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## Bobsled Champion Steven Holcomb Has New Vision



*By Christof Stache, AP*

*Steven Holcomb follows the U.S. national anthem during the World Cup winner ceremony Sunday in Igls, Austria.*

By Mike Dodd, USA TODAY

Four years ago, [Steven Holcomb](#) and his USA-2 teammates were ecstatic to beat out [Todd Hays'](#) USA-1 team in the four-man bobsled at the [Torino Olympics](#), even though they finished no better than sixth. This year, their aim is significantly higher: first place.

Holcomb, 29, has firmly established himself as the favorite in the Olympic four-man race, winning both the four-man and overall World Cup titles in the 2009-10 season. An American man hasn't won gold in Olympic bobsled since 1948.

"Winning is a combination of a great sled, great push times and great runs," Holcomb said in [Winterberg](#), Germany, after collecting his third consecutive gold medal this season. "My lines are finally coming together, so I think we have all three things necessary to win."

Holcomb and his push crew of Justin Olsen, Steve Mesler and Curt Tomasevicz last March became the first American men in 50 years to win gold at the world championships, and they finished second in the inaugural event at the Olympic track in Whistler last February.

The 2010 Olympic track is unlike other courses on the World Cup tour, and Holcomb said it puts a premium on driving skills.

"Every (other) track in the world pretty much is tight turns at the top as you gain speed," he said. "Vancouver is backwards. It's very open at the top, and then at the bottom it tightens up. When you have tight turns going 95 miles an hour, it's a little different.

"It's not going to be about who has the best sled or the best runners. It's going to take a fast start and skill to get through the turns to the bottom."

Holcomb entered the sport in 1998 as a push athlete and converted to pilot in 2002-03. In his first Olympics, in 2006, he finished sixth in the four-man and 14th in the two-man, issuing a call for upgraded equipment after the races.

"Going into [Torino](#), we had a lot of tension between the teams, coaches and the athletes," he said last fall. "USA-1 didn't get along with USA-2, and vice versa. ... When we beat Todd (Hays) by a single place, we were happy, like we won a gold medal.

"It was a little team rivalry, but at the same time it was a big victory for us to be the top finishing sled."

His image is known throughout bobsled now: the sleek, black Bo-Dyn sled called "Night Train" and the burly driver with the scuffed-up helmet visor.

The latter isn't superstition; Holcomb drove for so long with poor vision from a degenerative eye disease that he was thrown off by crystal-clear sight when it was corrected.

The condition, keratoconus, nearly forced him to retire two years ago as his vision deteriorated to 20-500.

The disease causes the cornea to bulge, and the standard treatment, a cornea transplant, would have ended his career, Holcomb said. But he and coaches

found a California surgeon, Brian Boxer Wachler, who was pioneering a procedure that implanted a contact lens behind the iris to correct the problem.

The [U.S. Olympic Committee](#) and USA Bobsled & Skeleton Federation picked up the cost of the March 2008 surgery, and Holcomb reported 20-20 vision after the procedure.

When he returned to the track that fall, he had to make an unexpected adjustment.

"As I learned to drive, my eyes got worse and worse and worse, so I learned to drive more and more by feel and not vision," he said. "Then I just threw in the vision all of a sudden and it really threw me off.

"My helmet is all scratched up, and the visor's not clear. Folks hate it, but I have to almost take away the eyes a little bit. It's too much information that I don't need. I had to get back to the way I learned how to drive."

He capped the 2008-09 season with the gold in the four-man and bronze in the two-man at the worlds in Lake Placid, N.Y. This season, after finishing seventh in the first four-man World Cup, Holcomb ran off three consecutive golds and a silver before Christmas.

Hays retired in December, but Holcomb said earlier in the season the rivalry between the two was more positive than in 2006. This time around, beating Americans isn't the goal.

*Contributing: The Associated Press*