

Partnerships on Powder: At Paralympics, Visually Impaired Skiers and Their Guides Form a Team

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KRASNAYA POLYANA, Russia — During his race Saturday morning, Mac Marcoux rocketed down the slope at nearly 75 miles per hour.

Marcoux is legally blind.

Straight ahead, Marcoux, 16, sees black. His peripheral vision is 6 percent. On a slick course, with jumps and bumps and compressions, he can zoom along faster than a car he is prohibited from driving only because he trusts the man skiing 20 feet ahead of him.

For these Paralympic Games, that man is Robin Femy, a former downhill racer who is responsible for Marcoux's safety as much as his performance. He communicates with Marcoux via radio, dispensing short commands and reminders through microphones in their helmets: Get forward, come into the pitch, royal flush. Marcoux navigates in part by tracking Femy's shadow, watching his legs and following right in, which makes details like uniform color critical. Since Canada's suits for the Games are all white, the lack of contrast with the snow forced Femy to wear black pants.

Often it can take years of partnership and continuity, of miles and miles skied together, before a racer and guide feel comfortable, in sync. Gabriel Juan Gorce Yepes of Spain said he has been with his guide for four years, and he thinks they need another four. Femy accepted his assignment two weeks ago, when Marcoux's usual guide, his older brother B. J., withdrew because of a back injury.

"I have that faith where I can go right behind him and not lead me in any bad spots on the course," said Marcoux, who won a bronze medal in the men's downhill on Saturday. "He's not going to try to kill me."

Visually impaired skiers are grouped by their acuity, and their classifications range from B1, for racers who are totally blind, to B3, for those like Marcoux who have partial sight.

For them, finding a guide whose personality meshes, who can motivate and teach and console in equal doses, is like finding the closest parking space in a crowded lot.

Five years ago, Lindsay Ball, 22, a B1 skier from the United States, teamed with Diane Barras, who recently quit her job with Maine's adaptive sports program to move to Colorado with Ball so they could live together and train full time. Ball said she realized some of her previous guides had not been pushing her enough, seemingly concerned more with helping her make it down the course safely.

"It has to be a person you really trust inside the snow and outside the snow," Gorce Yepes said. "It's almost like you're married."

Sometimes, they are married. Danielle Umstead of the United States asked her husband, Rob, to become her full-time guide in 2008, when she was struggling to find one after they moved to Utah from New Mexico. Like teenage lovebirds, they talk continually on the course. Rob tells her to turn, warns her about changes in terrain and, for the technical events, describes the gate combinations she will encounter — hairpin, delay, flush. But as with squabbling partners, their conversations are clipped, containing one- or two-word answers. They have to be.

"It's taught us to communicate even more than most married couples would do," Danielle Umstead said. "Our communication is just so awesome. We don't argue. And if we do, I win."

There is a 38-year age difference between the youngest and oldest members of the women on the United States team: Staci Mannella (17), a B2, and her guide, Kim Seevers (55). Their partnership of six years spanned Mannella's adolescence, which both, with a laugh, acknowledged was a challenging time.

Now, when they pull in at the beginning of a race, Mannella turns to Seevers, smiles and says, "We're going to kill it, Kim." When the starter counts backward from three, Seevers leaves at two or one, while Mannella follows upon hearing "go." Seevers calls out turns and shifts in snow condition or the rhythm of the course, but Mannella tends to say only two words the entire way down — good, when she passes the gate; and wait, if she needs to regulate the spacing between them.

"If you ever hear me say anything else," Mannella said, "that's not good."

On Friday, as she chatted at a picnic table outside the Paralympians' mountain village here, Mannella pointed to her dark sunglasses. Underneath, she was wearing black contact lenses. She has achromatopsia, which limits her acuity to three feet and renders her extremely sensitive to light. That makes snow, in her words, "not a good thing," and her willingness to careen down a mountain, in the words of some guides, remarkable.

"You're moving without seeing something," said Charlotte Evans of Britain, who guided Kelly Gallagher in the women's downhill. "I don't think I'd have the guts to do that."

The downhill skiers had three scheduled training runs — Friday's was canceled because of poor conditions — to become acquainted with a course that some racers called the fastest since the

2010 Vancouver Paralympics. Many of them, like Melissa Perrine of Australia, form mental maps of the course that they rely on during the race. Whenever her guide, Andrew Bor, calls out a gate number or the apex of a turn, she links the images to her memories.

But those, like Mannella, who are competing only in disciplines like slalom and giant slalom will not experience its contours until an hour before their races, during the inspection. An American sit-skier, Christopher Devlin-Young, assembled a diagram of the downhill course in a hallway at the United States' lodging that others have consulted for guidance. Seevers has spent hours analyzing video of how able-bodied skiers managed the terrain during the Olympics.

They try to account for every situation, memorizing turns and gate combinations, but sometimes, chance intervenes. It can come in the form of a headset malfunction, which could portend doom for B1 skiers, who must stop immediately, and force others with better acuity to yell at the top of their lungs and "go into survival mode and somehow make it to the bottom," as Mannella put it. Or it can come, even, in a stumble by the guide.

"If I crash, he has to stop," said Miguel Galindo Garcés, who guided Yon Santacana Maiztegui to a gold medal Saturday. It has happened only once in their 12 years together, Galindo Garcés said.

Femy and Marcoux, however well they have worked together, are unlikely to last as long. When B. J. heals, he will resume his post as Marcoux's guide. Marcoux's other favorite hobby? Mountain biking.