

Honour, Spirit And Remembrance At Track And Field

by Natalie Salat

“The Legion has done so much for me. I wanted to give something back.” Heptathlete Adrienne Bethune returned to her fourth Royal Canadian Legion National Track and Field Championships, and didn't have a moment's hesitation when it came to volunteering for one of the feature events—a visit to the veterans at the George Derby Long-Term Care Centre in Burnaby, B.C. **“I thought it would be such a good chance to meet all the people that made this possible. It's a real big honour for me.”**



PHOTO: NATALIE SALAT

The 17-year-old from Mississauga, Ont., whose grandfather served in World War II, also decided to bring a team jacket to present to one of the veterans from Ontario. Her gratitude to the Legion is huge. "I've spent four years (at the championships) and it's been the most amazing time of my life, the best competition for people in my age group."

This year, the Legion held its 30th national youth championships literally on a mountain, in Burnaby. Around 400 athletes, coaches and chaperones from across Canada gathered at Simon Fraser University Aug. 10-17, where they got down to the business of competition and training at 1,200 feet above sea level.

Bethune battled not only her peers but the flu that was making the rounds among the athletes. Still, she took gold in the girls' 17-and-under heptathlon, edging out British Columbia's Alana Pattison by three points. The heptathlon has seven events: the 80-metre hurdles, high jump, shot put, 200-metre sprint, long jump, the javelin and 800-metre race. "I didn't have a very good two days," acknowledged the Ontarian, "But I was very lucky and very happy to win."

Bethune intends to follow in the tracks of her father, Tim, who competed in the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. While training for 2012, she will also be busy studying. Having skipped a grade, she has just started her university career at McMaster in Hamilton. Chosen Ontario



Command's team captain, Bethune exemplifies everything the Legion hopes to foster with this event: leadership, motivation, and a strong sense of remembrance.

That fit well with this year's theme of "Honour, Spirit and Remembrance," a theme Dominion First Vice Wilf Edmond would return to each time he addressed the athletes. During Friday morning's orientation in the university theatre, Edmond looked out at the teens in their colourful uniforms and recognized more

than a few faces. "The fact that you're returning is an indication that this event is a worthwhile venture. The Royal Canadian Legion is proud and pleased to provide you with such an opportunity," he declared. "We do it in the name of those whose youth was cut short by the wars that this country had to fight to ensure our own and other people's freedom."

Blair DuGray, Athletics Canada's head clinician, told the athletes to "look at the people sitting to the right and left of you, and at yourself, because a number of you are going to represent our country down the road." DuGray and his coaches would be putting the teenagers through their paces during clinics later in the week, with some good old-fashioned drills and the high-tech help of Dartfish video technology. For now, though, he called for a huge round of applause for the Legion.

Two-time Olympian Brit Townsend seconded the motion. "Without the Legion, we would not have the opportunity of bringing together the best youth in the country." Once a Simon Fraser student, Townsend is now the university's head coach for track and field and cross-country running. Besides helping to run the Legion event, she gave the athletes a dose of inspiration, holding their attention as she recalled one of her proudest moments—breaking the long-standing Canadian record in the 1,500-metre finals of her first world championships. It came after a tense photo finish in the qualifiers,



PHOTOS: NATALIE SALAT

Previous page: At the opening ceremonies, the athletes raise their poppies. This page, clockwise from top: Legion officials, including Dominion President Jack Frost and First Vice Wilf Edmond, look on as local athletes deliver the Torch of Friendship; New Brunswick's Genevieve Lalonde leaves her competitors in the dust; Adrienne Bethune serves snacks to veterans of the George Derby Long-Term Care Centre.

in which she hurred herself between two bodies and “hoped for the best.” More than 30 anxious minutes later, the result was decided. “I would remember the image of my coach Gerry Swan striding across the field in tears, yelling to me that I had made it.”

Townsend told the 13- to 17-year olds that now is the time to take their track and field practice up a notch—because a world of opportunities awaits them: university scholarships, travel, and the chance to meet like-minded people. “It takes years to develop top athletes. This is an important time in your career.”

