

## Military bobsledders dominate 4-man event at U.S. National Championships

By Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs

**LAKE PLACID, N.Y.** - Military athletes displayed the past, present and future of USA Bobsledding at the 2009 Four-man U.S. National Bobsled Championships Jan. 10-11 at the Olympic Sports Complex.

Former and current U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program drivers swept the top three spots and an Air Force WCAP pilot finished fifth at the site of the 1932 and 1980 Winter Olympic Games.

Steven Holcomb, a former member of the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program, teamed with Justin Olsen, Steve Mesler and Curt Tomasevicz to win the four-man championship with a four-heat cumulative time of 3 minutes, 37.09 seconds on the 1-mile track.



U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program bobsled pilot Pfc. John Napier gets a push from teammates Jessie Beckom III, Jamie Moriarty and Cory Butner en route to their second-place finish at the 2009 Four-man U.S. National Bobsled Championships Jan. 11 in Lake Placid, N.Y. The quartet will compete for Team USA in the 2009 World Championships Feb. 20-March 1 in Lake Placid. Photo by Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs

WCAP Pfc. John Napier and teammates Jessie Beckom III, Jamie Moriarty and Cory Butner finished second in 3:38:66. Former WCAP Sgt. Mike Kohn of the Army National Guard Outstanding Athlete Program teamed with Rocky Lanz, Jacob Miller and Nick Cunningham to finish third in 3:39.81. Air Force Staff Sgt. Michael Bradley finished fifth in 3:42.72, with Avian Jordan, Ben Fogel and Derek Kresser aboard his red sled.

Holcomb and Napier will compete for Team USA at the 2009 World Bobsled Championships Feb. 20 through March 1 in Lake Placid.

"This means validation," said Napier, 22, of Lake Placid, the youngest athlete in the group. "I'm good enough, I'm here, and I made it free and clear. I've made the World Championships, so I'm really happy."

One week earlier, Napier also qualified for the World Championships by winning the national two-man crown.

"He's no longer little John Napier, the junior bobsledder," said Holcomb, 28, of Park City, Utah. "He's coming around. He was national champion last week, which is cool, and he finished second today, so he's on the World Championship Team again, which is huge."

"He was a good driver to start with, and now he's getting the physical side down. His pushes are coming down and he's getting faster, so he's going to be a threat in February."

Army WCAP and Team USA bobsled coach Sgt. Bill Tavares has helped Napier develop for the past decade.

"I've worked with him since he was 12," said Tavares, who also lives in Lake Placid. "He's been around for a while as a kid slowly coming through the junior ranks. He's a tall kid growing into his body. With his driving skills, he's just made that jump into the next level, and he's probably going to make one more."

"Right now, he's an up-and-coming driver. He's our future. We expect big things from him. He probably has great stuff in him for 2014 and even 2018 because he's so young, and he's still having fun."

"Coming into the Guard was probably one of the best things that ever happened to him. It taught him a skill after high school. He's learning a lot of stuff and he has direction now, so the military has been very positive for him."

Napier has been Olympic bobsled dreaming for as long as he can remember.

"My dad discovered this sport back in the late '60s and fell in love with it – just saw it one time and said he had to do it," Napier said of his "idol," Bill Napier. "He started sliding and made it up to the national level. When he was sliding, he bought a house out on the main road here – the entrance road, actually – about a mile away. It was just a good, prime location. He passed away about two years ago, so now I've inherited that."

"My dad met my mom at the bobsled track. She was a bobsled brakeman, and that's how they met. It was kind of a chosen path for me. I really don't ever remember having a choice of where I was going or what I was doing – it was bobsled since the age of 8. I was out here in the pee-wee program and I just kept going through junior programs and whatnot, and here I am 14 years later on the U.S. World Championships Team and sliding for the Army, as well. It's great."

Napier credits the military for keeping him on the bobsled tracks to success.

