

Curt Harnett eyes long-term impact in role as Canada's chef de mission for Toronto's 2015 Pan American Games

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – The title is Canada's chef de mission for Toronto's Pan American Games in 2015 but the post carries weight well beyond those two weeks in mid-July less than two years from now.

The work has already started and the impact will be felt long after the lights from the closing ceremony have dimmed and the athletes have departed.

Curt Harnett, Canada's most successful international cyclist who served as assistant chef for the country at the 2011 Pan Am Games in Guadalajara, Mexico, is prepared for that challenge after being [named to the role](#) by the Canadian Olympic Committee.

"I am ready for the task ahead and I accept this massive responsibility," said Harnett at the Pan American Sports Organization (PASO) general assembly in Toronto. "These Games matter, they matter because of the unprecedented investment into sport in this region. It's something that we in sport have long waited for and it's critical – it ensures that our athletes continue to pursue excellence right here at home. The investment will provide the foundation for success for all our athletes from all across this country for years to come. Toronto 2015 is a game-changer, I say this because this is not just about a few weeks of competition, it's about building a legacy for future champions."

Marcel Aubut, the president of the COC, was thrilled to be able to bring the Canadian Sports Hall of Famer aboard to fill such a visible and publicly influential position.

"We were looking for someone from Toronto, a child of this city. A natural ambassador, a natural leader, and a great

athlete with great credentials and achievements," said Aubut. "Curt is one of Canada's most decorated Olympians and we are so grateful that he has accepted this great responsibility. I have full confidence that Canada's Pan American athletes will benefit greatly from his extensive experience, unending passion, and tremendous intensity. Honestly, with those criteria there was only one real choice for us as chef de mission."

Harnett is a four-time Olympian, competing for Canada at the Games in Los Angeles in 1984, Seoul in 1988, Barcelona in 1992, and Atlanta in 1996, and a three-time medallist, winning silver in the 1000m time trial in 1984 and bronze in 1992 and 1996 in the sprint.

To go along with the long list of on-track accolades, fellow Olympian Adam van Koeeverden reminds us that Harnett may be best remembered for his flowing blonde locks and the [endorsements](#) that followed.

"This is a guy that I've been looking up to for as long as I've been an athlete and as long as I've been watching shampoo commercials on TV," quipped van Koeeverden.

Now before the Olympic medals and the TV spots, an 18-year-old Harnett brought his bike to the Pan Am Games in Caracas, Venezuela, the first time he rode competitively on the international stage for Canada.

"Caracas in '83 was my first multi-sport games experience. It set me up and prepared me for the Olympics in 1984," said Harnett. "It is my intent for the next two years to illustrate to Canadians, and specifically those in Toronto and the greater Golden Horseshoe, that if you're a sports fan you're going to love the Pan Am Games."

He returned to the Pan Am Games in 1987 in Indianapolis, where he won two medals including a gold in the 1000m time trial. The now 48-year-old Harnett wore his country's colours with great pride but admits he wouldn't have reached the same athletic peak had he not left home.

"I had to travel the world. I had to leave Canada to do what I needed to do. Facilities-wise we really didn't have what we're going to have, like the velodrome here, just a proper infrastructure there to train like we needed to train," said Harnett. "I think that's one of the fitting things about establishing the facilities here across many sports that are going to give us an opportunity to better use our resources."

Like many Canadians, Harnett's first love was hockey. He was pretty good too, earning himself a [tryout in the OHL](#), but by then what had started as a means to stay in shape during the offseason had taken over his heart. Turning to cycling changed his life.

"I was a kid introduced to a sport that was off the beaten track by a guy that cared. When you have these type of facilities in existence, that naturally occurs."

A large number of sports facilities are being built or refurbished around Southern Ontario for the Games. In Harnett's eyes, every venue presents an opportunity to expose youth to multiple sports in one common location. The more sports, the better.

"I'll speak to the facility that I'm most familiar with at this stage and that's the velodrome. It's going to be this perfect balance between a community centre and a high performance training centre. To imagine that I'm going to see kids on the infield playing basketball, because we can fit three full-sized courts on the infield, and they're going to see kids whirling around on a bike. To me that's the perfect marriage of what sport opportunity is, because not everybody is going to become a Michael Jordan, or LeBron James, or Andrew Wiggins. We have to say that same thing about Sidney Crosby.

"There's the community legacy that's as important as anything and that's creating an opportunity that provides some diversity as to the choices that a child can make into what sport they want to get themselves involved in."

All these years later, as he watches a local transformation an aspiring athlete of his age could only have dreamed of

seeing in Canada, Harnett is working to make that dream a reality for future generations. Just call him a man on a mission.

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