

Wotherspoon aided by Gregg's generosity

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Jamie Gregg graciously stepped aside. Jeremy Wotherspoon resolutely stepped up.

And so continues the process of putting Canada's top 500-metre speed-skating medal threat on the start line for his signature event at the Richmond Oval two months from now.

"It almost brought tears to my eyes, to be honest, when Jamie told me what he wanted to do," revealed Canadian long-track coach Michael Crowe. "It's almost unheard of. To give up your spot to someone else. But that's him. Very unselfish."

"I think it shows the nature of our team, that we want to share success."

Understand, Jeremy Wotherspoon skating in the 'B' pool would be comparable to Olivier joining the local rep company for a one-night performance of Richard III, or Rafa swatting balls on Court 4 during the club Friday-night ladder league.

Slumming it, in a sense.

Not that there were a dizzying array of options.

"I didn't really have a choice," he reminded you, smiling slightly. "This is what I need to do. That's the only way I can look at it. I'm committed and determined to get back to where I was. Besides, you can learn something from every race. I knew that to get to 'A' I had to skate in 'B.' And this was my first big race in a while. A bigger atmosphere. So I was really up for it."

"Maybe more excited, actually, than I usually am. And it went OK."

The Jeremy Wotherspoon saga remains one of the most compelling in the lead-up to the 2010 Games. For the most decorated World Cup long-track champion in history to be included in the 500 Olympic field at Richmond, he needs qualification points. Launching a comeback after missing the 2008-09 World Cup season due to a left arm splintered in six places, Wotherspoon failed to qualify for World Cup 500s after a shocking seventh-place finish at the Canadian fall trials, complicating matters no end.



Leaving us all to wonder: Will he regain the level that made him the planet's most dominating 500 skater in time, or at all?

Can he possibly, at long last, fulfill an Olympic destiny that appeared to have passed him by?

To gather the aforementioned qualification points, the 1998 silver medalist at 500 metres in Nagano is required to skate where he's used to, in the late pairs, against the swells of the sport. To do that, given the trials failure, he needed to first make a statement in the lower echelon.

Saturday morning, Jamie Gregg afforded him the opportunity. And Wotherspoon, who is from Humboldt and lives now in Red Deer, did not look back.

"I owe him," said Wotherspoon, gratefully. "But I hope it's a mutual, give-and-take thing. I hope I've helped him in some way, too."

More than he knows.

"Oh, I owe him a lot more than he owes me," countered Gregg. "It's made me a better skater, training on a daily basis with a guy like Jer. We have a close team atmosphere in the male sprint group."

Gregg said his dad, former Edmonton Oilers defenceman Randy Gregg, was more proud of his decision to give Wotherspoon his shot Saturday than watching the breakthrough 500 Friday that put the 24-year-old Gregg on a World Cup podium for the first time.

"Medals are nice," he explained, "but they wind up on a mantle or in a sock drawer somewhere. This is more important. We (Crowe and Gregg) talked about it after my skate (Friday) and made the decision to let Jer race. And it turned out to be a good decision. He raced well."

With the Oval still mostly empty, Wotherspoon clocked in at 34.65 seconds to finish 22/100ths of a second ahead of Russian Dmitry Lobokov and lay claim to the 'B' section of the men's 500 on Day 2 of the Essent ISU World Cup speed skating stop. The victory, significantly, allows the former 500 world record holder to bump himself up to the elite 'A' level for next weekend's schedule at Salt Lake City.

"A really nice gesture," said Wotherspoon, in the field for the 1,000 Sunday. "It just shows that while skating is in a lot of ways an individual sport, we have a real team atmosphere here, too."

"It's huge for me. I don't know where I'd be right now (if not for Gregg). It was someone being selfless."

Asked if he might feel even more keyed-up next week, graduated back to the 'A' list against the big guns, Wotherspoon shrugged: "I don't know, to be honest. Probably a lot like today, if I do get to skate."

Oh, he'll get to skate. That's the game plan. Why Jamie Gregg sacrificed his spot a day after the most enthralling race of his young skating career in the first place.

It doesn't take a Rhodes Scholar to realize Canada is a stronger entity with Wotherspoon leading its 500-metre February charge.

"Jeremy," said Crowe optimistically, "has the ability to meet challenges. I think today was a good solid race for him. Another step to where we want to be."

Come February, given the circuitous route he's been forced to accept this winter and that resume drowning in disappointment over three previous Olympic appearances, if Jeremy Wotherspoon, at 33, does indeed qualify for the 500, he'll do so in an unfamiliar role -- as an underdog. Perhaps even an afterthought.

A blessing in disguise?

"I think it depends on the reasons," Wotherspoon replied noncommittally. "Every situation is different and people have different reasons."

"Right now I just feel pretty good about the way the last month has gone for me and I just want to keep building on that."