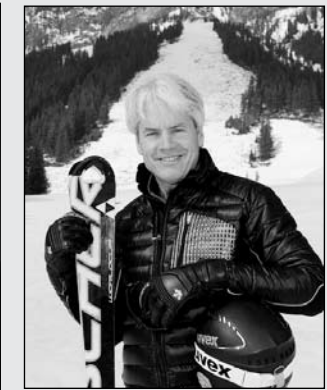
That statement alone illustrates just how much the Crazy Canucks’ legacy is bigger than mere memories. This is what Read has to say: “My initial reaction, which is influenced by how this keeps resurfacing, is not to look at what we did then, but focus on what are we doing now,” he says. “Rather than historic reflection, one should look at how our success gave us the ability to help the next generation to be even more successful.”

Read goes on to list the Canucks’ post-racing accomplishments and responsibilities. “Pod is a vice president with the Canadian Snowsport Association, Chair of the FIS committee for skiers with disabilities, a member of the board for the Canadian Olympic Committee and has been highly influential promoting sports and sports participation through his position at Telus. Dave Murray had a similar creative and impactful influence in developing and promoting masters’ ski racing until his untimely death in 1990. As for Dave Irwin [despite his near-fatal ski accident a few years back], he’s able to contribute through the Dash for Cash and the Dave Irwin Foundation For Brain Injury.

When all is said and done, it is still Read who leads the charge. A former member of the IOC Athletes Commission and the FIS Alpine Committee Executive Board, Read is a tireless



Vancouver executive Steve Podborski is a FIS committee chair.



Ken Read is director of winter sports for Own the Podium.

fundraiser and ski-racing promoter. But he’s also a surprisingly agile administrator. In June 2002, he took over as president of Alpine Canada (the governing body for all things ski-racing related) and took a big broom to the organization. The result? From one World Cup podium in 2002, Alpine Canada scored 15 in the 2006-2007 season.

Alas, that couldn’t be sustained. Read stepped down as CEO of Alpine Canada in June 2008 to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest when it became possible that his son, Erik, might be selected for the Canadian ski team (Erik was named to the team in 2009). Soon after the Olympic Games in 2010, however, he was tagged by longtime mentor Roger Jackson to take over the helm of Own the Podium. It is probably one of the most powerful jobs in Canadian sports today. And Read couldn’t be happier. “This is the kind of work I love,” he says. “This is where I can have a true and real impact on the future.”

Whistler Mountain Ski Team—Boyd has a broader perspective on this issue than most. Even today, he says, the shadow of the Crazy Canucks looms large. “Their legacy is multi-tiered,” he says. “Ken Read, for example, served as president of Alpine Canada during my coaching stint with the national team. He’s had a direct hand in the development of the sport for years.”

Bruce Goldsmid grew up racing in Vancouver with Crazy Canuck Dave Murray in the 1960s and early ’70s. The CEO of British Columbia Alpine for the last 35 years, he’s had a bird’s-eye view of the evolution of ski racing in Canada. “The Crazy Canucks set the standard,” he says. “They had a huge passion to win and that passion had a message that every ski racer in the country heard: ‘We’re Canadians. We go fast. And

we’re not afraid to take risks.’” He stops for a moment. “Slowly but surely, that became part of ski racing culture in this country. That attitude stuck, for better or worse...”

“By virtue of this message,” continues Goldsmid, “the young guys all gravitated towards speed. They might be good technical skiers, have all the physical assets for slalom and GS. But they were Canadians. And Canadians raced downhill...”

This “damn-the-torpedoes” approach exacted a high physical price from athletes as well. Going fast, pushing boundaries and trying to cut corners all have consequences. The Canucks themselves didn’t walk away untouched—all four suffered terrible injuries during their careers—but it was the ‘Near Canucks’ who suffered more. Dozens of young Canadian racers had their

skiing careers cut short because of inadequate training or preparation. Some had their lives significantly altered by career-ending crashes.

As for a coherent development strategy, the team is still struggling to define itself in a post ‘Crazy Canuck’ way. Ask anybody in the country for the name of a world-class downhiller today, and chances are they’ll hark back to one of the four originals.

Sad but true, admits Podborski. Still, if winning World Cup downhills were easy, he says with a glint of mischief in his eyes, everyone would be doing it. ❄️

Note: Though many great Canadian skiers were associated with the Crazy Canuck era, such as Jungle Jim Hunter and Todd Brooker, only the four mentioned in this story were official members of that group.