

CAST ADRIFT

The pre-Olympics sacking of Alpine Canada's president Max Gartner has left as many unanswered questions as Ken Read's surprise departure before him. **BY GEORGE KOCH**

For Canada's alpine skiers, the road to the 2014 Olympic Winter Games has been as muddy and tortuous as the coastal forests that separate the seaside city of Sochi from the mountains where the skiing events will be held. Our senior racers' dogged and sometimes heroic efforts to recover from debilitating injuries and sagging results have been well-publicized. Added to their personal performance struggles, veterans and newcomers alike are labouring under a sharp funding drop following the orgy of corporate sponsorship and government spending preceding the 2010 Games in Whistler. They've also had to cope with instability in the senior ranks of Alpine Canada, which handles Canada's national-level efforts in men's and women's alpine skiing, ski

cross and para-alpine (though not freestyle), and is into its fourth president in six years.

This follows the surprise departure over the summer of Max Gartner, the distinguished former ski racing coach and athletic director, as president and CEO. Gartner's odd exit—his announced resignation, followed by his firing—was one of several half-explained events beginning with the exit of former Crazy Canuck Ken Read as president in July 2008, barely 18

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months before the Whistler Games. In 2011 Read was followed by Alpine Canada's chairman, Gary Allan, who had also been interim president from Read's departure until Gartner's hiring in fall 2010.

These are confusing and stressful times to be a senior-level Canadian alpine racer—aside from the normal risks of high-level competition. Alpine Canada's budget has

plunged like a double-black-diamond chute from approximately \$20 million the year of Whistler to \$14 million in the most recent fiscal year—and is still dropping. Corporate sponsorship is a shadow. Our alpine ski team has fallen from sixth among the world's skiing nations in 2006,

when it racked up 3,260 Nations Cup points, to 10th. In what news media called the "dismal season" of 2012-13, performance plunged in nearly all disciplines, Canada gained only 1,344 points and went without a single World Cup victory. The team itself has been shrunk, and underperforming skiers punted.

Gartner's resignation was announced in mid-June. In a prepared statement, Alpine Canada chairman Danny Minogue called Gartner "a man of great integrity and professionalism," while Gartner stated, "I am honoured to have supported this organization in various roles for over 30 years." Leaving ahead of his contract expiry in mid-2014, Gartner said, was a way for a successor to start developing post-Sochi plans right now, with a focus on Alpine Canada's "business operations." Gartner also stated he would remain at work until Alpine Canada found a permanent replacement. But the next month, he was gone, as Alpine Canada announced that Roger Jackson, a 1964 gold medallist in pairs rowing and the founding CEO of Canada's pre-Whistler Own the Podium (OTP) project, had been appointed interim president. Neither Jackson nor Minogue would be interviewed for this article in *Ski Canada*.

There are opposing views whether senior management changes matter directly to the individual ski racer. "Max's departure doesn't have an immediate effect on the athletes," asserts Nancy Greene-Raine, a gold and silver



Olympic medallist in 1968, now a Conservative Senator and Director of Skiing at Sun Peaks Resort in B.C. "It's really the coach who is key to how they do." A former Alpine Canada employee disagrees.

"It's the whole package: the equipment, the masseuse, the senior leadership," he says. "And you need money for all of that."

I tried to pose this question to Steve Podborski, the former Crazy Canuck and Canada's Chef de Mission in Sochi, but he begged off to pack for a trip to Russia. Soon after, I received a phone call from someone on the Canadian Olympic Committee, warning me of the matter's "sensitivities." On balance, it doesn't seem good for our skiers to come off one disappointing Olympics and go into the next one leaderless.

Whatever his resignation might mean, Gartner's track record is unimpeachable and his achievements humbling. Born in Linz, Austria, Gartner began skiing at age three, later attending Austria's famous Schigymnasium Stams, which develops young ski racers, as well as two Austrian universities. After a brief ski racing career, he played professional soccer for five years. He joined Alpine Canada as an assistant coach in 1982, worked with male and female skiers, and became Canada's skiing Coach of the Year in 1991. In the early '90s he was the personal coach to his wife, Kerrin Lee, one of Canada's most successful alpine racers, who racked up 46 top-10 World Cup finishes plus a 1992 Olympic Gold medal. The two have been married since 1989, and one of their daughters, Stephanie, recently made the alpine development team.

In 1998, Gartner became men's alpine team manager, then Chief Athletic Officer in 2003. He worked to create world-class training programs, emphasized the technical disciplines more than in the past, and oversaw top racers like Thomas Grandi, Cary Mullen and Edi Podivinsky. The ski team's best year was 2006, when it delivered 39 top-10 finishes and 12 trips to the podium.

Former downhill racer Cary Mullen told one newspaper that he "never would have been a World Cup champion without him," and had given his own son the middle name Max. "Max is a gentleman, but not a pushover," says a former Alpine Canada employee. "He got what he wanted, but with a style that made you want to work with him. The athletic side was his optimal role."

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The same year, Gartner was named a director of OTP, formed specifically to generate medals at the Whistler Olympics. "Max knows how to create winners," Read said at the time. Gartner

later said his career highlight was "watching John Kucera and Erik Guay win back-to-back World Championship downhill titles in 2009 and 2011." Whistler itself, though, was a huge disappointment, without a single alpine skiing medal. Gartner was named Alpine Canada president a few

months after Whistler.