She also encouraged the athletes to check out what Canadian universities have to offer before looking southward. The message would prove necessary. Besides remembrance, the other theme that emerged during the week was that of Canada’s best and brightest giving serious thought to studying in the U.S., where athletics scholarships are plentiful.

In fact, just that week, Nova Scotian track star Jenna Martin, a record-setter in the 400-metre race at the 2003 Legion championships, was headed down to the University of Kentucky on scholarship.

Bethune, however, is staying in her home and native land. While at McMaster, the heptathlete will get a boost from the Ontario government’s Quest for Gold program, which provides funding to young athletes who live and train in the province.



The games officially began on Friday night. At the opening ceremony on the SFU field, the athletes held poppies in their hands as they observed the two-minute silence, listened as Vancouver’s Ronnie Way sang *Maples Of The Valley* in tribute to veterans, and heard from dignitaries such as Edmond, British Columbia/Yukon Command President Gerry Vowles, Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan and Dominion President Jack Frost. Local Arrangements Committee Chair Sharel Fraser told the teens, “Your

dreams are our hopes for the future.”

Before firing the official’s gun, Frost declared, “May each of you realize your personal best at these games. And always remember, you’re here to have fun—to meet new friends from across this country and learn about their community.”

The torch of friendship then made its way to the stage courtesy of a group of little girls from a local running club. They would be back early the next morning to lend a hand at the track.

More than 18 months of planning went into the championships. Fraser mobilized dozens of volunteers from local Legions and ladies auxiliaries for the many tasks required—transportation, ceremonial duties, arranging a day out to Grouse Mountain for the kids, arranging entertainment at the branches for the adults. Lesley Maudsley, Second Vice for B.C./Yukon Command’s L.A., had a crack team of ladies to help her raise funds, keep the hungry volunteers fed and prepare for the massive closing banquet.

The organizers couldn’t have planned the weather, but it was as if they had. Aside from a chilly, misty morning on Saturday, the championships were blessed with glorious sunshine. It was a busy weekend, too, with more than 70 events for the midget (15-and-under) and juvenile (17-and-under) levels. The athletes ran, threw, jumped, vaulted and drank lots of water.

Under the guidance of senior track and



This page, clockwise from top: B.C. thrower Trey Henderson is aiming for the Olympics; Stacey Irvine of Smithers, B.C., vaults toward a Legion record; Quebec track athletes Hubert Chevrette-Bélisle (gold) and Gabriel El Hanbli (silver) celebrate their win in the 400-metre hurdles with bronze medallist Michael Nishiyama as Legionnaires look on.

field official LeRoy Washburn, things ran as smooth as silk. An internationally certified official from New Brunswick, Washburn has been a stalwart at the Legion championships for more than 50 years. This year, he and his wife Loretta celebrated their 50th anniversary at the event as well.

The games proved to be a battle of east and west. Despite some tough competition from the home command, Ontario emerged as the top gold medal earner, with 31 to its credit. B.C./Yukon Command earned 24 golds, but tied its rival when it came to breaking Legion meet records. They each had three standard-setting performances, while New Brunswick had one.

The latter came courtesy of petite Genevieve Lalonde, 14. Besides bringing home New Brunswick's lone gold medals for the midget girls' 1,500-metre and 3,000-metre races, she broke the record in the 3,000. It's not even a race she enjoys. "I much prefer the 1,500." After running three kilometres flat out in just under nine minutes and 57 seconds, Lalonde yelled out encouragement to her fellow runners. She may have been tired—most people would have been catatonic—but Lalonde didn't forget to acknowledge the Legion. "I really wanted to get further this year—to work as hard as the Legion members." The graceful teen gave up dancing so she could focus on running, but she still has time for a



couple of other pursuits. "I'm trying out for the Canada Games in squash, and I play provincial soccer."

Trey Henderson, the tower of power from Richmond, B.C., won both the juvenile boys' discus and 5-kilogram hammer throw events, demolishing his 2005 hammer throw record with a 67.45-metre toss. "It was a good weekend," he grinned. "I can't really argue with double gold." Henderson has big plans, and getting to the Olympics is just one of them. With a year of high

school left, he already has three offers of sports scholarships in the States—for football. "For me, it's school and it's sports. I have time to hang out with friends, but I have to be kind of business first at this age, because...it's my future."

