

Host with the most

Nancy Greene Raine can't escape her glorious past as Canada's skiing queen, especially during a Winter Olympic year when she's an official Vancouver Games ambassador, but Canada's skiing senator, still healthy and happily married at age 66, relishes an opportunity to talk politics

Late into a long phone call, as former ski queen Nancy Greene Raine responds to questions about her newest job as a senator in the Conservative Party caucus, the message begins to sink in.

At 66, the woman people recall as the cute, down-home gal who won Olympic gold and silver at Grenoble in 1968 is no longer content to field soft questions about winning an Olympic race 42 years ago.

“I think when you get to my age in life, I have had some experience along the way and it isn't all about how you win a gold medal in a ski race,” says the senator, appointed by Prime Minister Harper in December 2008.

“The things I am interested in go way beyond sport and recreation and fitness. There are major issues facing our government right now. I like to think that growing up in a small town with a close-knit family, and being involved in raising a family and small business and education, I bring a grounded, common-sense attitude, a realistic approach to dealing with some of the issues facing our country.”

During the interview Greene Raine proceeded like the aggressive skier of old, although instead of slaloming around poles, she was negotiating hot-button topics like two-tier health care, aboriginal rights, Stephen Harper's personality and spending on social programs.

And her point was made conclusively when she was asked about being named Canada's Female Athlete of the Century in 1999, with Wayne Gretzky her male counterpart.

“Well that was the past century.”

Alas, the senator is in for another round of nostalgia as Canada's official Olympic ambassador for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, Feb. 12–28. Before and during the Olympic fortnight, Greene Raine will be greeting visiting bigwigs and hosting receptions and parties, travelling between Whistler, the site of many of the outdoor events, and Vancouver.

“Certainly I have been a big supporter,” she says. “I was on the bid committee, and I am in a group of people with VANOC, the Vancouver Olympic organizing committee, who are called ambassadors.

“VANOC is doing an excellent job. You know nothing is ever perfect and there is a big organization and there is a lot of pressure but there are sure a lot of good people there.”

Greene Raine might protest that her athletic accomplishments are in the distant past, but her legacy remains vivid for today’s skiers. Thousands of novices begin lessons in the Nancy Greene Ski League, established in 1968 with the involvement of her future husband, Al Raine.

And unlike, say, Anne Heggtveit or Kathy Kreiner, two other Canadian gold medalists, Nancy Greene remains, well, the gold standard for 2010 medal contenders such as 29-year-old Emily Brydon of Fernie, B.C. Brydon was asked by a Globe and Mail reporter: What would it mean to be another Nancy Greene? “I think she’s so legendary, she’s done so much for sport, for women’s sport, for everyone in sport,” said Brydon. “I think it would take more than a gold medal to surpass that, what she’s done.”

In the beginning, the Greenes – six kids, two parents – hit the slopes early and often. The daughter of avid skiers Robert, an engineer, and Helen, a homemaker, Nancy was born in Ottawa in 1943 but moved to Rossland, B.C., near the Washington border, at age three and that first year took up skiing at the local Red Mountain club. Her mom offered valuable advice early on.

“My mother taught me to ski. I realize that by following her I learned a very good natural technique, because one of her arms was paralyzed from her elbow down, in a bent position, from an injury she had as a child, and so in those days ski technique was a lot of upper-body movement, and she just skied with a perfect balance turning her feet. And in the end that is what the technique had to be.”

Greene describes a fortunate upbringing, with parental and community support leading to success in national and international competitions throughout the sixties. Nicknamed Tiger, she won 14 World Cup races and 17 Canadian titles over a nine-year career at the elite level and competed in Winter Games at Squaw Valley in 1960 at the age of 16, where she roomed with Anne Heggtveit, and then at Innsbruck in 1964 before going to Grenoble as a favourite.

The Canadian darling of an Olympics that also featured French skier Jean-Claude Killy and U.S. figure skater Peggy Fleming as headliners, a triumphant Greene returned home at the end of the 1967-68 World Cup season and called it a career.

That summer of 1968, Greene found herself working on Prime Minister Trudeau's Task Force on Sport and assisting the Canadian Ski Team with fundraising and promotion, which put her into contact with Raine, the new program director of the team.

It was love.

“The best thing that ever happened to me was falling in love with the right guy. He has a passion for skiing like I do. We have been involved in a lot of things together.”

The relationship with Raine – two years her senior – proceeded quickly to marriage in April 1969 and the birth of twin sons, Charlie and Willy, in January 1970.

Raine coached the national ski team for five years after their marriage, and then the couple graduated to resort development at Whistler and, since 1994, at Sun Peaks, near Kamloops in the B.C. Interior. Today they live in Cahilty Lodge in Sun Peaks, right at the foot of the slopes. Until her Senate appointment, Greene Raine skied every day in her role as director of skiing at Sun Peaks. Her husband has focused on business development.

The late-2008 phone call to inquire whether she would be interested in a Senate appointment came “out of the blue.”

“When Al and I started to discuss it, we realized it really is a unique opportunity to be part of the government. Because as a senator you sit in at the caucus meetings and you sit in with the prime minister and the cabinet ministers and with the other Members of Parliament and senators to discuss the issues of the day. And being able to have input into national policies is a pretty unique opportunity.”

Her Senate boss, the Leader of the Government in the Senate and cabinet minister Marjory LeBreton, is a huge fan of the former Olympian.

“When the Prime Minister appointed her to the Senate and I called her right after, I told her, you have no idea, I can't believe I am going to have as a colleague a person that I absolutely worshipped in the sixties,” LeBreton says. “Not only was she a tremendous athlete and Olympic medalist, but she brings a common-sense business connection, and being from British Columbia she has a good understanding of some aboriginal issues, so it is a whole host of things she brings to the parliament of Canada.

“She gets up in caucus and speaks her mind and the government and the prime minister and the cabinet listen. We'll say to ourselves, well if a person like Nancy Greene has a problem with this, then we'll take a look at it.”

By aligning herself with the Conservatives, Greene Raine risks alienating a few long-time supporters, but she says she is comfortable with the values of the Harper government.

“They (her views) are pretty much aligned. I will say I have been very much concerned over the years with the rising deficit and it was nice to see it being paid down, and now it’s gone back up again, and we are going to have to move in the next phase to paying it down again ... I think we are on the right track there.”

She thinks the stimulus package that the Harper government introduced a year ago was smartly designed in that it offered investments in infrastructure, not social programs, so that when the package expires there are not ongoing spending programs to have to pay for.

At another point, as part of a long discussion on a pet topic, aboriginal issues, Greene Raine suggests that Canada’s status as nation of many immigrants is partly to blame for intransigence in dealing with First Nations problems. “There’s a lot of discrimination. There’s a lot of, ‘I came here from X country with nothing, and I’ve worked hard, why should I pay for these people ...’ You know, immigrants don’t have much sympathy for native people.”

Health care is another priority for her.

“One thing that is important is that we take a good, open-minded look at delivering health care. There are some countries in the world where they have a blend of publicly financed health care with private delivery mechanisms. Wherever that makes sense, we should be doing it, because my gut feeling is that whenever anything is delivered by the government, it costs more ... the government’s role is to regulate the quality of what is being delivered, but the actual delivery of it probably needs a blend.”

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