

'It was for you guys'

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Byline: Rob Vanstone

Lucas Makowsky's old school became a gold school on Friday.

Makowsky, a 2001 graduate of Ecole Wilfrid Walker School, shared his 2010 Winter Olympics long-track speedskating gold medal with staff and students during an afternoon assembly.

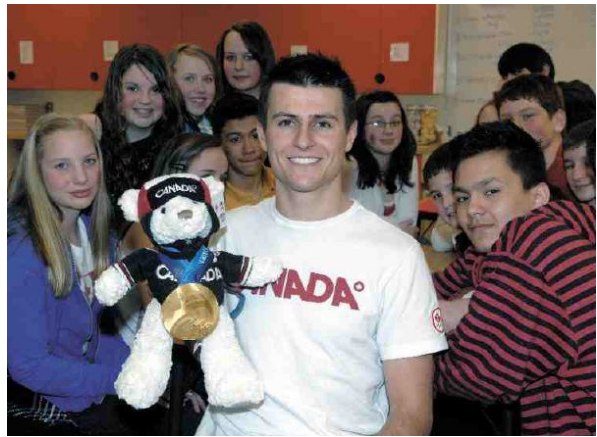


Photo by Rov Antel

"When I got in, I walked by the hallway that had my grad picture in there," Makowsky said. "Walking by the fountains that are down around knee height, it's a good reminder of where I came from."

Makowsky also carried around a reminder of his greatest sporting accomplishment -- the medal he won for Canada in men's team pursuit on Feb. 27. He teamed with Denny Morrison of Fort St. John, B.C., and Mathieu Giroux of Pointe-aux-Trembles, Que., to edge the United States in the gold-medal race.

"As much as this was for me," Makowsky said during the assembly, "it was for you guys, too."

Wilfrid Walker, a French immersion elementary school, partnered with Makowsky as part of the Canadian Olympic Foundation's Adopt An Athlete program. The school generated \$1,825 to help offset Makowsky's training costs by staging two fundraisers -- a coin drive and a candy-cane sale.

In addition, Makowsky kept in regular touch with students in Joanna Sanders Bobiash's Grade 7 class. He emailed students and also spoke with them in French via Skype. The class honoured him with its Lucas Wall, which includes posters, photos and flags.

Until Thursday, Makowsky had not met the students personally. They welcomed him at Regina International Airport when he returned home for the first time since winning the medal. Later that day, he was named male athlete-of-the-year at the Saskatchewan Sport Awards.

Makowsky made the acquaintance of a larger group on Friday. All the students flocked to the Wilfrid Walker gymnasium, where they waved miniature Canadian flags, listened to a Grade 7 band, watched a video presentation and applauded the school's most-decorated alumnus.

"It's really exciting because he was talking to us so much on the Internet," Grade 7 student Lexy King said. "To actually meet him in real life, it's like a dream come true. In person, he's all bubbly and really nice. He's just awesome. I'm really happy we got him for an Olympic athlete."

The excitement is mutual, judging by Makowsky's beaming countenance during his visit to Wilfrid Walker. After addressing the students, he showed them photos he had taken during the Olympics.

The star of the slide show was L'Ourson Makowsky, a stuffed teddy bear that was also part of the Olympic journey

"One of my good friends in Calgary gave that to me as a gift for making the Olympics," said Makowsky, 22, who moved to Calgary to train after graduating from Campbell Collegiate in 2005. "It's just something cute to have.

"I just thought of the idea right before the Olympics to take the bear around and take a couple of pictures and make a slide show for the kids. They've given me so much, so I figured I would take a few pictures with the bear and bring them back for my visit."

Makowsky also signed 300 autograph cards, to be distributed to the students on Friday, prior to returning to Wilfrid Walker.

"I would have never expected it to go this way, because we started off with the partnership as something small," Makowsky marvelled.

"It just really took off from there. They bought into the program. I went into the program with the attitude that I was going to try and inspire some kids with what I do. For it to get to this point, it's absolutely incredible."

The same description applies to Makowsky's meteoric rise to gold.

Until the 2009-10 season, Makowsky had not reached the podium on the World Cup circuit. That changed on Nov. 21 in Hamar, Norway, when he finished second in the men's 1,500m.

Barely a month later, he qualified for the Olympics in the 1,500m and 5,000m while securing a spot in team pursuit. He was 13th in the 5,000m and 19th in the 1,500m at Richmond Olympic Oval before celebrating the gold medal on the penultimate day of the Olympics.

"Did this last year really happen?" Makowsky said with a chuckle.

"I look at this and all I can think about is so many athletes, so many people, dream of something this big. To have been able to accomplish that, I consider myself really privileged to have gone through that journey and to continue on. If I can come back and inspire a school like this or kids back in Saskatchewan, that would be the best part of the journey."

He will continue to inspire youngsters through the Makowsky Award, which will be presented annually to select Wilfrid Walker students, beginning in June. One student in each grade, from 3 to 8, will be chosen by a faculty panel, which is to review criteria such as selflessness, compassion, attainment of personal bests and adherence to shared values.

The Grade 8 recipient will also be awarded \$100.

"That's something that I hope the kids will be able to look forward to and aspire to as they get older," said Makowsky, a second cousin of Saskatchewan Roughriders offensive lineman Gene Makowsky. "Starting at Grade 3, it's a great age to start looking forward to something that big."

Makowsky looks forward to continuing his arrangement with Wilfrid Walker, and to some relaxation after a rewarding, but hectic, past few months.

"It has been a bit of a rollercoaster," he reflected. "Going into this year, I didn't really know what to expect. I hadn't been on the podium in the World Cups and I hadn't even qualified for an Olympics before. To be on that podium and then to make the Olympics, and then to skate my first Olympics, and then to come back with a gold medal is an incredible year."