

South Okanagan ski coach an Olympic judge

By J.P. SQUIRE

Jerome Jang is about to enter the hotbed of Olympic cross-country competition.

The 56-year-old head coach at Nickel Plate Nordic Club in the South Okanagan is crossing his fingers, joking he hopes he won't end up on the evening news as the technical judge who disqualified a potential medal winner.

Jang, a former national team coach, is a judge in course competition control, the lead member of a technical team.

Three to five technical teams - depending on the length of the race - observe cross-country competitors to ensure they aren't interfering with other racers, for example. Or skating when they should be using classic technique. Or three-four racers from one country getting in front as a racing tactic and then trying to slow everyone else down.

"I'm the guy who gets you disqualified so I'm not real popular," Jang explained this week with a laugh.

Technical teams have three members: a judge, a spotter and a videographer.

When they observe an athlete who could be potentially disqualified, they bring their allegations and the videotape to a judges chambers. A panel of judges, who will also have access to numerous commercial TV video feeds at the Olympics, can then disqualify an athlete if it is a genuine infraction.

Technical teams will be stationed at key locations for all 10 cross-country Olympic events: sprints, relays and distance races for men and women.

"As an official, you don't want your face on the news. You don't want to be mentioned. We want everything to be done just right," said Jang.

A potential disqualification can quickly turn volatile as he found out at a Parasnordic World Cup in March 2009.

"The Russian skier came around this corner and actually cut off and almost pushed this other skier off the course. We caught it all on tape so we disqualified him and we sent that in. It turned out that the Russian skier would have been the gold medalist."

When officials told the Russians they were disqualified, the team manager, the coach and the skier all rushed to the judges chambers.

"And they were all pounding on the table, saying 'What is going on?'" recalled Jang.

"We walked in, put in the videotape and showed them exactly what happened, where it was and what the infraction was.

They all just sort of got up and left. As a result, the Canadian won the bronze medal in that particular race," he said.

"With something like that, you don't want to make mistakes. You want to make sure that people who are violating the rules, having infractions, are caught but you don't want to affect the race negatively either."

During those three days of racing at Callaghan Valley, five different racers were disqualified and four others were cautioned.

Jang, a coach for 30 years and a level-two judge, has coached members of the national cross-country ski team as well as officiated at World Cup competitions.

With the Olympic Games so close to his home in Penticton, he didn't want to go there as a coach.

"I know what kind of pressure those guys are under. They are up there early, early in the morning, especially down in Callaghan with the changeable conditions, trying to figure out the waxes, the (snow) structure, the ski and all that stuff. But I thought I'd like to be involved in some capacity," he said.

"I thought this would be a really good fit both my technical and my officiating career."

Jang had an opportunity to coach with the national team at the 1988 Calgary Olympics but life - and having children - got in the way. "When this opportunity came around, I thought 'Geez, I've just got to get into it.' I'm really excited. I think it's going to be great."

He's also officiating on a technical team at the Paralympic Games on March 13-21.

"You know, if I had my druthers, if I had only one event to go to, I think I would have picked the Paralympics over the Olympics. They are a little less stressful, fewer athletes and you get to stay right at the athletes' village with the athletes," he said with another laugh.

Many of those selected for the Olympic cross-country competition come from the Vancouver-Whistler corridor but a lot of them didn't have high-level officiating experience.

So Jang has gone down four-five times during the past two years to train the technical teams and help them get the experience at five national and international events, including a World Cup, a national championship and a NorAm.

"A number of them have taken level-one and level-two officiating in preparation for the Olympics. They are all trained and ready to go now," he said.

Olympic organizers did receive applications from experienced officials who live across Canada and even in Alaska. About 20 are working on the technical teams. Then there are 10 groomers, 20 volunteers touching up the corners between races and 20 more on course control - keeping spectators back.

"All told, I would bet you there are more officials than the 180-200 racers," said Jang.

Jang, formerly employed by the Ministry of Forests, was one of the founding members of Nickel Plate Nordic Club, which was established after the 1987 B.C. Winter Games needed cross-country trails for its competitions.

"I spent many hours up there walking the terrain, laying out the initial trails and got the cabin built. Since I retired in 2008, I've had more time so now I'm up there again as the club coach."

He is currently coaching one junior racer, 16-year-old Desiree Martin, and five to 10 Masters skiers, training 15 club coaches and instructing.

"I'm hoping to develop a bit of a legacy so I can have other coaches take over when I want to retire again," he said.