

Athletes looking ahead to Commonwealth Games, just 3 weeks away

[Cleve Dheensaw](#) / Times Colonist

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*Nathan Hirayama, right, fends off a tackle from England's Ruaridh McConnochie during the London Sevens in Twickenham, London, last year. Hirayama will be at the Commonwealth Games with the Canadian men's rugby sevens team.
Photograph By PAUL HARDING, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*

The blades, ice spray, skis, snowboards and snow-covered peaks of Pyeonchang are about to give way to the surf, sand, tracks, fields and gyms of Gold Coast, Australia.

It might seem to Canadians that the international summer sports season is arriving too quickly this year, but that's what happens when the Southern Hemisphere hosts.

Don't look now, but the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games are only 22 days away.

That fact was acknowledged Monday, which was Commonwealth Day, as Island athletes were recognized at a Gold Coast-themed luncheon held at Government House and attended by B.C. Lt.-Gov. Judith Guichon.

More than 40 Island or Island-based athletes will be competing in the Gold Coast Games for Canada.

“We wish them all well in their Games competition coming up. It’s an opportunity for them, as young people, to build relationships with other young people from 53 nations,” said David Spence, president of the Royal Commonwealth Society Vancouver Island.

Time and again athletes note how different a multi-sport Games is compared to the single-sport championships in which they usually participate.

The Langford-based Canadian men’s rugby sevens team failed to qualify for the 2016 Rio Olympics. But star national-team player and former University of Victoria Vikes great Nathan Hirayama said he is grateful for having had a taste of it at the 2010 Delhi and 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games and 2015 Toronto Pan Am Games, as he will again next month in Gold Coast, en route to 2020 Tokyo Olympics qualifying.

“You feel part of a greater Canadian team and greater Canadian experience at a Games,” said Hirayama.

“There are so many more distractions you learn to deal with as you compete. But it’s also a ton of fun. We went to watch and cheer on other Canadian athletes in wrestling, swimming and track. When do you get a chance to do that in [rugby-only events]?”

Some of the Gold Coast-bound national team athletes based on the Island train here through legacy funding from the 1994 Victoria Commonwealth Games. That fund is known as 94 Forward and its current capital of more than \$20 million is administered by a board chaired by former Oak Bay High and UBC Thunderbirds basketball star, and former B.C. deputy minister of finance, Chris Trumpy. Former national team rugby assistant coach John MacMillan is president of 94 Forward and former Camosun College vice-president and CFO Peter Lockie the treasurer. The directors are Robin Richardson, former national men’s team field hockey manager and currently director of the Bayview Place DC Bank Open PGA Tour Canada stop at Uplands, consultant and executive Robin Dyke, former B.C. Investment Management Corporation senior vice-president Lynn Hannah, and lawyer and 2008 Beijing Olympic gold-medallist rower Kyle Hamilton.

94 Forward is unique in that it is not tied to any government sport funding agency or national sport governing body.

“The fund is independent and acts as a complement to what the formal Canadian sport system is doing,” said MacMillan.

“Our continuing theme is stewardship of the capital fund that has been in place since 1994. Through that careful stewardship, we started for Sydney in 2000, and through Athens, Beijing, London and Rio, have continued to provide opportunities for Canadian athletes.”

National governing bodies with training centres on the Island include Rowing Canada, Rugby Canada, Swimming Canada, Athletics Canada, Triathlon Canada, Cycling Canada, Golf Canada and Tennis Canada.

94 Forward has selected Triathlon Canada and Athletics Canada middle distance for its in-depth support.

“We want to impact projects in a fulsome and deep way. As an independent fund, we lose relevance if we go too thin,” said MacMillan.

With the respective Simon Whitfield and Gary Reed and Diane Cummins eras behind them, both Triathlon Canada and middle-distance Canadian track faced rebuilding. 94 Forward has jumped in with helping establish the Triathlon Canada training centre in the region and the middle-distance Western Training Hub at the new PISE track on the Camosun College Interurban campus.

“Triathlon Canada faced a very challenging time at the 2012 London and 2016 Rio Olympics, and so did high-performance middle-distance locally after Gary, Diane and Zack [Whitmarsh], so we saw a need there for support,” said MacMillan.

He said he will be watching closely the results of the rebuild in those two programs as the summer Games cycle heads into Gold Coast in three weeks for the Commonwealth Games and into Lima, Peru, next year for the 2019 Pan Am Games through to the conclusion of the cycle at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

“Any fool can spend \$20 million,” said MacMillan.

“The point is to take care of it [the capital] and have a continuing impact in sport.”

The 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games run April 4-15.

cdheensaw@timescolonist.com