



On the Night Train, Bound for Glory

An Eagle Scout Overcomes the Odds to Win Olympic Gold.

By Mark Ray

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At the Whistler Sliding Centre on Feb. 27, Steven Holcomb slid into the history books as the driver of USA 1, America's first four-man bobsled team to win Olympic gold since 1948. The team's performance in the Night Train sled—which included setting a course record on one run—capped a remarkable season that also saw them win America's first world championship since 1959 and its first World Cup title since 1992.

What made the season even more remarkable is how Holcomb got there.

The Kindest Cut

A Park City, Utah, native, Holcomb came to bobsledding from alpine skiing. He made the U.S. bobsled team in 1998, securing a spot as a pusher, one of the two athletes who get a sled started on its 90-mile-an-hour downhill run. Holcomb dreamed of competing in his hometown during the 2002 Olympics, but driver Brian Shimer didn't give him the chance. "He cut me from the team," Holcomb said. "I was only 21 at the time, and he picked up a guy who was 29 or 30 years old, had been in the Olympics before, and was just a lot more seasoned veteran than I was. It's understandable what he did, but of course at the time, I was pretty upset."

Holcomb quickly turned his disappointment into determination. He decided to become a driver—a position where he couldn't be cut—and to serve as a forerunner at the 2002 Games. (Forerunners test a bobsled track before competitive runs began.)

There was just one problem. To become a certified driver, Holcomb needed to complete 100 runs without a crash—and the Olympics were barely a month away. So for

the next month, Holcomb virtually lived at the track, completing run after run using whatever warm bodies he could find, including his father, friends, track workers, and even the team's physical therapist. "She was like a 110-pound woman who basically just sat in the sled," he said. "I would push off the sled and jump in and ride down. It was literally whoever I could find and whatever I could do to get those runs in. Sure enough, I finally made it."

But Holcomb's biggest challenge lay ahead.

Flying Blind

About the time Holcomb decided to become a driver, doctors diagnosed him with keratoconus, a degenerative eye condition that makes the corneas bulge and seriously affects a person's vision. Contact lenses helped for a while, but his vision eventually got too bad for contacts to correct. Eventually, he couldn't distinguish the leaves on a tree or make out the largest letter on an eye chart. He was slowly but surely going blind.

Amazingly, as Holcomb's vision got worse, his driving got better. Rather than rely on his eyes, he began to rely on his instincts, feeling a course's curves instead of looking at them. *Sports Illustrated* called him "America's sled knight," recalling the scene from *Star Wars* where Luke Skywalker learns to use his lightsaber while wearing an opaque visor.

"Bobsledding's not reaction," Holcomb explained. "A lot of people think you're reacting to what's going on, but it's actually more anticipation and correction. Once you see something, you're past it and it's over and you're going to have some issues."

By 2007, however, Holcomb's keratoconus got so bad that he decided to quit bobsledding. But Shimer, who was now the bobsled team's head coach, wouldn't let him walk away. Instead, Shimer did some research and learned of a radical surgery that involved implanting polymer lenses behind the irises.

Holcomb underwent the surgery and immediately regained his 20/20 vision. Once again, he could see the leaves on trees, the letters on an eye chart—and everything flying past him on bobsled runs. "It took me a few weeks to figure out that there was too much information," Holcomb said. "My visor started getting dirty, and eventually it got to the point that it was really dirty, and I was like, 'This is really helping me. I'm not able to see as much as I did before, so I can actually concentrate on my sense of feel.'"

Ever since, Holcomb has intentionally scratched up his visor to limit visual cues. Like Luke Skywalker before him, he learned that your eyes really can deceive you.

Fun and (Olympic) Games

Holcomb learned something else as well—the value of leadership and teamwork. "I was a pusher for four years, so I know what it's like," he said. "The drivers can make it very stressful."

Determined not to make that mistake, Holcomb has worked hard to make sure his team has fun. Most famously, he breaks into a shuffling dance called the Holcy Dance whenever teammate Steve Mesler starts singing. (You can find video evidence on YouTube, but don't look for Holcomb on "Dancing with the Stars." He's a much better bobsledder than he is a dancer.)

And then there's the 50/50. After a day of training at Whistler last year, Holcomb and his team dubbed the track's 13th curve the 50/50 because only half the sleds were making it through that section unscathed. The next morning, as the team inspected the track before another day of training, Holcomb adorned the curve with a sign made out of a brown paper bag left over from a Chinese takeout order. The sign didn't survive the day, but the name did, as did the team's carefree attitude.

"There's a point where you need to relax and calm down," Holcomb said. "This isn't the end of the world. This is meant to be fun. It isn't supposed to be a stressful, miserable time."

Racing into the Future

The fun continued just a few days after the Olympics, when Holcomb and USA 1 appeared on "The Late Show with David Letterman" to share a list of the "Top Ten Things You Don't Want To Hear from a Guy In Your Bobsled." (Among the highlights: "We're lost," "Stop breathing down my neck," and "Somebody else steer; I'm Twittering.") They've also appeared at countless meet-and-greets and sponsor events across the country.

"We were able to put bobsledding back on the map. It's really going to help us get back in the spotlight and get our sport rolling again," Holcomb said.

Before long, however, the spotlight will move on, and Holcomb's team will return to Lake Placid to prepare for the 2010-2011 season. Will USA 1 compete for gold again at the 2014 Winter Olympics? "For sure," Holcomb said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Lessons Learned: Steve Holcomb and Scouting (sidebar)

Scouting didn't introduce Steve Holcomb to winter sports, but it certainly gave him plenty of time in the outdoors. "Growing up here, we did a lot of outdoor stuff," he recalled. "Every weekend we were out with Scouts doing something."

Beyond the outings, Holcomb credits Scouting with broadening his horizons. "Earning all the merit badges really opens your eyes to more than just one thing in life. There's so much to learn, so much you have to do," he said.

The advancement program also whetted his appetite for achievement. "You always have to do your best; you really do have to perform," he said. "It's not like you just show up and automatically get your merit badges. You actually have to learn and use your skills."