



FROM RUSSIA[★] with Drive

IVAN BABIKOV AND
THE FIGHT TO RACE FOR CANADA

BY TOM MCCARTHY | PHOTOS: DAN ROYCROFT

The coming Winter Olympics will be packed with great stories, but Ivan Babikov's might be the best. It's about love for sport and family, and the desire to create a better life. It's about belonging. But most of all, it's a story about pursuing a goal — one that leads Ivan Babikov straight to Vancouver in 2010.

THE BEGINNING OF THE DREAM

Ivan's story begins at a Russian ski school near the Arctic Circle, with a great coach named Nikolai Bratchikov. At first, Ivan skied because it was fun and because there wasn't much else to do. Soon, however, Ivan fell in love with the sport. As other kids quit, Ivan continued on. Eventually, his life became all about racing.

Ivan moved to Syktyvkar, a small city northeast of Moscow, to attend university. It was there that he nearly joined the national team, but the Russian system didn't quite work for Ivan. "In Russia," he says, "you do what the coaches tell you".

While Ivan was maturing as a racer, his older sister moved to Canada in search of a better life. She settled in Toronto in 1996. Four years later, on his first Christmas visit, Ivan raced outside Quebec City. He enjoyed the racing — and the country. But the word "immigration" didn't cross his mind.

But then in 2003, the opportunity arose for his sister to sponsor her family to come to Canada. Concerned about his life in Russia — his wife, Svetlana, and newborn son Sergey — Ivan took some convincing.

He made the move in June, leaving wife and child behind. Initially, he worked at a grocery store in Toronto to save money to send back home. Understandably, Ivan wasn't thinking of skiing much then. But his passion for the sport won out, and he contacted Cross Country Canada. They directed him to two Albertans, Phil Villeneuve and Rob Hogg, who would be instrumental in his future.

Phil, a recently retired Canadian skiing star who founded the race team, x-c.com says: "He showed up at my door with nothing — no skis, no gear, hardly any clothes. I put him up in my basement, scrounged around to find some sponsors, and off we went onto the race circuit." It was a wise move. "He just started winning, and I knew this was going to rock."

Rock he did. Ivan exploded onto the North American scene, winning medals in every distance event he entered in 2003-04, including one U.S. and two Canadian national championships. Ivan says something clicked then: "No Russian coach was around to tell me how to do things — I trained my own way, and it worked." And for Ivan, winning races meant food on the table for his wife and son in Russia. Phil's backing during this time was key: in addition to providing a home base, he introduced Ivan to the biggest US factory team, Subaru (now Saab Salomon), and the support Ivan received on both sides of the border allowed him to win one gruelling long-distance marathon after another.

SUPPORTERS

No athlete gets to the highest level without a support system. And when you've faced the challenges Ivan has, those supporters have to be die-hard. Here are some people who helped along the way.

Russian Ski Fans: Ski fans in Russia must be similar to hockey fans in Canada. At least, the ones who helped Ivan must be. The Russian ski website, www.skisport.ru, has a large following of committed fans and an active bulletin board. When they saw Ivan finish as the top Russian in the 2005 World Cups, they bought him his plane ticket home to Russia to qualify for Torino. The rest is history.

Phil Villeneuve: After retiring from elite racing, Phil started x-c.com, a team that supported elite racers outside the national team program. He set Ivan up with a team, race support, equipment, a place to live for several years, and the opportunity to succeed. Why did Phil do all this for Ivan? It was "the right thing to do. Ivan works hard and has faced huge challenges. If I didn't help him, I didn't think anyone else would have."

Rob Hogg: Rob guided Ivan through the bureaucratic and political complications of citizenship. Why did Rob take on this challenge for someone he barely knew? "Ivan was worth it. He is and will continue to be a positive influence on our community. Immigration is not easy. The financial struggle and angst Ivan has had to endure has been immense. He did it with a commitment to be the best he can be in his sport, and to give his wife and son a better life in Canada."

Tony Stephen, of Tower Cleaners in Calgary, and **Andy Gerlach** of the Saab Salomon racing team helped Ivan get his feet planted on Canadian soil and snow.



Ivan Babicov (Bib 101) takes the lead ahead of his Canadian teammates while wearing a Russian team suit. Photo: Rhonda Jewett

CANADA OR RUSSIA?

The Olympic winter of 2005-06 arrived. The previous season, Ivan had skied well enough to win the Continental Cup and secure guaranteed spots in the World Cup — the only way to qualify, lacking citizenship and not being on the Russian radar. In December 2005, Canada hosted several World Cup races in Vernon and Canmore.

