



U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program and Team USA skeleton coach Sgt. 1st Class Tuffy Latour leads Noelle Pikus-Pace (right) to an Olympic silver medal and Katie Uhlaender to a fourth-place finish in women's skeleton Friday night at Sanki Sliding Centre in Krasnaya Polyana, Russia. (U.S. Army photo by Tim Hipps, IMCOM Public Affairs)

# Army Coach Leads Team USA to More Olympic Medals

*By Tim Hipps*

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**U**.S. Army World Class Athlete Program and Team USA Olympic skeleton coach Sgt. 1st Class Tuffy Latour received a whole lot of love from his skeleton athletes on Valentine's Night at Sanki Sliding Centre.

Latour, 45, a four-time Olympic coach from Saranac Lake, N.Y., has led U.S. and Canadian athletes to six Olympic medals. He helped coach Team USA's Noelle Pikus-Pace to an Olympic silver medal and Katie Uhlaender to a fourth-place finish Friday night in the women's skeleton event.

One day later, Latour led Matt Antoine to an Olympic bronze medal and John Daly to 15th place in men's skeleton.

"He's a rock," Pikus-Pace said. "He's the absolute best coach I've ever had, whether it's track and field, skeleton, softball, basketball or soccer.

"It's not just because of his coaching on the track," she added. "It's because of the sacrifice he makes for us. He puts his athletes first, and he cares so much about us. He's results-based and all about what will make us better as a team."

Uhlaender thanked Latour for his support at the start of the bobsled run, and asked him to hold the good-luck necklace charm she usually wears during competition. It was the Major League Baseball National League Championship ring passed on by her late father, Ted Otto Uhlaender, whose Cincinnati Reds lost the 1972 World Series in seven games to the Oakland Athletics. Katie told Tuffy she wanted to make the final Olympic run on her own — without her father's presence, yet in honor of his name. It was a psychological way of "moving on," so to speak.

Ted Uhlaender, an outfielder for the Minnesota Twins, Cleveland Indians and Cincinnati Reds from 1965 through 1972, died of a heart attack at his ranch in Atwood, Kan., on Feb. 12, 2009, shortly before Katie finished second in the World Cup season finale at Utah Olympic Park in Park City, Utah.

"He made me feel like a warrior," Uhlaender said. "He made me feel like I have a purpose, and I felt like I lost my way when he passed away."

Nonetheless, Katie came roaring back on skeleton tracks and battled through numerous injuries to finish fourth at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games — five years and two days after losing her dad. Seemingly atop her game during the 2012-2013 World Cup skeleton season, Uhlaender again was forced to persevere after suffering a concussion last autumn. Having resiliently rebounded from numerous injuries and surgeries, including a shattered kneecap, Uhlaender expected to be in the medal hunt here.

"I can't help but wonder, what if I hadn't had that concussion, what if I had slid more, what if my start number was better," she said.

Pikus-Pace did not complete her six training runs here for the women's skeleton event and few really knew what troubled the sure-fire Olympic medal contender. She missed some practice runs, and blamed it on back pains. During a post-race press conference after winning the silver and sniffing the flowers, Pikus-Pace admitted that she had sustained a concussion.

"On Wednesday, I had a concussion," Pikus-Pace said. "On Friday, I was getting MRIs. I was pretty out of it. I couldn't see clearly. My vision was blurred, so for medical reasons I could not take those runs. ... My back has bothered me, but my federation was just trying to protect me from the media to protect me for this race. I had the MRIs on Friday and it was just deduced that I needed to take the maximum runs off that I could. But, honestly, I felt my best and I felt very good today."

After likely the final race of her career, Pikus-Pace said she was "confident and coming back," and experienced "only a little vertigo," but, she said, "Lizzy just threw down."

Elizabeth Yarnold won Great Britain's first gold medal of the Sochi Games with a four-run cumulative

time of 3 minutes, 52.89 seconds. Pikus-Pace (3:53.86) took the silver, followed by bronze medalist Elena Nikitina (3:54.30) of host Russia. Uhlaender finished fourth in 3:54.34.

