



Junior Canucks Win Historic Silver Medal in Relay at Nordic World Ski Championships in Germany

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OBERWIESENTHAL, Ger.—A new generation of Canadian cross-country skiers arrived on the scene and confirmed they are ready to carry the torch towards the international podium after winning the first ever silver medal for the country in the 4x5

kilometre team relay at the Nordic Junior World Ski Championships in Oberwiesenthal, Germany on Friday.

Barely old enough to drive a car, four Canadian teenagers – Xavier McKeever (Canmore, Alta.); Olivier Léveillé (Sherbrooke, Que.), 18; Tom Stephen, 17 (Calgary); and 19-year-old Remi Drolet (Rossland, B.C.) – brought a swagger and belief with them to the start line like World Cup veterans. The four-pack of baby Canucks combined to rock the four five-kilometre legs of the relay in a time of 55:30.4.

“People don’t really understand what went down today, but it is insane,” said Devon Kershaw, a four-time Canadian Olympic cross-country skier who has won multiple World Cups medals and was crowned a World Champion.

Kershaw has helped provide coaching support to head coach, Erik Braten, over the last two years at the Junior World Championships.

“This sport has such a rich history. We have had some incredible skiers in our program, but we have never been on the podium in the relay – Ever. The World Cup, World Championships and Olympics is the next step for these kids, but this is the best of their age group. To see the belief these guys had today was incredibly inspiring for me.”

The tone was set by the youngest member of the squad who boasts a familiar last name to Canada’s Nordic faithful.

Sixteen-year-old Xavier McKeever hammered the opening five-kilometre classic-ski leg for the Canucks which took the next generation of Nordic stars on a track up and down steep hills, twists and turns around the Sparkassen Skiarena. McKeever skied steady in the middle of the pack before handing off to Léveillé in fifth spot.

“My goal was to just try to stick with that first pack. I’m so happy I was able to stick in there,” said McKeever, who is the son of Olympians Milaine Theriault and Robin McKeever, not to mention the nephew of legendary Paralympian, Brian McKeever.

“Yes, we have a history of cross-country skiing in our family, but I don’t feel any additional pressure from that. I know my family is proud of me no matter what. I put my own pressure on myself

because I want to make my own path in the sport. It feels great to be able to start that with these guys today.”

Taking advantage of lightening quick skis, Léveillé led the chase pack while bolting around the five-kilometre classic-ski course.

“My only objective was to stay with the pack. When I knew I had very good skis and was leading my chase group, I knew it was our day,” said Léveillé, who is competing in his first World Junior Championships. “At about one kilometre into the race I was feeling very good and in control. I just knew I had good skis and needed to use that to my advantage so I pushed as hard as I could on the flats.”

Tom Stephen took the hand off and continued to ski confident and in control in the middle of the pack of the first skate-ski leg, setting up Remi Drolet to make a charge for the podium.

“Being in the pack, I just wanted to ski relaxed but powerful,” said Stephen, who handed off to Drolet in fourth place. “This gives our entire program a lot of confidence. It shows Canada is a force to reckon with, and that we have not just one, but a group of skiers at this age, who are equally strong and support each other.”

While the youngest member of the squad set the tone for the Canadians, it was the oldest member of the team – Remi Drolet – who inked the squad into the history books. Drolet was dominant in the anchor leg where he crossed the finish line in the silver-medal position.

“This is absolutely incredible. We were so stoked to start this race, and we told ourselves last night we are going to go for the medal today,” said Drolet, who finished just 10 seconds off the podium in the 30-kilometre skate-ski race when he was fourth.

“This is one of the best, if not the best, World Juniors for a Canadian team in terms of results. Knowing everyone on the relay team had a top-30 at the Championships we knew this was doable.”

Competing in his third World Junior Championships, Drolet was inspired by his teammates performance while warming up for his leg.

“When I finished my warmup and headed to the start, I saw we were really fighting well in the pack so I felt the pressure boil up,”

said Drolet. “I was ready to go when Tom tagged off to me.”

With the Americans breaking off the front, Drolet quickly caught two skiers ahead of him in the battle for the silver medal.

“We can’t emphasize enough how great the skis were today, and what a great job the wax team did today. Those were the best skis I have ever been on,” added Drolet. “When I started the second lap, I started to go harder and pull away. I was able to break from the group on the final corner and get second.”

The American team won the gold with a time of 54:54.9. The Italians finished behind the Canadians in third at 55:50.3.

Team Canada has only ever won two medals at the Junior World Ski Championships. Canada’s most accomplished cross-country skier, Alex Harvey, was the last to stand on the podium at the most prestigious junior cross-country ski event in the world. Harvey won two bronze medals in 2007 along with a silver at the 2008 World Championships. The three-time Olympian also won a gold at the Under-23 World Champs in 2011 before going on to win two gold, one silver and two bronze medals at the senior World Championships. Marie Josee-Pepin is the only other Canadian to win a World Junior cross-country ski medal when she claimed the silver at the 1989 Championships.

Canada’s Kershaw, Drew Goldsack and Chandra Crawford combined to win one gold, one silver and two bronze medals at the Under 23 World Championships in 2004.

In addition to winning World Championship gold with Harvey in the team sprint in 2011, Kershaw was part of Canada’s only men’s World Cup medal-winning relay squad in 2017 when he teamed up with Harvey, Lenny Valjas and Knute Johnsgaard to win the bronze in Ulricehamn, Sweden.

The only other time a Canadian cross-country ski team won a World Cup relay medal came 30 years prior when a women’s foursome of Angela Schmidt-Foster, Carol Gibson, Jena McAllister, and Marie-Andree Masson won the bronze in Canmore, Alta.

“This was such a huge goal of our team when I was on the National Team,” added Kershaw. “We had many, many great races on the World Cup, winning medals in team sprints and individual races, but we just never could get it done until 2017 in

Ulricehamn. I'll never forget that day. To win a relay medal is so hard. You need all four guys to be skiing great.

“Today is equally special. It was like dominoes today. To see those guys feed off each other was so cool. Just absolutely amazing.”