



Living A Dream

By Rob Vanstone
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REGINA — Lucas Makowsky has come full circle — or full oval, as it were.

The Regina-born speedskater vividly remembers watching television in his family's living room on July 2, 2003, when the International Olympic Committee awarded the 2010 Winter Olympic Games to Vancouver. Now he is poised to compete in those very same Games.

"The actual Olympic dream really started to form when I was watching the announcement," he recalls. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool to compete at the Olympics in your home country?' It wasn't really a light-bulb moment, but that's when I thought to myself, 'That could be a reality.' "

And sure enough ...

The 22-year-old Makowsky has qualified for the men's 1,500-metre and 5,000m races, along with the team pursuit. His first race is Saturday's 5,000m at the Richmond Olympic Oval.

"This is what I wanted to do," says Makowsky, who lives in Calgary, where he trains with the national team at the Olympic Oval. "Once I put my mind to something, I don't quit until I feel satisfied with it. To know that I'm capable of putting my mind to something like that and achieving what I originally wanted to, it's a pretty cool feeling."

It is a feeling that he can share with his father (Mike) and 24-year-old brother (Mykola), both of whom are intensely involved in speedskating.

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Mykola is a member of Speed Skating Canada's national developmental team. He attended the Olympic trials, as did Lucas, but did not qualify in his two events — the 1,000m or 1,500m. Although Mykola is competing on the Canada Cup circuit, he will find time to head to Richmond for part of the Olympics to watch his brother skate.

Their father has achieved International Skating Union Level 5 certification as a speedskating starter — the highest level that can be attained — and is positioned to work at future world championship events. He is one of only 24 starters on the ISU's world championship list.

Mike's immediate priority is to work as a technical official at the Richmond oval during the Olympics. Exceptions will be made when Lucas skates.

"Then I'll be in the stands," Mike says with a chuckle.

It was with the encouragement of Mike and his wife, Shirley, that the brothers took up speedskating. They joined the Regina Speed Skating Club when Lucas was six.

"A colleague of my dad's at work suggested trying speedskating for both my brother and I," recalls Lucas, a second cousin of Saskatchewan Roughriders offensive lineman Gene Makowsky. "My parents suggested it to both of us at the dinner table one night, and we naively agreed. We were always very active kids. We hadn't been in an ice sport up until that point, so we said we'd give it a try. It kind of took off from there and we fell in love with it."

The family received a jolt four years later, when Shirley Makowsky was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. She died June 28, 1998, at age 42.

"An aspect that we've taken as a family is to celebrate life," says Mike, 54, who was married to Shirley for 20 years. "While we were going through the grieving process, we had a discussion. The boys came up with an important observation — that we have to live the future and not worry about the past."

The bond between father and sons was strengthened during the summer of 1998, when they went mountain biking in Alberta.

"We went to the highest peaks in the backwoods," a proud father says, "and we found ourselves."

Shirley Makowsky's influence is still felt. Like her husband, she encouraged her children to be active and pursue varied interests — a philosophy the boys have embraced.

"We were attracted to speedskating because of family values and emotional building," Mike says. "You pick up really great life skills. In speedskating, there's no swearing and it's important to be respectful. There is the whole social component. That whole environment of respect comes into play."

That is one aspect in which the brothers have excelled. They were trilingual — speaking English, Ukrainian and French — by the time they entered grade school.

Growing up, Lucas also took piano lessons with the University of Regina's Conservatory of Performing Arts, played soccer and participated in Ukrainian dancing. By the time he enrolled at Campbell Collegiate in 2001, speedskating was becoming a greater priority and the emphasis on other activities decreased.

In Grade 10, when Makowsky began taking classes in Campbell's International Baccalaureate Program, speedskating and maintaining an academic average exceeding 90 per cent devoured most of his time.

Mykola is of a similar ilk — to the extent that he, like Lucas, is studying chemical engineering and economics at the University of Calgary. The brothers live together in a condo near the U of C.

"Mykola has been a mentor for Lucas, being a friend and somebody who is there for support," says Mike, who is the director of trade and logistics for the provincial Department of Highways and Infrastructure.

The Makowsky brothers worked on the family farm near Canora for three summers after their mother's death. Mike's brothers, Merlin and Andrian, operate the farm — on which their parents, Leonard and Doris, still reside. Along with handling farm chores, Lucas and Mykola trained together during those summers.

"Myk was such a huge influence on how I turned out," Lucas says. "There were times when I wanted to go back to sleep. I'd say, 'Not today. Yesterday was a tough day.' He was always the one who was up and gung-ho to get going."

That approach put both brothers on track for a move to Calgary, where the national team is based. Lucas arrived in Calgary in the fall of 2005, having graduated from Campbell, and continued to progress in long-track speedskating.

He was ranked first in Canada in the 5,000m and 10,000m, and second in the 1,500m, during the 2008-09 season. That was a prelude to the breakthrough season of 2009-10. He reached the World Cup podium for the first time Nov. 21 in Hamar, Norway, placing second in the 1,500m.

Makowsky continued to excel at the Canadian Olympic long-track team selections in Calgary, qualifying in the 5,000m on Dec. 28 and the 1,500m on New Year's Day. In the process, he also secured a spot on Canada's entry in team pursuit — a race in which up to four skaters from each team try to complete 15 laps in the fastest time.

Having fast-tracked his way to Vancouver, Makowsky has already considered the intriguing possibilities for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

"The best part will be when the three of us can be actively participating," he says. "Looking forward four years, Sochi is definitely a possibility for that — with the way that I'm skating and where I'm at in my career, and with the way that Myk has been progressing in his skating career. If he keeps improving the way that he has, that'll definitely be a possibility. With my dad now being a Level 5 starter and getting the experience, I know it's also his goal to be starting in Sochi.

"That would be pretty well the ultimate progression of events — quite the cap to the journey."