Gartner was philosophical about his departure when I spoke to him in mid-October. "The six years leading up to a country's home Olympics are the best time you can be in amateur sports," he says. This is thanks to pervasive energy and enthusiasm plus surging government and private-sector funding. By contrast, "In the first six months of my new job, we lost \$3.75 million in sponsorship," the beginning of a "difficult" three years. In addition, Gartner says, "I had gone from focusing on the athletes, which I really loved, to running the overall program, without much interaction with the athletes." Although Alpine Canada found some new sponsors, as well as large donations from dedicated individuals, Gartner says he "got really burned out." He concluded that "the organization needed a new person with the full energy, who can come in with a clean slate, develop a new vision and put in place plans for well after Sochi."

If Gartner himself is this self-critical, imagine the anxiety among Alpine Canada's board members, staff and racers' parents. Competition for finite resources is endemic in nearly any organization. Even in Alpine Canada's financial heyday, there were areas some considered understaffed. When the flow of funds is constricted, stress levels shoot up.

One possible battleground was over the balance of effort and money going to the short-term attempt to salvage Sochi—which some consider a lost

cause—versus building for the long term. The Europeans are masters at mapping a ski racer's career from adolescence virtually to retirement. Starting at least last year, Gartner publicly stated that Alpine Canada's main priority was "medals" and that this required a planning horizon out to at least the 2022 Games. That, in turn, demanded solid support for the development teams (typically the 15- to 20-year-olds). But after Whistler, development team funding was again cut. Gartner can't have liked that, and reminded people that a similar move following the 1988 Olympics led to a 13-year drought without a single men's downhill victory.

Last April, Gartner declared that each \$200,000-per-season increment required to support one racer for one World Cup season had to be directed to those with the best chance of producing medals. He mentioned a "shift of resources" in which the current year's World Cup team was reduced in size—and underperformers were cut loose—while the development team was enlarged to prepare for 2018 and 2022.

Gartner is too restrained to say whether Alpine Canada was gripped by a battle of visions. But there's no question that the long-term was his vision. One of his last acts was to recruit Martin Rufener, who helped build the Swiss men's ski team into a World Cup powerhouse, as men's alpine head coach. "My push at the end was to ensure that we had the very best possible coaches," Gartner told me.

"The best thing Max did was put great people in place on the coaching side, people who could produce incredible results, and I think that's going to be his legacy," agrees

Greene-Raine. Thanks to the solid technical foundation, Alpine Canada's main focus should be raising money, including finding a proven CEO from outside alpine skiing. The racers will have to work harder as well, Greene-Raine says, using innovative social media-driven approaches such as crowdfunding, which some are now trying.

One former Alpine Canada employee says differences between

senior management and the board have been chronic since the time of Ken Read. But when asked about this, Keith Bradford,

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Alpine Canada's Director, Communications, said, "There's no value in us addressing that question." Bradford acknowledges that Alpine Canada had begun focusing on each ski racer's performance and had dropped "a number who didn't make the qualification criteria." This was "difficult," he says, but wouldn't describe specific external reactions or pressures.

Others say Gartner's departure simply reflected an organization's requirement to allocate responsibility for a funding problem. "Whoever was in the seat after 2010 was going to have a 40-60 per cent budget cut, and it was particularly bad because we didn't medal, which then threatened the OTP funding," says the former Alpine Canada employee. "Max was out there beating the drum for financial support, yet sponsors were dropping like crazy. Someone had to wear that."

Whoever succeeds Gartner will have a formidable task. Some worry that Alpine Canada's record of senior-level changes might scare off potential replacements. But Bradford says the organization has hired one of North America's top recruiting firms and by early October was already interviewing candidates for the permanent job. Gartner (and Jackson's) replacement, says Bradford, will "absolutely"

focus on "securing long-term sustainable funding," as well as developing an overall strategy for the next four to eight years. In the meantime, Alpine Canada is "very excited" about Sochi. Specific goals include eight medals for para-alpine, one each for men's and women's ski cross, and one medal for alpine skiing.

But what about the longer term? "The world is changing fast, and this organization can't hold the status quo for long," says Gartner. "We need to scrutinize our resources

and only take on the best athletes, while focusing on development in the ages of 15-20, because you can't catch up after that. It's about looking eight years down the road, and a big investment will have to be made in the next generation."

Some say Alpine Canada simply can't be internationally competitive on its current budget against countries, like Austria, where downhill skiing is analogous to hockey in Canada or basketball in the U.S. One potential option is integrating more of Canada's Olympic

winter sports into a super-organization with the critical mass for powerful, systematic fundraising—and then parcelling out dollars with an equally relentless focus on teams and individuals who deliver results. "What's needed is that the winter snow sports world comes together and finds a common structure

that serves itself in the best way, and maximizes the money flow to the athletes and programs," says Gartner.

There are already discussions about creating a "snow sport

consortium" to generate a "super brand" that can impress possible corporate sponsors with its large membership, diverse events, vast audience and efficient single sponsorship channel. While that sounds terrific in principle, it seems like a monumental task to set up and run. It would multiply the stakeholders and factions under one umbrella, each with their own ideas, demands, agenda and sense of specialness. Whoever headed such an organization might find himself pining for the simpler, easier times of Max Gartner. ❧

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