

Utahns play vital role in record medal haul

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Vancouver, British Columbia » It's fitting that four-time Olympian Bill Demong will carry the flag for the U.S. Olympic Team at the closing ceremony of the Vancouver Games tonight.

The first American gold medalist in Nordic combined lives and trains in Park City, and athletes like him from Utah have made a huge contribution to the most successful Winter Games in U.S. Olympic history.

"I have seen a significant change over the four Olympics that I've been to," Demong said. At the 1998 Nagano Games in Japan, "we felt like we were a small country at the Olympic Games. As a whole team, we felt like one of the outsiders at the Winter Olympics. Now, we're here to win."

And win, they did.

The Americans have won 36 medals -- tying the most ever, by any nation -- with the certainty of one more today, when the men's hockey team plays Canada in the much-anticipated gold-medal game. That assures they will win the overall medal count for the first time since the 1932 Lake Placid Games; even when they won 34 medals at the 2002 Salt Lake Games, the Germans topped the table with 36.

Sixteen of those medals came from athletes who live and train in Utah -- from downhill skier Lindsey Vonn and short-track speedskater Apolo Anton Ohno to aerialist Jeret "Speedy" Peterson and history-making bobsled driver Steve Holcomb.

"We're probably the best prepared team," said Mike Plant, the chef de mission for the U.S. team. "You combine that with the passion and the commitment and the dedication" of the athletes, and "you come out with a pretty powerful combination. And we've seen some great results."

The highlight for many Utahns surely had to be Holcomb's dominating victory in the four-man bobsled on Sunday, snapping a 62-year gold-medal drought for the Americans in one of the most popular sports in the Olympics.

Demong was right there, too, as the first American to win gold in one of the Nordic sports -- cross country, ski jumping and combined. He and Park City's Brett Camerota also were part of the silver-medal winning relay team.

Vonn and snowboarder Torah Bright of Salt Lake City won the only other gold medals among Utah athletes, though Bright won her halfpipe gold for Australia, meaning the total medal count for athletes from Utah will be 17. In addition to the hockey game, there is one final men's cross country race today, though no Americans are expected to medal.

A part-time Park City resident, the much-hyped Vonn won the downhill and took bronze in the super-G, but crashed out of her other three races and disappointed those who expected her to fare even better.

Meanwhile, Ohno became the winningest winter Olympian in U.S. history, with his silver and two bronzes giving him eight medals in his career. He has lived in South Jordan while training at the Utah Olympic Oval in Kearns. He probably will move soon to New York or Los Angeles to pursue business opportunities.

"Just seeing all the Americans have so much success -- and not just Alpine, but in all the events -- has been

really cool," Vonn said. "Sitting at home watching TV in the evening and seeing pretty much every event there's an American on the podium. It's very cool to watch and even though I'm living through the Olympics, I'm also still a spectator and I love to see how much success we're having as a team."

In all, 19 athletes were responsible for the Utah medal haul, though nearly 40 others competed, too.

Some were elated to medal or simply participate, such as moguls skier Shannon Bahrke of Salt Lake City and skeleton slider Noelle Pikus-Pace of Orem. But others were disappointed in not improving on past successes.

Skier Ted Ligety finished no better than fifth in his four alpine races, after winning gold at the 2006 Turin Games. Bobsled driver Shauna Rohbock of Orem had hoped for gold after taking silver four years ago, but finished only sixth on the dangerous track that earned worldwide criticism after the death of a Georgian luger in a training crash the day before the Olympics began.

"It's not the Olympics I've dreamed of for four years," she said.

The U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association based in Park City enjoyed a great showing, though, even if it fizzled a bit at the end.

Its athletes won 21 medals, including eight in the first six Alpine events -- that would rank at least fifth on the medal table -- while Kearns-based U.S. Speedskating managed 10 medals, with a lot of help from Ohno and double-medalist Chad Hedrick, who has lived in Draper but plans a move back to his native Texas.

So now, the focus will shift to the 2014 Sochi Games in Russia, a host nation that will be coming off a disappointing performance in Vancouver. They won a modest 15 medals, pending today's cross-country finale.

The Americans, on the other hand, won't have that problem.

But thanks to the athletes from Utah who made the Vancouver Games such a roaring success, they will have a hard time producing an encore.

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Local medalists

Athlete	Connection	Sport	Event	Medal
Bill Demong	Park City	Nordic combined	Large hill	Gold
		Team relay		Silver
Lindsey Vonn	Park City	Alpine skiing	Downhill	Gold
		Super-G		Bronze
Steve Holcomb	Park City	Bobsled	Four-man	Gold
Torah Bright	Salt Lake City	Snowboarding	Halfpipe	Gold
Apolo Anton Ohno	South Jordan	Short-Track	1,500	Silver
			1,000	Bronze
		Team relay		Bronze
Chad Hedrick	Draper	Speedskating	Team pursuit	Silver
			1,000	Bronze
Katherine Reutter	Kearns	Short-track	1,000	Silver
		Team relay		Bronze
Jeret Peterson	Park City	Freestyle skiing	Aerials	Silver
Brett Camerota	Park City	Nordic combined	Team relay	Silver
J.R. Celski	Salt Lake City	Short-Track	1,500	Bronze
		Team relay		Bronze
Bryon Wilson	Park City	Freestyle skiing	Moguls	Bronze
Shannon Bahrke	Salt Lake City	Freestyle skiing	Moguls	Bronze
Allison Baver	Taylorville	Short-track	Team relay	Bronze

Aly Dudek	West Jordan	Short-track	Team relay Bronze
Lana Gehring	Kearns	Short-track	Team relay Bronze
Kimberly Derrick	West Jordan	Short-track	Team relay Bronze
Simon Cho	West Jordan	Short-track	Team relay Bronze
Travis Jayner	West Jordan	Short-track	Team relay Bronze
Jordan Malone	Salt Lake City	Short-track	Team relay Bronze