

## Freya's Experience at the World University Games



### *Start of First Race*

This March, I had the once in a lifetime opportunity to represent Canada at the World Universiade in Krasnoyarsk Russia, for which I qualified while studying engineering at the University of Alberta. The Universiade is a multisport event, hosted every two years for student athletes from around the world. Krasnoyarsk is an industrial city in the heart of Siberia; it is over 4,000 km east of Moscow and over a thousand kilometres north of the Mongolian boarder. I never dreamed that I would find myself sent to Siberia, and every moment of the trip was an adventure.



### *Outside of the Athletes' Village*

After 30 hours of connecting flights to the opposite side of the Northern Hemisphere, I arrived in Krasnoyarsk airport into the midst of the welcoming army of volunteer attachés, traditional Russian dancers and musicians. This welcome was the first hint of the magnitude of the event and the seriousness with which it was taken by our Russian hosts. Arriving with me were over 3000 athletes from 58 countries, who competed in 76 events in 11 sports, along with their coaches and support teams. The total budget of the games was \$688 Mill (US), but much of that will provide a lasting infrastructure legacy to the city.

After my transfer to the athletes' village, I spent the first couple days orienting myself and trying to adjust to the +15-hour time zone change. The athletes' village comprised residential apartments, a lounge and fitness centre, a dining hall, and a cultural centre, where we could play with adorably fluffy Siberian huskies and feed a reindeer. The dining hall was an adventure. The kitchen staff struggled to evolve over the course of the games to accommodate the multitude of cultures and dietary specifications. The mainstay of all meals was potatoes, prepared in at least five ways and dripping with butter. Because the games fell over a Russian holiday to celebrate the coming of spring, we were served traditional Russian pancakes (these represented the return of the sun after winter), tea, and chocolate. All meals were accompanied by live music, interrupted by sporadic announcements about the day's podium sweeps for Russia (Russia won 112 medals – 98 more than Japan in second place). The dining hall was the nexus for the multinational friendships that formed between athletes, and I expect a United Nations of visitors to Vancouver over the coming years.



### ***The Opening Ceremonies***

The scale of the opening ceremonies rivaled those of the Olympics. At first, we were held in tent, where we got to know other athletes, exchange national pins, and strike up conversations. Marching into the Olympic size ice arena as part one of the largest teams at the games (87 athletes) was exhilarating. The arena was filled with music, dancers and crowds of cheering supporters. Upon taking our seats, we listened to speeches from the head of the games, the head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and President Vladimir Putin, who officially opened the games. The torch was lit, and the performances began from ceiling to floor of the arena - trapeze artists flew in the air over Russian ballet dancers and figure skaters. The colours and sounds were overwhelming.

After this long night of excitement, it was time for the competitions to start on a sunny day with perfect race conditions. Our first races were a 5km classic and a skate pursuit. We were all nervous on the morning of the first race, not knowing what to expect, especially since President Putin came to watch.

Competing with me were athletes from around the world, including the Russian national team with former Olympians. While many of the athletes were university students, some of the athletes had travelled directly from the World Championships in Seefeld to the games; the divide in competition between the world cup athletes and university athletes was very apparent. The races were fast, and the course was challenging, with big climbs and little opportunity for rest on the downhill. I personally love climbing and so I thought the courses were well suited to my strengths.



### ***Double Pole Mania***

Next in the week of competition came the sprints. One Canadian, Alex Maycock, qualified for the heats in the men's race, and it was fun to get to cheer him on from the stands. My next race was as anchor skate leg of the 3x5km relay. This race was my favorite because of the added team element – we were 10th. My last race was the 15km skate mass start. The start of this race required sharp elbows to get into a good position. Within the first couple of kilometers there was a big downhill, on which I was tripped up by another skier and then crashed into by a second. I killed myself trying to catch back up to the pack I wanted to be with, but did not quite have enough energy left once I caught up to stick with them. The lesson I learned about such a large mass start will hopefully carry into next season.

With one day left until the end of the games, the Nordic girls could finally relax. The Boys still had a 30km to race and we all went to cheer them on. A Japanese skier lead this race from the start and crushed the Russians in only the second non-Russian cross-country ski medal of the games. Also of special note, was our Canadian teammate Aidan Kirkham who had the race of his life and finished 20<sup>th</sup> overall – this was the top Canadian cross country result of the games.

The Games officially wrapped up with the closing ceremonies, where the Universiade flag was handed over to Switzerland, where the next games will be held in two years. The evening was spent celebrating the end of an amazing two weeks. I feel incredibly grateful to have been given this opportunity. I met so

many incredible people from many countries, including Norway, Argentina, Czech Republic, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Finland, Sweden, Poland, Switzerland, Russia, and many more. I hope to cross paths with at least some of these people in the future.



***Team Canada***

Thank you to everyone who supported me in preparing for the games this year and throughout my ski career, including my family. I feel so grateful to Hollyburn for being the most amazing club. Without your support both personally and financially I would not have been able to have this opportunity. Thank you to Jake Weaver for being the best coach; thank you for all of the hard work you put into helping me achieve my goals this year. Thank you also to sponsorship from Coast Outdoors. In sharing this experience at the World University Games, I hope I have convinced Hollyburn's younger athletes that it is possible to pursue a post secondary education while competing in elite sports, with international opportunities.

Sincerely,

Freya Hik