

It all came together for Vermilion's pride and joy in Salt Lake City



Courtesy, Jan Scott
Beckie Scott "still has the same spark and enthusiasm she had as a 13-year-old," says former coach Les Parsons.

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The foundation of Beckie Scott's unprecedented Olympic achievement is to be found here, peaceful and undisturbed as always, in tiny Vermilion provincial park 200 kilometres east of Edmonton.

A dull white cloud stretches over the prairie and seamlessly into the horizon as Scott's semi-retired parents glide swiftly over 10 kilometres of the nordic trail bearing their daughter's name.

A steep hill at the halfway point sucks the breath out of hundreds of skiers who come each year to compete in the Beckie Scott Loppet March 16th.

But Walter Scott, 67, and his wife Jan, 57, scale the hill easily. Walter, once an international nordic ski racer himself, challenged Beckie to a race up this hill a few years ago.

"I got a third of the way up before I saw her at the top. She looked like she was just flying. I've never seen anything like it," says Walter.

Beckie Scott grew up in a bungalow in the small hamlet of Vermilion, skiing from her backyard to the park. The trail takes an average skier almost two hours to complete. After thousands of trips around the loop, Scott navigates the distance in under 30 minutes.

The people in this town have supported Beckie ever since she was a child, raising thousands of dollars through picnics and bake sales to subsidize her expenses.

"It was great growing up in a small town. I really felt the support and that everyone was behind me in both the Nagano and Salt Lake Olympics," says Scott.

It all came together at Salt Lake, as Scott finished third in the Winter Olympics five-kilometre pursuit race.

Vermilion celebrated last spring on "Beckie Scott Day" with a parade and ceremony. The bleachers and floor of the town arena were packed with 3,000 of the town's 4,400 residents.

Almost a year later, there will be another ceremony held, this one in Salt Lake City at Cauldron Park to commemorate the 2002 Winter Olympics. Back in Canada, those Games will be remembered both for triumph and controversy — the latter over Scott's race and the far more publicized figure skating drama involving Jamie Sale and David Pelletier.

Russian skiers Larissa Lazutina and Olga Danilova of Russia tested positive for steroids after being awarded the gold and silver medals in the 5K pursuit. Nearly 10 months later, the Court for Arbitration in Sport upgraded Scott's medal to silver from bronze, rather than to gold.

Scott, 28, isn't dwelling on the injustice. Instead, while continuing to compete on the World Cup circuit, she uses her fame and reputation to push for strong anti-doping rules and publicizes the plight of children in Afghanistan.

Fresh off winning the Grand Prix Pontresina Invitational race this past Wednesday in Pontresina, Switzerland, she's gearing up for the world championships at the end of the month in Val di Fiemme, Italy.

Her former coach and lifelong friend knows her competitive fire is still burning.

"She never brags," says Les Parsons. "But she still has the same spark and enthusiasm she had as a 13-year-old."

Walter and Jan stoked that fire by moving here from the Arctic in 1973. During a walk in the park that winter, Jan Scott thought the provincial park would be excellent for nordic skiing trails.

Situated in a valley shaded from the sun, the trails keep early snows long after the surrounding prairie is melted dry, and the air is usually 10C colder than in town.



Courtesy, Jan Scott
Beckie Scott shunned performance-enhancing drugs in her quest for success in cross-country skiing.

The little town that raised an OLYMPIAN

Herald Archive, Reuters
Beckie Scott celebrates winning the bronze medal — it was later upgraded to silver — in the women's combined pursuit competition at the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics.



Vermilion River runs along the park's north side, and there are no trees on its banks to protect skiers from blustery north winds.

"The cold air moves in and just stays there," says Walter Scott.

The conditions gave Beckie an apprenticeship in toughness, invaluable in a sport requiring athletes to overcome pain and exhaustion.

Scott also gets her incredible tenacity from her parents.

Her father, born Walter Scholz, grew up an orphan after watching his mother starve to death in East Germany at the end of the Second World War.

"I crawled under barbed wire fences and ran across no man's land under gunfire to get away," he says.

Scholz legally changed his last name to Scott when he reached Canada after four years in West German refugee camps. Having learned English with little help, he earned a master's degree in sociology/psychology.

Scott's mother has a master's degree in nursing administration and ran Vermilion Hospital for a decade before retiring last year.

When their daughter was born in 1974, the Scotts rallied the town to build a world-class 10-kilometre track and create a nordic ski club.

In 1978, Jan Scott formed a jackrabbits ski league for Vermilion kids and in 1986, the Scotts convinced the town to move the CN station to the park's trailhead, where the club transformed it into a ski lodge.

Posters, plaques and a tall wooden cutout of their daughter fill the old train station's waxing room walls now.

The memorabilia surrounds a nordic poster inscribed with the words of a Canadian skiing pioneer.

"Independence, freedom and a healthy life are the gifts my skis have brought me," signed Chief Jackrabbit.

The Scotts have lived this sentiment and passed down the wisdom. Beckie Scott has kept her passion for ski racing in perspective since playing games of tag and soccer on skis.

"Every race became a celebration rather than hard work," says her mother.

Both mom and dad kept young Beckie on skis most of her free time.

"Just being raised in the outdoors and doing a lot of outdoors stuff at an early age gave me endurance and ability to stay out longer," says Beckie. "My parents kept me focused and always encouraged me to work hard and reach for big things."

Shunning performance-enhancing drugs, Scott took a decade to work her way up from a 75th-place finish in her first world championships to consistent top-15 finishes in World Cup races.

But it wasn't until winning the bronze medal at Salt Lake City that she achieved fame across Canada.

The pride of her parents, and her home town, was built long ago.