

Canada's triathletes on a sprint for Tokyo gold

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Rising Canadian star Desirae Ridenour of Cowichan Bay and national team head coach Jono Hall at a Triathlon Canada event at Saanich Commonwealth Place.

Photograph By TIMES COLONIST

The Victoria-based Canadian triathlon team returned home from across the Pacific with a clear aim in mind: Gold the next time they go trans-Pacific.

“Our goal is to win the mixed relay at the Tokyo Olympics in 2020,” said head coach Jono Hall.

“It’s ambitious. But the relay is a priority for us and we have the athletes who are capable of doing that and putting it together on the day.”

Hall made his comments over the weekend at a Triathlon Canada event in which members of the wider sports community were invited to meet the national team at Saanich Commonwealth Place. The Canadian team athletes also unveiled their new racing kit for upcoming 2018 World Cup and World Series events.

Coast Salish artist Carey Newman created the striking design for the uniforms, combining an orca representing swimming, a raven for cycling and wolf for running.

The Canadian triathlon team is returning after the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast, Australia, where Joanna Brown overcame a ferry-load of injuries to win women's individual bronze and the Canadian mixed relay team of Brown, rising 18-year-old Desirae Ridenour of Cowichan Bay, Matthew Sharpe of Victoria and Tyler Mislawchuk placed fourth.

"It was the little mistakes that cost us in the relay," said Ridenour.

"If we correct those little things, we can definitely be on the podium in Tokyo."

That's not an idle prediction. Triathlon was a deep event in Gold Coast, with Commonwealth nations taking five of the slots in the current world top-10 rankings in the mixed relay with No. 1 Australia, No. 4 Britain, No. 5 Canada, No. 7 South Africa and No. 9 New Zealand.

"It's not a soft event in the Commonwealth Games," said Hall, a transplanted Aussie.

"Still, we were disappointed. Fourth-place in any Games is the toughest of all placings."

But Gold Coast was for next time — specifically Tokyo," said Ridenour.

The prodigy out of Cowichan High went from winning three gold medals against junior national competitors at the 2017 Canada Summer Games to battling against the big dogs in Gold Coast.

"It was a good learning experience," said Ridenour.

"There was a lot to be encouraged by."

The triathlon mixed relay, which makes its Olympic debut at Tokyo, comprises a female-male-female-male format in which each of the racers swim 300 metres, cycle 6.6 kilometres and run one kilometre before tagging off to the next relay teammate.

"Speed counts in the relay and that's my strength," Ridenour said.

If Canuck ambitions come true in the relay at Tokyo, it would be Canada's first Olympic gold medal in triathlon since another trans-Pacific moment when Simon Whitfield of Victoria ran first across the line when the sport made its Summer Games debut at Sydney in 2000. Canada's last Olympic medal in triathlon was Whitfield's silver medal at Beijing in 2008.

“We’re definitely in rebuild mode, but we’re very encouraged by Gold Coast and where we’re at,” said Triathlon Canada CEO Kim Van Bruggen.

Triathlon Canada is among a number of national teams based in Victoria. Its head office is in Save-on-Foods Memorial Centre with a satellite office in Saanich Commonwealth Place.

The 94 Forward organization, which oversees the \$20-million legacy fund from the Victoria Commonwealth Games, is a major sponsor of Triathlon Canada.

“It’s amazing,” said Ridenour, who gets to stay her hometown while other triathletes from across the country have had to relocate to Victoria.

“The pool is right here, PISE is close by, as are cycling roads and the Galloping Goose.”

Other head offices and or national training centres located in Victoria include those for Rowing Canada, Rugby Canada, Swimming Canada, Athletics Canada, Golf Canada, Tennis Canada, Cycling Canada and Surfing Canada.

Surfing Canada represents the newest Olympic sport, with Wickaninnish Beach near Tofino hosting the Surf Canada Nationals this weekend, featuring surfers who will compete for the nation at Tokyo 2020.

Next week, it’s the turn of the sport that made its Olympic debut at Rio in 2016, as the women’s rugby Canada Sevens takes place at Westhills Stadium in Langford, featuring the Olympic-bronze medallist host side.

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