

## **2010: Games Building**

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It's mid-February on a damp Vancouver day exactly three years from the start of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. An aquabus is chugging around False Creek offering journalists an all-encompassing view of the future Olympic Village. What we see are mounds of dirt, excavated rock, cranes, the odd dumpster. It's a mess, really. A construction site. At face value it's dirty and not all that interesting. Dig a little, though — as heavy equipment is doing now — and it's mesmerizing.

This mucky site, once an eyesore of abandoned sawmills and sooty industry, is perched at the edge of the city's inner waterfront in southeast Vancouver. By February 2010 it will somehow transform into a tidy, eco-friendly athletes' village. A 13-storey, 1,100-unit residence stepping up gradually from the False Creek will serve as home base for 2,500 athletes and their coaches. It will include restaurants, stores, a community centre... a school, even. A boardwalk will snake along the seawall. Kayaks will be tied up, Vancouver style, to the docks out front. These buildings were budgeted at a ghastly \$1 billion to build, but no one yet can predict the final tally. When the Games close, a developer moves in to re-configure the community. A portion of the units will be saved for low-cost housing; the rest will be peddled on the open market with price tags beyond \$1 million.

### **Cypress Mountain**

The sun starts to shine prettily on Cypress Mountain as our band of journalists journey toward it, creeping through the snarl of traffic that is Vancouver's downtown. By November '09 a \$2-billion light rail service — a semi-Olympic project — called Canada Line should reduce traffic between Vancouver and Richmond. But for now we can only inch through the gridlock, over a bridge, up the Coast Mountains and into Cypress' parking lot.

At this point the lot is beyond full of buses and boisterous students on class ski trips — the usual fare for mid-week Cypress. One day soon it will be filled with another kind of racket: that of snowboard and freestyle fans, TV crews, loud music, loud coaches and cocky athletes. This is the site of 2010's snowboard events, including halfpipe and SBX. Freestyle's aerial, mogul and skier-X events will be here, too. While the world will be looking up the hill at the action, though, the athletes will look down — and what a site it is. Cypress has a view of coastal Vancouver that, when the light is right, can leave you oddly calm and breathless.

Cypress' skiers are seriously benefiting from the Games. The mountain is expanding to the tune of \$25 million. The list includes nine new runs on east-facing Black Mountain, a new highspeed quad, and a sorely needed new baselodge. The Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) is taking care of seating and feature construction for the Games and has committed to installing what will have to be a mightier-than-Mother-Nature snowmaking system. This is coastal British Columbia, after all. If 2010 is a low-snow year, VANOC will simply have to take matters in hand and force winter on winter. So far, VANOC's \$15.8-million budget for Cypress, snowmaking included, has only been short by an only mildly controversial \$850,000.

### **Callaghan Valley**

The following day we journalists have forsaken our aquabuses and high school buses for a swifter, meatier mode of travel. Snowmobiles have been gassed up at the base of the Games' Nordic venue in Callaghan Valley, sandwiched silently but grandly between Squamish and Whistler. This immense, pristine site — unpopulated and remote — will host the biathlon and cross-country events of the Winter Games, and will soon own a heart-in-mouth, 120-metre ski jump.

The price tag on this Whistler Nordic Centre is somewhere around \$115 million. It's a shame, really. As is, Callaghan Valley is so perfectly, beautifully untouched. By 2010 it will have roads, stadiums, parking lots, lodges, several kilometres of cross-country trails and a biathlon range. The trade-off is a post-Games, Olympic-sized Nordic venue for use by locals, tourists and high-performance athletes.

## Sea To Sky

Back on the Sea To Sky, our wearying band of journalists snakes up the ever-widening road to Whistler. This winding, perilous highway cut between rock and ocean has seen more protest than any other 2010 Olympic project.

A single, years-ago-yet-infamous comment by IOC Evaluation Commission member Gerhard Heiberg triggered a raucous debate. His out-loud worry that Whistler was “too far from Vancouver,” was based on the dangers of driving this narrow, iced-over, mud-sliding road. And it very nearly made Vancouver/Whistler lose its bid.

But Heiberg had beers with then-PM Jean Chrétien and the rest is history. Sea To Sky earned a \$600-million widening between Horseshoe Bay and Whistler to ease congestion for traffic bound for alpine, Nordic and sliding sights at Whistler. Yet, during the Games, the Sea to Sky will be closed to most public traffic. Event-goers and locals will have to rely on special transit.

## Whistler

Creekside, at Whistler's south end, is our first stop on the Whistler leg of this Olympic venue tour. As the mountain's final condo frontier, we see hotels and restaurants popping up at a dizzying rate. But it's the downhill course that, for skiers, is most interesting. The Dave Murray Downhill ends here at Creekside. Men will follow Murray's famous course from top to bottom; women will start on Wild Card, swing over to Lower Jimmie's Joker, catch up with Franz's Run, then join the Lower Dave Murray course.

Whistler-Blackcomb (WB) has contoured, graded, landscaped and removed trees to meet FIS standards, and significantly boosted snowmaking. All this in time for the Games' first test event: February 2008's World Cup races at Whistler. The finish stadium will be constructed on Timing Flats in August '09.

During the Games, the entire Creekside base will be transformed into race facilities, including wax cabins, an athlete's lounge and security checkpoints. An open gondola (cabriolet) will carry fans from Creekside to Timing Flats. On race days they're expecting crowds of 7,600.

Creekside is only one of Whistler's venues. The Whistler Sliding Centre will host bobsleigh, skeleton and luge. It's near the base of Blackcomb Mountain at Fitzsimmons Creek. Then there's the Whistler Olympic Village. Housing 3,200 athletes and officials for Whistler events, it's establishing itself in Cheakamus Valley, about 20-minutes outside town. Post-Games it turns into a subdivision for employee housing.

And finally, there's the Whistler Athletes Centre — a controversial high-performance facility that's munching up VANOC's budget faster than a 1980s Pacman consumed those cookies. Rising construction costs have ballooned its budget to a current \$36.5 million. Add to that Creekside's re-configuring cost of \$26.2 million, the Sliding Centre at \$99 million and the Whistler's Olympic Village at \$131 million and it's obvious: the Winter Games don't come cheap.

## Is it all worth it?

Back on False Creek, sitting in the tugboat gazing at the pile of rubble that will soon be Vancouver Olympic Village... it's hard to say. This journalist's heart answers yes. All you have to do for proof is look south into the Wasatch Range to see the stirring re-birth of Utah's skiing post-Winter Games 2002, or gaze Down Under to re-ignite that warm feeling that glowed out of Sydney in 2000.

Still, we'll have to wait until the flame leaves the building at Closing Ceremonies in February 2010 to say for sure. In the meantime we can update you on the progress of Canada's most expensive event. Ever.

One thing we can tell you: It's one heck of a construction site.