



Prairie Gold

By Christine Hanlon
Photography: Michael Roberts



Next to standing on the Olympic podium with a gold medal around his neck, the most surreal moment in skeleton racer Jon Montgomery's recent memory may well be seeing 8,000 people crowded on the streets of Russell, Manitoba.

"Growing up there, in your wildest imagination you couldn't picture that," says the Olympian of his hometown, population 1500. "When you get home and you see the people who have impacted your life in the manner the folks in Russell have impacted mine, undoubtedly that's the most special tour so far."

Since sliding headfirst down an icy track to beat his closest competitor by 0.07 of a second on February 19, 2010, Montgomery has been touring with his girlfriend Darla, giving speeches and making appearances across Canada. After a stop in Calgary, then Niagara Falls, he came home to a parade, a community barbecue and a reception at the local hall.

Were it not for the Mounties, the throngs of people and the jumbo screens, it might have been a regular family visit for the Calgary-based car salesman and auctioneer. Oh yeah, and there was also that small matter of having his picture added to the wall of fame at his former alma mater, Major Pratt High.

As the son of the school's former principal, Montgomery was beaming with pride. His father was on hand, of course, just as he has been at every baseball, volleyball and hockey game his youngster ever played, sometimes as spectator, but more often as coach.

"My mom always came out to cheer me on," recalls Montgomery, adding that he is five and nine years younger than his sisters Jill and Jodi. "For a while, my oldest sister helped out with babysitting and rearing a busy child like myself."

Always looking for ways to keep himself entertained, Jon was easily convinced to try anything his family suggested. In a rural Manitoba town, opportunities for sports and activities are limited as a result of the population base. Nonetheless, the Montgomery family was very involved in hockey, spending much of their time travelling long distances to games and competitions.

But being in a small community also meant there were no try-outs or pickups. Parents paid their \$200 and their kids played hockey. "We were competitors," recalls Montgomery. "We were asked not to come back to a league in Saskatchewan that was the closest distance to us because of the beatings we put on their teams." So the boys headed out to Winnipeg to try their luck against the big city AAA teams.

Not only did the rural team have talented players who had been together all their lives, but the boys also benefited from outstanding coaching. For a while, the team had the same coach as NHL player Theo Fleury, another former Russell area resident. So it was that



long before he had even heard of a sport named skeleton, Montgomery was part of the team that represented Manitoba at the Western Canadian minor hockey championships.

The team's bronze medal win may well have played a role in whetting the future Olympian's appetite for a higher level of competition. He remembers that years later, while talking to a former Russell resident playing on the Junior National Women's Volleyball Team, it dawned on him how much he admired those who represented Canada at the upper echelons of sport.

The epiphany was brought home when someone asked if his Canadian flag tattoo meant that he was an Olympian. "I looked down on my chest and had to sadly look up at him and say, 'Not yet,'" recalls Montgomery, adding that at the time, he was searching for a vehicle that would help him make his dream come true. "I would have represented Canada at tiddly winks if I had the opportunity. Lucky for me I found skeleton."

Lucky indeed. It is interesting that someone with a self-admitted needle phobia should hardly flinch when hurtling down a track at 145 km an hour on something barely thicker than a crazy carpet! As a teenager getting his first tattoo with his mother in Winnipeg—she opted for a butterfly on her ankle—he almost passed out when the artist was inking.

"I asked for water, he stopped for a moment, I collected myself and he finished up," explains Montgomery. "So we made it to the finish line."

And he's made it past the mark ever since. After high school, he had Canada written above his tattoo before leaving for Georgian College in Barrie, Ontario, where he graduated three years later. He then headed for Northwood University in Cedar Hills, Texas to complete his degree in Automotive Marketing and International Management.

It was during a co-op work term at the Winnipeg Auto Auction that he first developed an interest in the auction world. For a week he went to school from dawn to dusk, learning the ropes of what it takes to be a fast-talking auctioneer. He was a "quick" study.

"It's like everything in life," he says, speaking barely a beat slower than at a car auction. "You get out of it what you put into it. That's what life is all about."

He credits this work ethic to an upbringing by parents who used the everyone-sees-everything setting of a small town to demand he deliver face-to-face restitution for any mistake he ever made. Even now that he's all grown up, the roguish redhead continues to have a close relationship with Eldon and Joan Montgomery.

In fact, they were by his side the day that he saw his first skeleton race. He was immediately intrigued. Montgomery was living in Calgary

by then, right across from Olympic Park, and in March of 2002, he signed up for the Discover Skeleton program at the site.

"I was hooked after my first run," he explains, reflecting on the thrill of the challenge and speed. "It was unlike anything I had ever done in my life."

After completing a Talent ID camp, he was invited to a "driving school" in the fall. Soon he had his "pilot's" license and was starting from the very top of the track.

The rest, as they say, is history. Over the next seven years, Montgomery would rise through the ranks of the world circuit leading up to his crowning achievement at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

It may not have seemed obvious at the time, but the endless interviews after that electrifying win were only the beginning of months of public appearances, product promotions and speeches. The homecoming in Russell was followed by a stop in Calgary, then Vancouver, Kelowna, Edmonton, and the Juno Awards in St. John's, Newfoundland. Montgomery hopes that this "work" will enable him to support himself during the next four years as he trains for the next winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

Montgomery will also visit schools and a refugee camp in Uganda as an athlete ambassador for Right to Play. He first became involved with the organization when he volunteered his time at one of their charity auctions. Since then, he has also attended several of their fundraising golf tournaments.

The importance of giving back is one of the many values he learned from growing up on the prairies. Another is the need to believe in something—then give it your all.

"Life is all about living to the fullest," says the gold-winning Olympian from Russell, Manitoba. "I think it's about getting out there, trying new things and finding something that makes you passionate."

After all, he adds, passion is what happiness is all about.