



FILIPINO-CANADIAN IN FOCUS:

Gilmore Junio

Olympic Speed Skater

BY EARL VON TAPIA
Philippine Canadian Inquirer

MANY PEOPLE work and train hard for hours a day, every day, for years on end, just to get the chance to compete at the highest levels of their sport and represent their country at the Olympic games. Not everyone makes it.

Indeed, this could have been the story of Gilmore Junio, a Filipino-Canadian born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, who near the start of his speed-skating career injured his back and contemplated hanging up his skates all-together. But through

perseverance and the unwavering support of his parents and family, Gilmore found a way to overcome his setbacks, switch gears, and eventually earn the right to represent Canada as a Long Track speed skater at the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.

Like all good Canadian boys though, Gilmore's first encounter with an ice rink was to play hockey.

"When I heard a bunch of my friends started playing hockey and my brother started playing hockey, that's kind of how I got into winter sports," said Gilmore.

Gilmore mentioned how

there was an outdoor rink near his house and that he "basically grew up" on that sheet of ice.

"I would spend 8 hours on some days, weekends and weekdays, just skating there and playing hockey with my friends. That's one of the big memories of my childhood, is just playing hockey in that outdoor rink," he said.

The transition from hockey to speed skating was initiated by his father, Gino.

"I started speed skating when I was 13. My dad was watching TV and he saw an ad for a camp at the [speed skating] oval for speed skating. It was right around the age when we

started hitting in hockey... the kids started getting a lot bigger, and I wasn't getting any bigger, I was still pretty small. I don't know if he was fearing for my safety or not, but he suggested I try it out," he said.

Gino had put Gilmore into power skating classes as a child, and that helped Gilmore transition into the sport of speed skating. At one of these speed skating camps, a coach saw the potential he had and suggested Gilmore join the speed skating club.

Gilmore excelled at the skating, but it was the supportive community of speed skaters that helped him stick around.

"The speed skating community has been amazing. I've made a lot of friends and met a lot of amazing people... everyone was just supportive and wanted everyone to do well. It was something that I hadn't really been used to, and so it was an environment I wanted to be in," he said.

But tragedy struck early in his career. Gilmore was a short track speed skater, and during a competition in 2009, he was injured during a race and fractured two of his vertebrae in his back. The injury nearly ended his short career.

"Getting home from that competition where I got in-



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jured, sitting in my bed with two fractured vertebrae in my back, having thoughts of quitting . . . was that my last competition? Was that my last race? That was definitely a low point where I didn't really know what was going to happen," he said.

But Gilmore quickly decided not to admit defeat. He recuperated and switched gears to the long track discipline. Two months later, he was in Moscow representing Canada for the first time at an international race.

The rest of the story can be described as nothing less than a dream come true. In 2012, he won his first World Cup medal, a silver, in Nagano, Japan. In 2013, he won his first gold medal at a World Cup event in Salt Lake City, USA. Early in 2014, he qualified for his first Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

He made headlines in Sochi, though it wasn't for the most ideal reasons. After finishing 10th place in the 500m event, he gave up his spot to teammate Denny Morrison who went on to win the silver medal in the 1000m event. Gilmore's sacrifice was much appreciated by Denny and his team, and praised by everyone else for the selfless act.

Despite that, he says that the Sochi experience was so far the highlight of his career.

"It was almost surreal, it doesn't feel like real life . . . it's just really cool to be around the athletes, you get to see some of the athletes you watch on TV playing hockey, you see them walking around the cafeteria, just like you they're athletes trying to do their countries proud . . . when I look back at the Olympics, I can't believe I actually did that," he said.

At every step of the way, from his first days with the speed skating club, all the way to Sochi and beyond, Gilmore always mentioned the love and support he received from his family and how integral it was to his success.

Gilmore's parents Gino and Julie came to Canada from the Philippines separately, but met in Winnipeg in the 70s. They moved to Calgary in the 80s and started a family. Gilmore has two siblings, an older brother and older sister who have been with him "since day one".

Gino was a tool and die manager who worked hard to establish a life here in Canada, an impression that was not lost on Gilmore who says that example was "huge" for him growing up. Gino is now retired.

The rest of his family has also been really supportive of his career. They were there at the side of the track when Gilmore qualified for the Olympics, and the entire extended Junio clan even joined him in Sochi.

"Sharing that experience with my mom and dad who game me so much and sacrificed a lot so I could push through my dream of going to the Olympics, and my brother and sister being there, they've been with me since day one and they've seen how much the sport means to me and being an Olympian means

to me, and being able to share that with them is definitely a highlight . . . I can't reiterate how great a feeling it is to share something like that with people that knew me before I even started speed skating," he said.

For now, Gilmore is still competing at competitions. Since the Olympics he has won a Silver and Bronze medal at World Cup competitions, in addition to a 6th place finish. He is also attending school, studying coaching and kinesiology to become a physiotherapist for the eventual day that he has to hang up his competitive skates.

He hopes to compete in the 2018 Winter Olympics, when he'll be 27 years old and in his prime. And this time, he'll go not to just give up his spot and watch from the sidelines, but to win the gold. ■

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