

## FOCUS ON WINNERS: CHANDRA CRAWFORD

She's the Olympic champion for the women's cross-country sprint and became a global YouTube star thanks to her singing performance on the podium in Turin, but Chandra Crawford has spent the last year working hard to recover from injury so that she can defend her title at the next Winter Olympics, in Vancouver in February, 2010.



# Sprint champion on comeback trail

**I**n February 2006, Chandra Crawford of Canada took the world of women's cross-country skiing by surprise when she powered her way to an Olympic gold for the sprint event, skiing the 1,100 metre-course in a time of two minutes and 12.3 seconds. The then 22-year-old from Canmore, Alberta, was still relatively unknown on the World Cup circuit and far from fancied for the top prize in Turin, but she got faster with every round of the competition and edged out Germany's Claudia Künzel in the final.

She went on immediately to give the performance of the Games on the medal rostrum, singing her heart out and lighting up the Alpine dusk with a broad smile. The reaction to this of the Canadian television presenter back home—he said that this was how anyone lucky enough to win Olympic gold in the future should sing 'Oh Canada', and spoke of burly production people bursting into tears on seeing and hearing her—means the clip is still a hit on video-sharing website YouTube nearly four years on.

Those four years have passed quickly and the next Winter Olympics, in Vancouver in February,

*Raw power: Olympic cross-country sprint champion, Chandra Crawford (centre), shows why she's number one.*

*Chandra Crawford/  
activ8 Communications*

are just around the corner. Showing herself to be a mistress of the understatement, Chandra Crawford describes her preparation for the defence of her title as “up and down”. She missed the whole of last winter’s World Cup season because of injury, and, eventually, in February, resigned herself to receiving surgery to try to put her suffering from compartment syndrome—in which increased pressure, usually caused by inflammation within a fascial compartment in the body, impairs blood supply—to an end.

### Back in training

By the early summer, she was back in training, running and cycling in and around Canmore, which hosted the cross-country events when the Winter Olympics were last in Canada (Calgary 1988). She also hooked up again with the Canadian Olympic squad, taking part in training camps on home soil, at Mammoth Lakes in California (“for a big altitude burst”; it’s 2,400 metres up), and in New Zealand for some skiing in winter conditions. Her hope is that this will stand her in good enough stead to make an impression when racing starts with the new World Cup season in November and December. “I feel pretty ready, but I have to get a top-20 finish in a World Cup sprint event to make the Olympic team,” she says. “If I can do that, I’ll be ready to rock in February.”

To pull this off will be a considerable achievement. As well as compartment syndrome, her lower leg injury problems have included bursitis in her ankle, which, like compartment syndrome, is usually caused by repetitive strain and excessive pressure. All of this is bad news for someone with “bony feet who has to wear ski boots”. Paying close attention to her boots has been one of the principal ways in which she has looked to make changes to ease the strain. “The orthotic footbeds I was using in my ski boots, and in all my footwear, were way too stiff,” she says now. “It was a type of product that was simply not appropriate for my body because of the amount of running around I do on mountains. I’m the same whether I’m in a competition or in training or at a dance party at night. I tend not to hold back.” Taking her footwear concerns a bit further, she spent some time in France before her training programme kicked in again with her supplier, Salomon. The company has modified the boots it makes for her by creating more room in the cuff for her ankle.

Her favourite headgear also comes from a European supplier, Barcelona-based Buff. “I love the way you can fold the fabric into a headband, a face-mask or a scarf,” she explains. “When you wear it around your neck, it really seals off the top of your jacket; it’s like adding an extra layer



*A string of injuries and a change in format mean Chandra Crawford will have to work extra hard to defend her title at the next Winter Olympics in Vancouver in February, 2010.*

*Chandra Crawford/  
activ8 Communications*

of clothing, but without the weight.” And she loves the long leggings that Halti of Finland supplies, its Nuclei pants, which are usually worn for base- or mid-layer warmth. They wick moisture from the skin to the outer surface, which is durable and matt, while the inner surface is soft and made from brushed fabric. They also have soft, non-chafing seams with a flatlock structure for extra comfort. But another base-layer favourite for Ms Crawford are the thin, soft tops from a local brand, Lululemon. These are made from blends of cotton, Lycra and the Vancouver-based company’s own Vitasea fabric, which contains Seacell, the yarn derived from seaweed and cellulosic fibre, and, Lululemon insists, gives wearers the extra benefit of bringing their skin into contact with the vitamins, minerals and amino acids in the fabric.

### Confidence boost

Lululemon is also a major sponsor of Fast and Female, an initiative the Olympic champion helped set up four years ago to encourage girls in Canada to be more confident and become more active in skiing and other sports activities. “I like companies that take the whole message on board,” she says. “Our sponsors have to be people who do more than just give us something. We want people who buy into the whole philosophy. Lululemon is a good example; they give the girls who come to Fast and Female events swag-bags with some of their products and the girls love to put the garments on right away because they make them feel like getting fit.”

Returning to clothing for top competitors, she explains that the ski-suits the Canadian Olympic team wears for elite competitions are



*Fast and Female is an initiative Chandra Crawford helped set up four years ago. With the support of companies such as sportswear brand Lululemon, she works hard to encourage Canadian girls to take part in sport.*

 Chandra Crawford/activ8 Communications

standard issue rather than being left to the choice of the individual athletes. She loves the “amazing” nylon, Lycra and polyester tops Sport Hill supplies in various thicknesses. She can say little about the latest developments on the ski-suits themselves, except that they involve “top secret” innovations that the team managers believe will make a difference. They are at extra pains to return an impressive haul of medals at Vancouver because the home nation won no golds at Calgary 1988. Her only mild criticisms over what she is given to wear are that she likes socks that are thin and that reach the mid-calf. She’s not sure the sock suppliers are paying close enough attention to the fact that women’s calves are a different shape from men’s. “I’d also like a hat that doesn’t look as dorky this time. That would be a big improvement; I had to secure the last one with my ponytails,” she comments.

If Chandra Crawford does make the Olympic Team, she will have to fight extra hard to defend her sprint title. This time around, the race will be in the classic style rather than the freestyle or skate-ski format under which she won her gold medal in Turin in 2006, and in which her raw power helps her excel. The International Olympic Committee seems to be having a little difficulty in making its mind up about which of the formats to stick with: it was classic in 2002, freestyle in 2006, and is now reverting back to classic. The main differences between the two are that a classic race takes place on prepared grooves in the snow, with athletes double-poling their way towards the finish. In freestyle races, they push one ski outwards at an angle each time, much like ice-skaters (which is why this format is also called skate-skiing).

At Vancouver 2010, the shortest distance over which individual women athletes will race freestyle is 10 kilometres, but there is better news for Ms Crawford in that the team sprint (relay) race will allow her to show her skate-skiing strength and expertise. You can tell, though, that she still wants a shot at defending her individual Olympic title. She will need to stay injury-free and, as mentioned, post some good results in the early part of the World Cup season. But if she can do that, the advantage of having the home crowd behind her, of having skied at the Olympic site many times in the past, and of being a natural-born fighter could still be enough to allow her to sing an encore from the winner’s podium. 