

Native American Youth Showcased at Vancouver Olympics

A deer admires U.S. Olympian Naomi Lang (Karuk) ice dancing a soulful “Salute to Nature” at Vancouver’s Grouse Mountain Ice Skating Pond. As an eagle morphs into an eagle dancer, Derek Howell (Pawnee) soars on a snowboard. An endangered arctic bear changes into a bear dancer on skis as Joe Tompkins (Tlingit) wins the 2010 World Cup Paralympic Downhill. A wolf bounds down pristine powder, changing into eight-year-old wolf dancer Delaney Tyon (Lakota), racing to victory in the U.S. Nastar Championships. And a buffalo near Whistler ambles through a cloud, fading into buffalo dancer and speed skier Ross Anderson (Cheyenne), racing down the slopes at 154 mph to become the “Fastest Skier in North American History.”

That is a taste of the surprising talent featured in *Mountain Spirit Celebration*, a short video produced by the Native American Olympic Team Foundation (NAOTF). The film aired worldwide at the closing of the 2010 Vancouver Paralympics, which showcased the most amazing Native American and First Nations (FN) skiers, snowboarders and skaters. While only two have had opportunities to make U.S. or Canadian Olympic Teams in this Millennium, their goal is to inspire us to feel our “oneness with nature” and to further create a love affair with the animal and plant kingdoms.

“Animals feed, cloth and teach us. Watching their movements inspired the first North Americans to help invent the roots of 11 Olympic sports, including skiing and ice hockey,” said Ronnie Lester, a Lilwat Elder. He and his wife, Normaline, graciously hosted and guided Suzy “Chapstick” Chaffee and 16-year-old Mariah Cooper (Ojibwe-Oneida), who was mobbed by fans at Whistler’s Lost Valley XC Center, when filming in buckskins. In the video, Mariah morphs into an XC Native American Olympic Hopeful, and then into four-time Canadian Olympic XC stars Shirley and Sharon Firth (Gwich’in FN). Together they won 79 National Championships after a priest in the Northwest Territories taught them to ski.



Joe Tompkins (Alaskan Tlingit), three-time Olympian and 2010 World Cup Paralympic Downhill champion. Photo courtesy Jessica Tidswell, U.S. Ski Team



Delaney Tyon (Lakota) racing through the finish line at the Nastar Championships. Photo courtesy of Nastar.com

The First Nations won an Olympic Gold for their contributions to the “Best Winter Olympic Opening Ceremonies ever.” What few know is that following the “doom and gloom” start of the regular Games, Lester, once a rock star, led a ceremony along with Shirley Toman and Squamish Elders, “for the safety and joy of the Olympians and visitors,” which resulted in “Bluebird Days.” South of the border, Native American tribal elders, in appreciation of ski resorts sharing the joy of skiing and boarding with their kids, have been helping end droughts, starting with asking the Eddy Box Family (Southern Ute) to perform a snowdance in 1963. Ski Utah also asked Utah tribal elders for a snowdance, which resulted in their glorious 2002 Games.

Because this awareness strengthens the future of snowsports, these Native champs hope this video inspires even more visionary North American resorts and supporters to share priceless opportunities with underserved Natives, like Delaney from Pine Ridge, SD, the poorest reservation in America. In 1996, after Telluride Ski Company was saved by Rollingbears (Lakota), they pioneered the program with Ute youth as a way “to start a new beginning.” With local General Schwarzkopf behind it, Native programs snowballed across America. Snowsports Industries of America donates gear, which has been helping end diabetes and creating Olympic dreams, and Olympic skier Billy Kidd (Abenaki), a NAOTF board member, has been helping Native talent like Delaney and Mariah get coaching.

American Indians are dependent on donations and sponsors, whereas the Canadian Government supports FN sports, including brilliantly hiring the Firth sisters to bring XC and Olympic dreams to Arctic youth. With added inspiration from the NAOTF, 13 Canadian ski resorts now have FN snowboard programs, thanks to director Aaron Marchant (Squamish).

“Since heroic moms like mine usually create Olympians, the

moms of Mariah, Delaney and Naomi called me to take their youth to Whistler to expose them to the Olympic experience,” said Suzy Chaffee. Since mountains are often far from reservations, Naomi’s dream now is to spread the joys of skating across Indian Country with her Native Blades Foundation. While filming NBC’s sizzling “Latin on Ice” with her Russian ice dance partner, Peter Tchernyshev, at the Seminole Hard Rock Café, Native youngsters even in Florida loved her clinic.

“Our FN reserve school had a skating rink next door and I stayed out of trouble by learning cool hockey skills,” said Duane Kercher, a Cree skier and host. Native skiers and boarders tell similar tales. Now Kercher, a Whistler real estate mogul and hockey referee, wants to help Lil’wat kids get hockey opportunities since government support just scratches the surface. This handful of Native Olympians and Olympic Hopefuls valiantly hope this video enhances people’s love affair with nature and steps up their guardianship.

Coincidentally, the 2009 World Ski Congress at Mammoth (Calif.) honoured Nils Larson for his documentary, “Skiing in the Shadows of Genghis Kahn,” which reveals that the Chinese-Mongolians actually invented skiing 8-10,000 years ago, to chase down big game for survival in the mountains of Asia’s Four Corners. Since they share DNA markers,

linguistics and ceremonies with the Apache and Navajo/Dine of North America, who came over the Bering Strait, Native Americans, along with fellow freestyle ski pioneer Wayne Wong, were celebrated at the 2009 U.S. Ski Shows for being “Pioneers of Skiing.”

The video and participants were sponsored by Ute Mountain Casino, Lac Courte Oreilles Casino, Oglala Sioux’s Prairie Wind Casino, the Karuk Tribe, the Squamish-Lil’wat Cultural Center at Whistler, as well as NuStevia by NuNaturals.com and Staples Vancouver. The video is set to John Tesh’s and Robert Mirabal’s (Taos Pueblo snowboarder) “Valley of Dreams,” as well as the double flutes of Gene Tagaban, Tlingit Native American snowboard team member. Additionally, a number of the film’s shots were made possible by Ross Anderson, Director of Marketing at Taos Mountain Casino.

The Native American Olympic Team Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit partnership of Olympians and U.S. tribal elders and leaders, whose mission is to “create joyful unity through sports and education to help heal Mother Earth for all our children, including through the Olympics.” ♣

For more information about the Native American Olympic Team Foundation, visit www.naotf.org and www.snow-riders.org.

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