



Whitehorse anxiously awaits spotlight



Torch bearers

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WHITEHORSE (CP) - Yukon's capital is ready for its close-up.

As the last athletes and coaches trickle into Whitehorse ahead of Friday's opening ceremony for the 2007 Canada Winter Games, the remote city is making final preparations for the biggest multi-sports event ever held north of the 60th parallel.

While bone-chilling temperatures have kept most visitors indoors, evidence of the pre-Games hype still resonates throughout the city. Games banners in a cavalcade of colours dangle from lampposts along Main Street, where downtown vendors have posted signs welcoming the nearly 2,800 athletes and coaches to town. Even the mayor is involved, with City Hall boasting four Games banners featuring Inuit children at play.

The competitors and coaches seem as thrilled to be in Whitehorse as the locals are to have them.

"Our team is so excited to be here," said Cam Berwald, Alberta's chef de mission. "A lot of our kids have never been this far north, so it was an added attraction to making this year's team."

The first of 22 events begins Friday with a pair of round-robin ringette matches at Takhini Arena. Competition begins in earnest Saturday with four events, including long-track speed skating, the first medal event of the 16-day Games.

When the athletes aren't in competition, they'll have plenty to gawk

at in one of Canada's most beautiful cities. Nestled between tree-dotted hills to the east and walls of mountains to the west, Whitehorse provides a picturesque backdrop for the 40th-anniversary edition of the Games.

Spectators will also be treated to one of the more compact Games in recent memory. All events will be held in Whitehorse, with a majority of competitions clustered together in a four-kilometre radius.

"It's wonderful," said Berwald. "With everything so close together, our kids will have a chance to support other members of the team."

The decision to award the Games to Whitehorse was a no-brainer. With the territories starving for facilities and the Games council looking to showcase a largely-unknown commodity, the marriage seemed inevitable.

"It's a double impact," said Moira Lassen, Yukon's assistant chef de mission. "We in the north get the infrastructure, and the southerners get to enjoy a unique part of the country. Both sides benefit."

The biggest benefactors will be the local athletes, who have been blessed with Olympic-calibre training facilities as part of hosting the Games.

Additionally, those from the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut will enjoy a rare home-field advantage, while the rest of the country racks up the frequent-flier miles instead.

"It's great that our athletes won't have to travel, and not be tired out from that experience," said Lassen. "They're really happy about being able to perform in front of their families."

As for the cold, each outdoor sport has its own guidelines on when to postpone competition. Lassen said northern athletes don't necessarily have an advantage in cold climates, since so many of Canada's elite amateur competitors have been through it before.

"Chilliness is all relative," said Lassen. "As long as the athletes dress warm, and wear layers, they should be fine."

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