Steep, slick runs test non-Olympian’s prowess

By Susan Wood

WHISTLER, British Columbia – Standing at the gate in a crouched position with my skis together, I heard the beeping of the warning clock signaling the start of my Olympic run.

The sound was in my head, no medals were at stake, but the run is the same one the Olympians will conquer this month.



Susan Wood dreams of gold. Photos/Kathryn Reed

I was taken aback with the adrenaline rush as I launched off one of the many Whistler rollers on the Dave Murray Downhill run, the men’s official 3.1km course for the 2010 Winter Games starting in 10 days. The men’s and women’s downhill runs, along with the super G and giant slalom courses on the lower ends, will be at Whistler Blackcomb Ski Resort’s Creekside area.

The run was named after local skier Dave Murray, who as a member of the “Crazy Canucks” was ranked third in the world in downhill racing in 1979. The following year, he placed 10th in the Olympic Games at Lake Placid, N.Y., before retiring two

years later to run his home resort’s ski school.

His 22-year-old daughter, Julia, will follow in her father’s footsteps by competing in the women’s skiercross during this year’s Winter Games. She was almost 2 years old when he died of cancer in 1990.

“He’s our resident hero,” Whistler mountain host Evelyn Coggins told her tour group at the start of the downhill run.

The run was named in his honor two decades ago. A sign is near the top explaining who Murray was and a bit about how fast the Olympians are likely to fly down the route.

As Whistler realizes its 50-year dream to host the Winter Olympics, Murray’s spirit lives on to grace the nerves of steel in the likes of Lake Tahoe’s downhiller Marco Sullivan and U.S. veteran racer Bode Miller, among others.

As my Atomics scratched and scraped across the hard-packed slope on my recent visit to Whistler to preview the venues, I heard another sound. It was the voice of Tahoe orthopedic surgeon Terry Orr, who is headed north to support the athletes of the U.S. Ski Team for the third time.

“It’s a windy course, and fast – not one you can just look at from top to bottom,” he warned, with a wink and a nod of good luck to Sullivan.

I discovered firsthand it’s steep – like much of Whistler’s “great-to-be-alive-if-you-love-to-ski”runs. The drops are certainly memorable. If I had a mirror attached to my ski helmet, my look of intensity may have scared me, but I was told later I was giddy as a child.

I thrive on the steeps, so I felt right at home in the terrain known for the longest elevation drop in North America – more than 5,000 feet. Only Zermatt’s 8-mile run in Switzerland beats it.

The various pitches of the Dave Murray Downhill have names like the Weasel, Afterburner – which is more like a ledge, Lower Insanity, the recently widened Coaches Corner, the short Boyd's Bump, Murray's Jump aka Hot Air, and the infamous Toilet Bowl – where an abrupt rolling hill goes into a steep pitch in which racers will need to make a 90-degree left turn off what looks like a 45-degree drop.

Coggins' group stood staring at the run at the base of the turn in awe.

"How can they do that?"I heard a few times.

I can't wait to watch the Olympians pull it off while sitting in the comfort of my living room.

Coggins, a Halifax, Nova Scotia, native who labels what some call icy surfaces as "hard pack," said the Toilet Bowl got its name because that's where all the "crud collects because, yes, it rolls down hill."

Whistler Blackcomb kept the Dave Murray Downhill and the women's downhill – located on Franz's run – open to the public until Jan. 25. Lower Dave Murray, even when groomed, remains a black run.

The BC trip was complete after whizzing down the two courses as if my last name were Mancuso and Sullivan of Squaw or Vonn of Vail. Well, it wasn't exactly at Olympic speed.

"People have been so excited. There is a buzz. Now you can sit and watch at home and say 'I skied that'," Coggins said on the tour. "It's amazing the speeds they go."

Think of a finely-tuned Porsche, and now throttle it.

Much of Coggins' focus of her tour involved doing different variations of the men's downhill run, which can be accessed via the Garbanzo Express chairlift or the Whistler Village Gondola to the mid-station. Skiers and boarders from the

Creekside area may take the Creekside Gondola to the Big Red Express to Upper Whiskey Jack, a run named after a colorful and resourceful scavenger bird that hangs out at the lodges.

The women’s downhill starts along the fall line of the Franz’s chairlift. It’s named after Franz Wilhelmsen, one of the founders of Garibaldi Lift Company and Whistler Mountain. Fast and furious is how best to describe skiing the women’s downhill, which as Coggins put it, comes with its own set of technical challenges.

Lindsey Vonn’s no-guts, no-glory style and Julia Mancuso’s grace-under-pressure demeanor may thrive in this setting. The run is steep and the terrain fast. The best set of edges may prompt some skiers to slide.

With an average of 2 million skier visits under its belt, Whistler’s record-setting 30-plus feet of snow this season bodes well for the host of this world event designed for spectator and participant. At least 90 percent of the dual-mountain terrain will be open for riders throughout the Olympics.

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