"I reached the point in my career the last few years where I just couldn't go any farther because, financially, this sport is the second-most expensive Olympic sport there is, next to equestrian riding," he said. "The runners alone – the blades we slide on – are \$5,000 to \$10,000 a pair and I usually purchase two new sets a year because sets of runners go faster on different tracks under different conditions, different temperatures, on different days."

"It's a really expensive sport with all the traveling, and shipping big, heavy equipment around. I joined the Army and was able to be accepted into the World Class Athlete Program, which has helped me out and got me here where I'm at."

The stories of Holcomb and Kohn somewhat resemble Napier's, much like



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muffled echoes in the Adirondack Mountains snow.

"There's no way I would've been able to support myself and the things that I've done without the backing of such a huge team, a huge family," Holcomb said of serving seven years in the Army World Class Athlete Program. "I'm proud of my country and I have a lot of respect for our Soldiers. It's an honor to represent them."

Kohn spent eight years in the Army World Class Athlete Program before joining the National Guard Outstanding Athlete Program.

"In the offseason, we do a lot of recruiting events, talking to schools, going to NASCAR races or whatever other events we might do to promote

the Guard as a Soldier and an athlete," said Kohn, 36, of Chantilly, Va. "It's a fair balance between the two. They ask us for roughly three or four days every two or three weeks to do a recruiting mission. It cuts into your training schedule a little bit, but at the end of the day, the support that you get from them financially is unmatched really with any other sponsor."

The military bobsledders visit schools to talk with students, flash their medals, show their videos – "to show them what we do," Kohn explained. "To show them that the National Guard is about more than what they probably think it is."

"It's a great program. I'm thankful to be in the Guard, thankful to be an athlete. Yeah, I'm at the end of my career, but I've got a year to go and then I'll probably give back to the National Guard when I'm done with this in some other capacity. I'm halfway to retirement, believe it or not."

Bradley, 24, of Hill Air Force Base, Utah, made an unsuccessful two-year run at making the 2006 U.S. Olympic Team before deploying to Iraq. Now he's back in the sled and pointed toward Vancouver for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

"Being off the ice for two years set us back a little bit, but this season is an eye-opener of what I need to be doing to get to the next level and get back to where I was when I went back into the Air Force," Bradley said. "We're going to try and do everything we can to get as close to the Olympic Team as we can. Next season will be our big season to come out for the team trials and see where we go from there. This season is just kind of a mark of where we need to be and what we need to do during the off-season."

A native of Philadelphia, Bradley moved to Rhode Island and began bobsledding at age 12. Six years later, he competed on the America's Cup circuit. In 2004, he stepped up to the Europa Cup.

"My main goal and my final goal would be to make the U.S. Olympic Team," he said. "Right now we're just taking the steps we've got to take to get there and climbing up the ladder, little by little."

But now, Holcomb and Napier are firmly planted in Team USA driver's seats.

"Last year was my first World Championships in Altenburg, Germany," Napier said. "This will be my second one, so I'm hoping on my home track that I can better it. I'm hoping to podium."

Holcomb, who finished fourth in both the two-man and four-man World Cup standings last season, is stoked to have the World Championships on U.S. ice.

"It's very exciting," Holcomb said of Lake Placid playing host to the rest of the world. "The United States hasn't won a World Championship medal in 60 years or something, and this is going to be one of our best chances because this track is difficult, it's fast, it's intimidating. They'll only get six runs to figure it out, and we've probably had 12 or 15 already in these past two weeks."



U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program bobsled pilot Pfc. John Napier drives Jessie Beckom III, Jamie Moriarty and Cory Butner to a runner-up finish in the 2009 Four-man U.S. National Bobsled Championships Jan. 11 in Lake Placid, N.Y. They will compete for Team USA at the 2009 World Bobsled Championships, scheduled for Feb. 20 through March 1 at the Olympic Sports Complex in Lake Placid. Photo by Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs