

October 30, 2008

Bobsled driver Holcomb sees better things ahead



By Tim Reynolds, AP Sports Writer

LAKE PLACID, N.Y. — Olympic bobsledder Steven Holcomb was speeding down the icy track for a preseason training run a few weeks ago, when a piece of duct tape tore off the chassis and whizzed past his helmet.

His teammates weren't bothered. They'd seen it happen dozens of times. Holcomb, though, was spooked. Until then, he'd never seen that before.

In a sport that demands razor-sharp hand-eye coordination, Holcomb excels even with a degenerative eye disease called keratoconus that makes reading a challenge - say nothing for steering a bobsled in a snowstorm. "Sometimes, I really didn't see all that much out there," he said.

Given his success, that's hard to believe. Holcomb is a national champion, a World Cup star and was the top American driver at the 2006 Turin Olympics. He navigates slippery tracks at 80 mph in a sport where tiny mistakes can lead to disaster. Yet he did all that with vision so blurry that he couldn't read the big "E" atop an eye chart from more than 6 feet away.

A \$15,000 procedure may have saved Holcomb's vision - plus could nudge him closer to Olympic gold in Vancouver in 2010.

"If he was in the top five in the world before, I wouldn't be surprised if he's soon to be the top in the world," said Dr. Brian Boxer Wachler of Beverly Hills, Calif., the corneal surgeon who developed the procedure that Holcomb underwent, Holcomb would love to see that.

Keratoconus causes the cornea to bulge outward, causing blurred vision. In some mild cases, glasses or contacts can be the answer. In Holcomb's case, neither did the trick. Lasik didn't work, either; Holcomb tried that in 2000, but was back in glasses within a year. So after last season, he decided he'd either find a solution or retire.

"They couldn't make contacts strong enough for me anymore," Holcomb said. "And since it's a progressive disease, I had to get a new prescription, a stronger prescription, every three months. Finally they said, 'You know, we can't make them any stronger.' So it was the end. For a while, I thought it was the end."

U.S. bobsled coach Brian Shimer didn't want to see that happen. He researched options, found Boxer Wachler, and sent Holcomb to California to meet the doctor. Holcomb was deemed a candidate for Visian ICL, or Implantable Collamer Lens, a 9-minute surgery where a contact is embedded behind the iris.

It's permanent, and so far, it's worked for Holcomb.

His vision, once as bad as 20-1000 - which gets defined as "profound visual impairment" - is now close to perfect. He sees things on tracks that he never knew were there before.

"I was part of the FDA approval study for it," Holcomb said. "I couldn't wear contacts the day of the surgery, so they literally had to walk me around the room. And then they did it, I got up, and just like that, I was 20-20. It's incredible. I call it an eye-opening experience." Pun intended, of course.

Holcomb didn't just suffer from keratoconus, but also was extremely nearsighted. So Boxer Wachler - who has performed similar procedures before live on national television, plus has worked with other athletes, most notably Los Angeles Lakers' guard Derek Fisher - began the process by having Holcomb undergo what's called C3-R, something that strengthens the anchors within the cornea and minimizes the bulging effect.

It's relatively new technology and isn't offered by many eye doctors yet. Boxer Wachler is considered the pioneer in this sort of work. "We've been doing this for five years," Boxer Wachler said. "It's not experimental for us. We call it an off-label procedure."

But because of the costs involved, Holcomb almost decided not to undergo any procedure. Holcomb isn't a rich man, by any stretch of the imagination. Bobsledders don't get into their sport for money; it's rare to find a sled that turns a profit at the end of a season, no matter how many races a team wins in a given year. The technology is costly, the perks are few, and when Holcomb was told how much Visian ICL would cost, he initially balked at going forward.

"It was every amount of prize money I'd ever won," Holcomb said. "So the U.S. Bobsled Federation stepped up and donated, and the U.S. Olympic Committee stepped up and donated, and now I hope they can collect on it." That shouldn't be a problem.

When the World Cup season starts in Germany in a few weeks, Holcomb will be among the favorites once again. He ended last season ranked fourth among drivers in two- and four-man bobsled, and now with his vision no longer a stressful issue, he can't see any reason why he shouldn't improve on the track.

"Now that I can see, things are starting to click," Holcomb said. "I already could feel out there on the track. It's like putting a face to a name now. My eyes don't hurt. My head doesn't hurt. Before, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even play catch before. Someone would throw me something and it'd hit me in the face. Now I can focus on what's important out there."

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