



February 12, 2010

## 'Night Train' Helps Bring Steven Holcomb, US Bobsledders to Light



Getty Images

In any other context, it would be downright creepy. Steven Holcomb, the once-blind Olympian who will drive Team USA's favored four-man bobsled down the treacherous, curvaceous Whistler track, is talking about his sled. It is called "Night Train," and it is stunning -- sleek with a dull black finish, it was conceived by Bob Cuneo, a race-car designer, who modeled the machine on a mostly chrome-less Harley-Davidson motorcycle and then cheekily spread rumors that the base was covered in a special coating from NASA.

"Technically, it's my wife," Holcomb tells me. "I'm married to it."

Um, come again? "On my Facebook page, in the information section. Check it out," he says. And sure enough, under 'Relationship Status,' Holcomb has typed, 'Married to Night Train Bobsled.' He says he'd take it back to the Athletes' Village every night if Olympic rules allowed, if it didn't have to be locked up for security reasons. (There are competitors who really believe the ludicrous NASA rumors.)

The sled that carried Team Holcomb to a world title has become quite a legend amongst bobsledders, though it still runs a distant second to the man who drives it. It's frightening to think that less than two years ago, Holcomb was legally blind and steering his crew through twists and turns that dropped like a tear on a sheet of ice, where one wrong move could lead to disaster.

"We're lucky nothing bad happened, that nobody got seriously injured," Holcomb says. "In retrospect, it probably wasn't the brightest thing to do."

His eyes had been deteriorating for years because of a degenerative disease called Keratoconus, a condition that weakened the shape of Holcomb's cornea and distorted his vision. Eventually, the condition became so severe, even the strongest contact lenses could not correct it. A cornea transplant was an option, but it would have rendered his eyes too delicate for sliding. Despite Holcomb's near-blindness, despite everything around him appearing to function on a perpetual fun house loop, he and America's top team continued to win and medal in World Cup events.

"But I couldn't keep risking it," Holcomb says. "I decided it was time to retire. I went to (U.S. coach) Brian Shimer and told him I was quitting."

Shimer asked Holcomb to put off the decision for a moment, long enough to do one more round of research on Holcomb's condition. Shimer subsequently discovered a Beverly Hills ophthalmologist named Brian Boxer Wachler who was performing C3-R, a unique two-part procedure, on patients with Keratoconus and getting fantastic results. In short, C3-R treats the cornea with vitamins and ultraviolet light, before an artificial lens is implanted behind the irises.

Holcomb underwent the surgery in March 2008. The man with 20-500 vision had to be guided by the arm as he entered the Beverly Hills building, and a short time later he walked into the sunshine, amazed at how the world looked now that his vision was 20-20.

The USA hasn't won Olympic gold in men's bobsled since 1948. Holcomb and his team took both the four-man and overall World Cup titles in the 2009-10 season and are firm favorites in Whistler. But even with their breakout star's perfect eyesight and their magical, mysterious Night Train sled, the U.S. still faces a likely showdown with Germany, a bobsled powerhouse. Andre Lange, Germany's three-time Olympic medalist, says he is retiring at the end of these Games, adding a spicy dynamic to the event.



AFP/Getty Images

"There's a little more pressure on us now," says Holcomb, 29, who took sixth in the four-man race and 14th in the two-man in the 2006 Olympics, figuring they'd be his last Games considering his eye disorder.

"We think the personality of our team is world class.

We were the best push crew on the hill this year. We do everything as a team, we eat as a team, we live as a team, we work out as a team. We were first in the gym yesterday and the last to leave."

He is quick to tick off the quirks of his teammates that make up the No. 1 U.S. sled: Steve Mesler "is the coach of the team, he likes to take charge." Justin Olsen "is young and

rambunctious, he brings a lot of energy to the team." Brakeman Curt Tomasevicz "is the quiet guy, the kind who will always have your back. Me, I'm kind of in the background and lead in my own way.

"And the fifth member is Night Train," Holcomb says. "The sled has become a part of us."

Holcomb came to know his sled so well when he could barely see, he was driving it mostly by feel and memory. Now that his eyesight is crystal clear, he's learned to block out the visual cues that guide other drivers but only distract him. If the Night Train doesn't make Team USA stand out enough, Holcomb's funky helmet completes the odd picture. Drivers can be fastidious with their helmets, replacing them every race, but not Holcomb. His looks like a lion got its paws on it, and the visor is a dense blur.

"Everyone hates it, but after the surgery my eyes were almost too perfect. I had to tone it down, take the eyes out of it a little bit," he says. "I'm more comfortable if I have limited information and can rely on feel and instinct. Driving a bobsled is very strange, there really isn't anything like it. The sled becomes an extension of my body.

"Even when I couldn't really see I learned to tell when the sled is sliding, if it's going into a skid, what direction the nose is, if it's on a slant. Learning to drive by feel has been a huge advantage. My vision wasn't bad when I started driving but as it started to go I had to develop a special awareness elsewhere. There are some drivers that drive strictly by vision, and they are good drivers, but it's a lot harder if you're going just by visual cues."

Will it give him an advantage on the Whistler Olympic track, a course unlike any other on the World Cup tour? Holcomb calls it "backwards," with its wide-open spaces at the top, and skinny, tight curves near the end. "Going 95 mph at the bottom over the turns is going to be an adventure," he says.

Four years ago, he figured his Olympic run was over. Nearly two years ago, he had surgery on his eyes and began to see new possibilities. Then came Night Train, a peculiar beauty put out as a test. "We were told it wasn't meant to be used, but we ended up dominating the season with it and ended up winning the World Championships with it," Holcomb says.

"It's kind of picked up steam, no pun intended."