Meanwhile, his teammate Stacey Irvine of Smithers, B.C., attracted the attention of onlookers with her pole vaulting. First, she surpassed 3.50 metres, the Legion record for girls 17-and-under. Next, she achieved a vault of 3.70 metres, to put the record out of reach for a time. Finally, she decided to try and beat her personal best of 3.80 metres, which she got at the 2005 World Youth Championships in Morocco. There were gasps as one of her attempts resulted in a painful-looking landing. Unruffled, Irvine gave it another go. It didn't work out, but she took it in her stride. After all, this would be her second gold, to add to the one she won for 110-metre hurdles. As for the harsh landing, Irvine laughed, "You have so much adrenaline, it doesn't really hurt." Obviously blessed with a high threshold for pain, the vaulter aims to go into physiotherapy or sports science.

As for other injuries around the track, there were the usual sprains and strains, but fortunately nothing serious. Tara Langlois, a paramedic helping out in the first aid tent, observed how gung-ho the injured were to get back out and compete. "Wrap 'em up and send 'em



This page, clockwise from top: Ontario sprinter Mike Robertson (in black) gives double-gold winner Matt Leeder a bear hug after Leeder won the 3,000-metre race; Ontario medallists Maddie (back, centre) and Jessica Buttinger are joined by their family, minus sister Natalie; Jared Baird of Nova Scotia lets the javelin fly.

Next page: the Grouse Mountain Skyride.

out. That's the way it goes."

That was the case for Hubert Chevette-Bélisle of Repentigny, Que., who had been to see Langlois for leg pains. Inspired by the daunting presence of his training partner and teammate, Gabriel El Hanbli, Chevette-Bélisle got over his pain and nabbed the gold in the juvenile 400-metre hurdles, beating El Hanbli by split seconds. Both went on to win multiple medals in the hurdle and relay events.

In fact, there were quite a few multiple winners—and they all brought special moments to the games. Loudia Laarman of Lethbridge, Alta., lit up the podium as she accepted her gold medals for the juvenile girls' 100-metre and 200-metre sprints. Nova Scotian Mason Foote, who won gold in the 100-metre juvenile boys' race and bronze in the 200, took time out to give relay pointers to his teammates. Mike Robertson, of Williamstown, Ont., knelt down and crossed himself before winning the juvenile boys' 400-metre dash, and afterwards embraced his worthy rival, Joel Senick of Saskatoon. Robertson later took gold in the 200.

Maddie Buttinger, a hometown favourite at the 2003 Legion championships in Kitchener, Ont., returned to the Legion for the third time—and picked up even more medals. This time, she was joined by her younger sister, Jessica, who turned out to be a regular on the podium



as well, in the under-15 events. Their B.C. experience was a family affair. The whole Buttinger clan, including parents Pam and Gord, as well as siblings Natalie, Danielle, Emily, Rachel and Scott, trekked out West to cheer them on.

Maddie, 16, has taken great strides since her first Legion nationals, making it to the World Youth Championships in Morocco last summer. Being there forced her to miss the Legion nationals in Edmonton, but Buttinger said it was an

invaluable experience. "It really opens your eyes because you think that in Canada you're doing really well, but then at the world level, it's crazy to see these people." Although a medal eluded her, she nonetheless came away inspired.

This year, Buttinger came away with four Legion medals: two golds in the 400-metre individual and relay races, a silver in the 400-metre hurdles and a bronze in high jump. After each event was over, Buttinger's steely game face gave way to smiles as her little sisters affectionately patted her head.

Gord Buttinger said it wasn't until his eldest daughter had been to the Legion nationals that she really began enjoying track. Since then, she's been training solidly and setting a good example for her younger siblings, all of whom are also involved in athletics. "It's not about being the best. It's about doing your best. Maddie's been a good leader in the family."

This is what the Legion wants to see, said Edmond. "We do this because we believe there's a need to develop our youth so they may become the effective leaders this country has always had."

The championships drew to a close with the passing of the torch of friendship from Fraser to New Brunswick Command's LAC delegate, Helen Ladouceur. The games will begin again in Oromocto in August 2007. ■