"I slid my heart out," said Uhlaender, 29, of Breckenridge, Colo. "There wasn't anything else I could have done. I am heartbroken."

Already a world champion, World Cup champion and Olympian, Pikus-Pace finally got the Olympic medal that eluded her by one-tenth of a second at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Whistler, B.C., Canada. She retired from skeleton to expand her family, but a miscarriage in 2012 inspired her back onto the fast track. Her husband, Janson, and two children, Lacey and Tracyen, supported her long road to Sochi and were here Friday night to share in the celebration.

"It was worth the wait," Pikus-Pace said. "It was worth every minute of it. Honestly, getting hit by the bobsled, people said: 'Oh man, that's horrible.' Getting fourth at the Olympics, they said: 'Ah, too bad.' Then I had the miscarriage at 18 weeks, and many tears were shed. But if I hadn't gone through every single one of those things I could not be here today. And this is right where I want to be, and to have my family here, the love and support, it's just beyond words — just beyond words."

During another post-race interview, she expressed her sentiments again.

"It is so surreal," Pikus-Pace said. "This is everything I could have imagined and more, just to have my family here with me and all of the love and support and cheers we've had, and all of the trials we've had to overcome to come to this moment. This is as good as gold."

The proud gleam in Coach Latour's eyes seemed to say it all during the flower ceremony.

"It's just incredible," Latour said while riding a van down the mountain from the skeleton start to the finish. "We've been working hard all season [and] for the last two years with Noelle through a lot of ups and downs, and ever since we got here, she just hasn't felt well. It was kind of a battle for her to just even get here to these races. For her to come out and finish second was as good as gold to her."

"She wanted to come out and win a medal at the Olympic Games, and we got her there," he said. "It was little disappointing that we couldn't get Katie up on the medal stand, as well."

U.S. Olympic men's skeleton athletes also praised Latour.

"Tuffy has been the best coach I've ever had in my life," said John Daly, who finished 15th in the Olympic men's skeleton event Feb. 15. "The one thing he's kind of drilled into us is: 'It's a process, it's not about results. You focus on the process. You focus on curves one, then two, and on down.' That's a really hard thing to do,

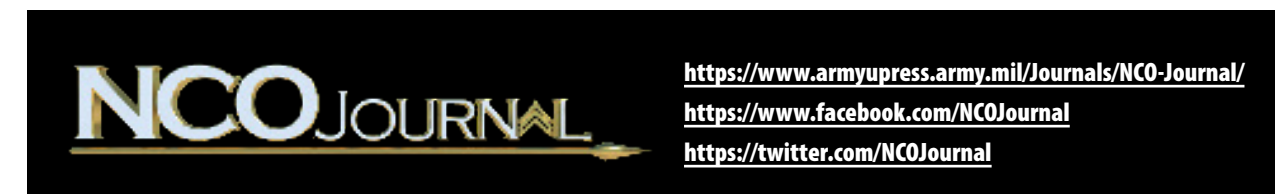
but he's always had confidence in us. He's always kind of believed in us. We look to him when we don't believe in ourselves and we see what he sees, and that's kind of how it goes, and that's kind of why we do well."

Antoine claimed Olympic medal No. 6 for Latour's athletes when he struck bronze in men's skeleton Feb. 15.

"He started with us in 2010 and he's taken the team to new heights," Daly said. "He's taken us all to a medal in each world championships, so you couldn't really ask for a better coach."

"It's great to be in WCAP," Latour said. "Anytime you can serve your country and represent it at the same time, it's very, very special. The Russians have put on a great Olympics. The Sochi Games are awesome. The facilities are first class. This is probably one of the best sliding facilities in the world. They have all these gondolas bringing people to these different facilities. It's spectacular." ■

*(Editor's note: Gary Sheftick of Army News Service and Amanda Bird of USA Skeleton contributed to this article.)*



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