

Winning name of his game

Jack Poole has a big challenge to bring Winter Olympics here

Ashley Ford

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Jack Poole remembers with crystal clarity the day five decades ago when an errant car plowed into him on a road near Lloydminster, Sask., ending his NHL dreams forever.

"I remember my lower right leg was mangled and hanging on by the skin.

"My one thought was the dream had died and there goes hockey," he said in an interview with The Province.

But on the long, painful train ride back to Moose Jaw to have the triple compound fracture properly repaired, Poole realized he had been handed a valuable lesson --that life is a series of setbacks that can be overcome.

The native of Mortlach, Sask., -- population 200 -- went on to obtain a civil engineering degree and build a highly successful career in the often rough and tumble real estate development business as a salesman and builder.

Poole never lost his love for sport and proved it by becoming heavyweight wrestling champion at the University of Saskatchewan in 1954. He played a mean game of curling for many years and can still "spank the Spalding" -- a.k.a. golf -- with the best of them.

It's somewhat ironic that the man whose sporting dreams perished decades ago is now leading the charge to snatch the ring of one of the world's premier sporting events, the Winter Olympics of 2010.

The old competitive fires burn brightly and the tall, fit 68-year-old, who looks years younger, says he is in the game to "win."

"I guarantee you we will have the winning bid.

"But in this game that doesn't necessarily mean we will win."

Poole has put his life on hold for the next 17 months, charging a buck a year for his services, although the job did offer a salary.

He loves the competition, despite the fact that he knows anything to do with the Olympics is rarely clean or sporting.

It's "a blood sport. It is going to be 17 months of adrenaline."

Poole, as president and chief executive officer of the Vancouver/Whistler 2010 Bid Corporation, is also keenly aware he will personally carry the can if the bid fails.

"Should we lose, I am the one who is going to wear it."

Ever the eternal optimist, Poole has endured challenging hiccups over his long career in the tough development business.

And he isn't about to let fear of failure foil his drive to deliver the goods to B.C.

"This is very similar to bidding for a major real estate deal," he says.

Poole was a highly successful developer in the '70s and '80s. But when the real estate market soured his companies faced the sword.

It speaks volumes about his salesmanship and business acumen that it didn't cave in and he clawed his way back to success.

His affable, friendly manner hides a very keen business mind.

And that has won the admiration of such diverse heavyweights as billionaire Vancouver businessman Jim Pattison, Ken Georgetti, head of the Canadian Labour Congress and downtown realtor Bob Rennie.

Pattison says Poole is a "sound businessman and the right guy for the job."

"These things take a lot of energy and Jack is a very good people person. He also has the confidence of both federal and provincial governments and that is a very important ingredient," Pattison says.

Rennie agrees. "There is no better choice. He is dedicated and skilled and if anyone can get the job done it is Jack Poole."

Another close ally is Premier Gordon Campbell. Poole hired Campbell as a "common labourer" on a construction project at Babine Lake near Smithers many years ago.

"I joke that I gave him his first job and he gave me my last. I paid him \$2.50 an hour and he pays me \$1 a year."

Poole has a reputation for smoothness, but also toughness, fairness and an ability to sell.

When his once high-flying Daon Development Corp. crashed in the 1980s because of a cash crunch brought on by high interest rates, the gloss came off his career for a while.

But the buildings of those halcyon days -- Park Place Tower on Burrard and the Daon Tower at 999 West Hastings -- remain icons in the downtown business core.

Poole's never-look-back attitude saw him renegotiate more than \$2 billion with the banks, and they all got their money back. Shareholders -- he was also one -- didn't do as well and lost money.

In the late 1980s, Poole, Georgetti and Campbell started the Vancouver Land Corporation to develop affordable housing.

The company has had several name changes and is now known as Concert Properties, with Poole as its chairman.

Earlier, as Greystone Properties, it linked up with Las Vegas gambling czar Steve Wynn to build a proposed \$750-million casino-convention centre on Vancouver's waterfront. The city killed the project and an expanded convention centre remains an unfulfilled dream.

Poole keeps his business hand in between assaults on golf courses here and in the U.S. deserts. He has stepped away from everything and hired someone to manage his business affairs.

"This project (the Winter Olympics) has a definite sunset and it has my total focus."

Is it the last hurrah?

"One should never say final. I don't look forward too much in life and I never look back. I live for the day. That suits my style."

aford@pacpress.southam.ca