

## Track star Gary Reed touts Victoria's 'strong community' for athletics

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Cleve Dheensaw / Times Colonist

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Gary Reed saw a bit of himself Saturday night as he prepared to address the young runners of the Western Hub, which is the Victoria-based Athletics Canada western training centre for the nation's promising middle-distance track athletes.

"I'll share my experiences with them. I was in the same place they are in 2002 when I came to Victoria to train," said Reed, Canada's greatest 800-metre runner.

"These are young athletes climbing to the next level and I hopefully can inspire them to do great things," said the 2007 world championships silver-medallist and fourth-place finisher in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Reed was the keynote speaker for the Western Hub reception at the Hotel Grand Pacific. It was billed as a "Celebration of the track community on the Island" and was hosted by 94 Forward, which administers the legacy fund from the 1994 Commonwealth Games.

Athletics Canada's Western Hub is among several national team training centres on the Lower Island. They include those for Rowing Canada, Rugby Canada, Triathlon Canada, Swimming Canada, Golf Canada, Tennis Canada and Cycling Canada.

A major component of the training centres are the NextGen programs, in which Canada's emerging post-Tokyo 2020 generation of Olympians is being incubated.

The coaches of the Athletics Canada Western Hub are 2012 London Olympics 800-metre semifinalist Geoff Harris and former national-teamer Heather Hennigar. The general manager is Julianne Zussman, who has 45 caps in rugby and has played in three World Cups for Canada. Zussman never ran track but her insight as a Canadian international athlete is invaluable to the young running group training in the Western Hub.

"I can offer a unique perspective as an athlete who relocated to a training centre [Rugby Canada's in Langford]," said Zussman.

"It's a new experience for a lot of the younger athletes and a steep learning curve."

In a country of such vast distances, centralized national training centres are crucial in developing and nurturing national-team athletes.

"It certainly is critical. You feed off each other's energy, ideas and performances," said Reed, now co-owner of a development company in Kamloops.

"During my eight years in the Victoria centre [2002 to 2010], we had myself and [fellow-Olympians] Zach Whitmarsh and Diane Cummins and great leadership and coaching. That doesn't happen in isolation. I loved my years in Victoria. They were some of the best years of my life."

It's a co-ordinated effort that includes myriad support services provided to the elite athletes by Canadian Sport Institute-Pacific and the Pacific Institute for Sport Excellence on the Camosun College Interurban campus.

"What I liked about the Victoria programs was the strong community behind them," said Reed, who still holds the Canadian 800-metre record of 1:43.68, set in 2007.

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