Ivan went to the start line in B.C. wearing a Canadian suit, but racing for Russia under his FIS license. Confusing, and technically against FIS rules, but, as Ivan says, "I didn't care — I just wanted to race." His results were amazing — a 14th, a 4th, and an 18th place finish. Only two Russians, and no Canadians, beat him in those three races.

Meanwhile, Rob Hogg, one of Alberta's key cross-country builders, had been reading the Citizenship Act, trying to figure out how to help Ivan become Canadian.

Ivan sought an expedited citizenship process, initially with the Liberal government in 2004, and then with the Conservatives in 2005. Both attempts failed, the second just before the 2005 World Cups. With that went Ivan's chance of skiing for Canada in the Torino Olympics. Most frustrating for Ivan was the lack of control. He couldn't train harder or push through it — the decision was someone else's. It didn't help that the time he spent in the U.S. or Europe winning money for his family didn't count towards the residency requirement (immigrants must spend three years total in Canada over a four year period).

Ivan decided to focus on racing, and his amazing World Cup results helped convince him that he was Olympic calibre. But he could only qualify in Russia, thousands of kilometres — and dollars — away. Then, unbelievably, a group of Russian ski

fans decided to help. Each pitched in \$100 towards a plane ticket for Ivan to attend the Olympic qualifiers.

Ivan raced in the U.S. National Championships in Utah in January 2006, where he won three of four races. Three days after his last race in North America, he arrived in Moscow for Olympic trials, having lost all of his luggage — including his skis — during the voyage. Delayed a day, Ivan boarded a train from Moscow and, 10 hours later, pulled into Rybinsk. It was 4 a.m. At 9 a.m., he was on the start line of the 50 km qualifier and — against the depth of the Russian field — he finished fourth. After he won the next two qualifying races, the Russian coaches had no choice but to put him on the Olympic team.

So, in February, he was in Torino — in a Russian suit. Ivan enjoyed the Olympic ex-



Ivan with son Sergei near their home in Canmore, Alberta.

perience at first, but team dynamics deteriorated, and the coaches passed him over for the final spot. "I wasn't their guy anymore," he says. "They saw me as Canadian, and none of the coaches wanted to fight for me." The result? The guy picked instead of Ivan got dropped on the third relay leg, and the Russians didn't medal. Looking back, Ivan is surprised he skied as well as he did in Torino (his best finish was a 12th). "With all the stress and controversy, I realized that I had no chance at medaling."

The following season was more stable. His family was finally together in Canada after three years apart. Ivan competed in more World Cup races, in a Russian suit. Still, his citizenship struggles continued. Finally, Rob and Ivan pushed to have his case presented to a judge. Upon hearing his compelling story, the judge waived Ivan's residency requirement, and in January 2008 — five years after he arrived in Canada — Ivan Babicov became Canadian. "It feels good. After trying and trying, it's cool to sing O, Canada as a Canadian."

FLYING THE FLAG

Once Ivan was named to the Canadian National Team this spring, he could finally focus on 2010. He's integrating into the Canadian program carefully, after having skied for so many years on his own. Dave Wood and Arild Monsen, head coaches of the National Team, says that Ivan "brings a

positive attitude to the team. He puts a lot of competitive intensity on the table." And Devon Kershaw, the leader of the men's team, is also stoked about his new teammate. "He's full-on. That's how he skis, trains, and lives. His technique is that quintessential Russian dynamic, which combines high power output with that distinctive long stride. He starts hard and holds a bad-ass pace all race." If Ivan has one weakness, it's that he doesn't have much of a finish sprint. As Devon notes, though, he doesn't usually need it — most people can't stay with him to the end.

So what are the predictions for 2010? "He gives our relay team a huge boost," says Wood. "He has the potential for some very strong individual results, and he gives us the potential to be solid on all four relay legs. Canada hasn't been in that position for a long time." Kershaw adds: "Think of Ivan racing that third leg with the other big guns that race his style. That 'gun to tape annihilate' racing that he really excels in. It will be exciting to watch."

Ivan, now 28, enjoys life in Canmore with his family. He had an amazing 2008 season, winning two U.S. and two Canadian championships in the space of 11 days. He's spending a tough summer training with his new team. And he's pumped to ski for Canada in 2010. As for what will happen after 2010? Well, how could he possibly miss the 2014 Games in Russia? **SRC**