

## Olympian Christina Smith Speaks at Northwest Schools

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Christina Smith, driver of the Canadian Women's 2 man bobsleigh at the Salt Lake City Olympics delivered a powerful and inspiring message to students in several schools in the Northwest School Division last week.

Recently appointed as a commentator by CTV, Ms. Smith spoke passionately about her experiences as a high level athlete in the formative years of women's bobsleigh.

She described herself as "a girl in a choir who was given an opportunity, one of those chances of a lifetime."

Offered a crack at the sport by a friend who wanted to give away a season's bobsleighbing that she'd just won as a door-prize, Christina's first impression was that a large component of the sport (which involves sleds pulling 4-5G's as they travel at speeds in excess of 135 km/h down twisting icy courses) is an athlete's ability to work through fear. After her first ride had confirmed all of her worst suspicions she was surprised to find that two distinct aspects of the sport kept drawing her back for more. The first was the challenge: faced with the obvious risks she saw an opportunity to confront and face down her fears. "It was an opportunity for me to do something that not many women were brave enough to do. The men had been doing it for seventy or eighty years and I asked why not women?"

The second was the growing understanding that by participating in a sport that was seeking international and Olympic recognition she had the chance to be a pioneer and a leader helping to develop the sport of women's bobsleigh: "It wasn't just an opportunity to do something good, or to team up with other women that have the drive and the courage to do a sport that's really extreme- it was also an opportunity to grow a huge family of women around the world and to begin a movement- a movement that would bring us into the Olympic games. It took us ten years of proving ourselves- using the same weight of sleds as the men- to show the world that we were strong enough."

Those ten years involved working and saving all summer long so that they could cover the costs of the winter's competition as they travelled throughout Europe. Ten years of borrowed sleds and equipment, ten years of staying in the homes of other bobsleighters to cut costs and ten years of mentoring, encouraging and sharing equipment with other women athletes in the same situation. (It wasn't until women's bobsleigh was confirmed as an Olympic sport that sufficient sponsorship money became available for the Canadian team to ship their sleds overseas for competitions).

After ten years only two of the athletes that had helped pioneer the program qualified for the Salt Lake City Olympics: a Swiss girl and Christina, who finished in 9<sup>th</sup> place.

She movingly described the thrill of her bronze medal performance at a World Cup event, and then spoke about how she and her teammate made the commitment to always, regardless of the day's result, come away from the track smiling. They came to this decision because they realized what being a role model truly involved: that a positive reaction to whatever happened, whether good or bad, broadcast into homes all over the globe had the potential to affect people's lives far beyond the parameters of the sport.

Smith spoke about the advantages that come when you live a life with intense highs and lows as opposed to a life spent in a comfortable middle zone. "It's about pushing your limits whenever you can so that on the days when you really need to, you can and will be ready."

Students also heard about the advantages of fitness in body, mind and heart, and about the transformational process that high-level athletes undergo when they leave the sport and move on to another life and new endeavours. And since you weren't there here are...

### **9 Bobsleigh Facts For You:**

1. The shoes worn by bobsleighters each have over 400 extremely sharp needles to improve the ability of the athlete to run and push on ice...
2. which the driver of the bobsleigh sincerely hopes will not end up in his or her back when the brakeman leaps into the sled at full speed.
3. A 4-5 g force will easily: force all the air out of your lungs, all of the fluids out of your body and give you a degree of flexibility that you never dreamed you could obtain.
4. The Whistler bobsleigh track is the longest and fastest in the world. It's 1450 m long, a drop of 148m, has a maximum grade of 20% and 16 corners. Teams expect to reach speeds in excess of 140 km per hour.
5. The maximum weight of the sleds, including crew, is: 630 kg (1,388.9 lbs) (4 man), 390 kg (859.8 lbs) (men's 2 man), or 340 kg (749.6 lbs) (women's 2 woman). Metal weights may be added to reach these limits, as greater weight makes for a faster run.
6. The runners of the sleds are rounded (not edged) and polished (by hand, by the athletes) to a mirror finish.
7. The sleds have no seatbelts and no restraints. The athletes are held in place only by their determination to stay in place – which is enhanced by their knowledge of the physics involved in a wreck.
8. Slide down the track fast enough (after being thrown from a sled), and you will discover that the friction generated by the ICE will melt your suit.
9. The races begin with a standing start and team members push the sleds up to 50 m before boarding. You can lose a race in the initial push, but rarely win one – what wins a race is the weight, aerodynamics, and runners of the sled, the bobsleigh mechanics, the condition of the ice, and the skill of the driver.









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