

Makowsky proves he belongs

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Lucas Makowsky is no different than any of his family, friends or acquaintances. He grew up green. Steeped in the lore. Born to the colours.

Unable to land tickets for Sunday's 97th Grey Cup at McMahon Stadium, the 23-year-old Regina speed skater, a chemical engineering and economics student at the University of Calgary, invited a group of friends to watch the Saskatchewan Roughriders tangle with the Montreal Alouettes.

"We were starting to get a little nervous in the second half, when Montreal began pouring it on," he admitted Tuesday, during athlete interviews for this weekend's ISU Essent World Cup speed skating stop at the Olympic Oval. "And then, at the end . . . I mean, how crushing is that?"

Makowsky's ties to the Riders extend beyond geography and loyalty. There's blood involved, too. Gene Makowsky, the 36-year-old, 15-year linchpin of Saskatchewan's offensive line, happens to be a second cousin.

Makowsky understands it'll take the province as a whole a while to grieve.

The past couple of weeks have been a mixed bag emotionally for the extended Makowsky clan, the Riders' loss is offset to some degree by Lucas' breakthrough skate on the long-track speed skating World Cup stage a week earlier.

In Hamar, Norway, Lucas reached his first WC podium, surging to a personal-best time of 1:45.27 in the 1,500 metres to finish 1.34 seconds behind Shani Davis of the U.S. and ahead of Norwegian phenom Havard Bokko.

Makowsky, who considers the 5,000 his best distance, had never placed higher than eighth at a World Cup event.

"It's not as if Lucas came out of nowhere," pointed out his coach, Marcel Lacroix. "He's been getting better and better, making progress, for two years now. He's been close for a while. In the two weeks in Europe before Norway, he was skating very well. In one race, the ice cracked underneath him. If not for that, he would've put up a great time. "



"So, from the inside, watching, you could see this coming. It's not a 'Whoa! Where did this guy come from?!' skate. Not at all.

"The result doesn't mean he'll podium every week. What it does mean is that he knows now he can compete with the best in the world, can beat them, isn't out of place being up there on the podium beside them. And that's a big step."

As there was on Sunday at McMahon for the 6-foot-3, 300-pound offensive tackle, the skating Makowsky can count on plenty of family support in the Oval stands this weekend, the last opportunity for Canadian skaters to compete internationally at home before the Vancouver 2010 Games in slightly over two months.

"I wouldn't call it an epiphany moment," said Makowsky of his 1,500 in Norway. "What it does is re-affirm that what you're doing -- the training, the regime, the off-ice -- is working.

"The thing is, I didn't have that 'Wow! I just skated lights out!' feeling after that race. I felt good, but not that much different than the week before, to be quite honest. I was just that little bit better here and there and it made all the difference.

"To be on the podium with Shani and Havard, skaters I've looked up to for years, was a great feeling. I've been working on the mental preparation part of the sport and it's paying off."

In addition to the 5,000 and 1,500, where he joins Fort St. John, B.C.'s Denny Morrison to give Canada an 1-2 punch, Makowsky has become a vital component of the team pursuit group.

"Lucas' development, along with that of Mathieu Giroux, now gives us a three-piston engine," said pursuit coach Lacroix.

The ISU World Cup opens Friday at the Oval with the women's 3,000 and, significantly for the extended Makowsky family, men's 1,500 finals scheduled.

"This week, I'm just focused on continuing my development, my progress," said Makowsky. "The idea is to bring the technical, mental and emotional elements together at the same time. If people have different expectations of me now, after Norway, well, I can't control that. All I can control is preparing to race.

"What we're all aiming at, obviously, is being at our peak for the Olympic Games. That's our Grey Cup.