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B2ten could have the formula for Olympic medals

Program helps top-level Canadian athletes with equipment and support

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RANDY STARKMAN
SPORTS REPORTER

If Helen Upperton's bobsled had wheels, they'd have been spinning.

The promising young pilot was stuck in a rut: fourth at the 2006 Turin Olympics; five fourth-place finishes on the World Cup circuit the following season. She knew her driving was improving, even if the results didn't show it. She also knew she needed a new sled, so she committed herself to doing whatever it took to buy one.

It turned out to be a lot easier than she expected.

That summer she hooked up with an outfit called B2ten, a group of well-heeled Canadian businessmen who have pooled about \$2 million together to provide Olympians with the extras that could produce a medal at the 2010 Vancouver Games – no strings attached.

It's not a blank cheque. In fact, the athletes don't get any cash. The program provides services and goods to try to complement what already exists and generally recruits athletes who are on the cusp of an international breakthrough but might be short of resources.

"They said, 'You tell us what you need and we'll make sure you have it,'" said world champion speed skater Denny Morrison, a B2ten member.

Among the other 16 winter athletes in the program are Olympic moguls champion Jennifer Heil, Olympic skeleton silver medallist Jeff Pain, Team Canada goaltender Kim St. Pierre, long-track speed skater Christine Nesbitt and short-track speed skater Francois-Louis Tremblay.

Upperton has been one of the major beneficiaries because of the equipment needs in her sport. B2ten has invested well over \$100,000 in buying her a sled from the Monaco federation, several sets of steel runners, plus support to help her adapt to the new sled.



HIGHPERFORMANCESPORT.COM PHOTO

Canadian athletes involved in the B2ten program look for the winning recipe with chef Matthew Schnarch, far right, during retreat last year at Mont Tremblant, Que. From left, cross-country skier Alex Harvey, hockey goalie Kim St. Pierre, bobsledder Helen Upperton, skeleton racer Jeff Pain and moguls skier Stephanie St. Pierre.

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But as Upperton explains, the help hasn't stopped there. The Calgary native said B2ten has provided mentoring, advice on team management and dealing with sports politics, access to top athletic trainers like Scott Livingston of the Montreal Canadiens, osteopaths, sports psychologists and a lot more.

"There's so many different options," she said. "If you need them, you can access them. ... They don't have a cookie-cutter formula for everybody."

The donors appear to be in it truly to help the athletes, getting nothing tangible in return but a tax receipt.

"There's no quid pro quo, it's not a marketing type thing, our name isn't on helmets or anything like that," said Barry Heck, a Calgary merchant banker who heads up the western investors.

But Heck said they share a feeling that Canada should be doing a lot better on the international stage but is hurt by abysmal resources. He said they like the fact the organization is private, there's no politics and not a nickel is spent on administration because all the time is donated.

"The athletes are not making money doing it; quite the opposite," he said. "The passion and dedication that they show, I tell you if that doesn't inspire you as a Canadian or a parent or an individual, I don't know what else can. It really chokes you up. It does."

That's evident in the pride in Heck's voice as he talks about being at Canada Olympic Park with his family when Upperton won her first World Cup with her new sled.

"To have that personal connection with her and knowing you really did help, it really is powerful," he said. "It's just a very rewarding thing to see it in their eyes and just to be able to free them up to be able to really concentrate on their sport."

B2ten happened by accident.

It all started with Jenn Heil. Her coach and boyfriend Dominick Gauthier enlisted the help of Montreal businessman J.D. Miller in building a team of experts and financial backers around Heil that helped boost her to Olympic gold at the 2006 Turin Games. Heil lived with the Miller family for the four years leading to the Olympics.

Miller and Gauthier figured they had a good thing going, so why stop. The more money Miller raised through his business connections across the country, the more athletes they added.

"I don't think any of us knew what to expect, knew what it would grow into," said Heil. "I think what's cool about B2ten is it's really unique in the Canadian landscape of sport. What's so different is I think it's the only organization that targets the athletes on the individual approach."

Gauthier serves as the program director, although his primary job is as a freestyle moguls coach for Heil, Stephanie St. Pierre and Alexandre Bilodeau, all of whom are part of B2ten, while Miller, a long-time amateur sports enthusiast who does advisory work on complex financial situations for public companies, handles the business side. Andrew Parsons, a neighbour of Miller's and former business heavyweight, does the accounting.

"Andrew Parsons was the CFO (chief financial officer) for the Bronfman family for many years and here he is helping us for free and working a lot actually," said Gauthier. "It's people who believe in sport, who believe in making the sport system a better one in Canada."

Claire Angus Caplan of Toronto and her husband, businessman Mark Caplan, were among those recruited by Miller. They became so enamoured with the grit and character of the women's bobsledders that they're now involved in filming a documentary of their Olympic journey.

Angus Caplan believes it's the moral support as much as the financial that lifts the athletes.

"Financial is one thing, but I think it's also seeing that people actually give a crap. It really helps inspire them that someone does care and it's also not just about one event."

Miller notes the needs are different for every athlete.

"You can't supply the same resources to every athlete. We have athletes in this program that cost six figures a year and others that cost low five. It's not important what the number is. What's important is they get what they need in order to be the best they can be."

For Morrison, that's meant helping him furnish an apartment near the Richmond Olympic Oval, where he's now training for the Games, buying him a mountain bike for training, and extra pairs of carbon fibre speed skating boots at \$1,300 a pop so he can experiment to find the best approach.

For World Cup freestyle aerials champion Steve Omischl, it's been the opportunity to work with the sports psychologist he's always wanted and have her accompany him to some events.

Rochette, having her best season so far, got help paying for her choreographer, a music specialist and a ballet teacher.

Speed skater Christine Nesbitt, also off to a flying start this year, was losing a lot of time and gaining a lot of stress trying to get around Calgary on her bike and the bus. So someone in the B2ten group living there provided her with a car, covered the insurance and gave her a gas

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allowance. They're also helping her with an apartment near the Richmond Olympic Oval.

"If there's a genuine need for it and they agree that there's a need for it, they'll approve it," said Omischl. "But if you're saying, 'I want to go to Maui on vacation because I'm stressed out and it'll help me out,' you can forget about that."

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