

Golden again

Westlake leads Canada to first world sledge hockey title since 2008

by Herb Garbutt
Oakville Beaver Staff

In the grand scheme of things, five years is not all that long. Measured in the terms of an athletic career, though, it takes on a whole new context.

With each passing year, thoughts of how many more times opportunities will present themselves begin to creep in.

For Greg Westlake, who joined the Canadian sledge hockey team when he was 18, success came early. Within two years, he was a Paralympic champion and, at 22, Westlake lived his own Paul Henderson moment, scoring the winning goal at the world championships with just 10 seconds to play to give Canada the gold.

"I remember looking at the (championship) ring," Westlake said. "I had this big hunk of gold and diamonds and I thought, 'I'm going to fill up both hands.'"

And then the victories suddenly became harder to come by. Bronze at the 2009 worlds, fourth at the 2010 Paralympics, bronze again the 2012 worlds. It wasn't a complete drought. Canada did win two World Sledge Hockey Challenges during that time, but gold eluded them at the major competitions.

Westlake couldn't help but wonder.

"I don't plan to play until I'm 40," he said. "I started to have to

come to peace with, if I was to only win two championships, am I OK with that? And honestly, I was. You can't let wins and losses dictate your happiness."

Just because he was OK with it, didn't mean Westlake was done trying, though. You don't get named captain of a Canadian hockey team — as Westlake was in 2011 — without a passion and burning desire to win.

So it shouldn't have come as a surprise that 11 minutes into Canada's first game at the world championships in South Korea, it was Westlake that opened the scoring, finishing with two goals and an assist in a 5-0 win over Italy.

He scored two more in a semifinal win over the Czech Republic to ensure that Canada would once again have a shot at gold. Westlake and his teammates then made the most of that opportunity. They held the United States to just one shot on goal in the first two periods, and five in entire game, as they pulled out a 1-0 victory.

"It's one of the best games we've played," Westlake said. "It wasn't a fluke; we beat them."

With five goals and three assists in five games, Westlake was named the tournament's top forward. The 26-year-old said the award was special because it was voted on by the coaches.

One of those votes no doubt came from behind the Canadian bench where Mike Mondin says

Westlake leads by example with his two-way play.

"It's not just the points he gets, it's his play away from puck, coming back into our zone," Mondin said. "If I needed video clips of a player coming back into our zone, it wouldn't take any time because he plays that way start to finish."

Westlake said his only regret had he never earned another gold medal would have been not adding to Canada's winning tradition during his time as captain. The victory put that to rest and served as proof of what the current group of players — half of the team has turned over since 2010 — is capable of.

"There's always pressure to win. That's what makes it special," Mondin said. "We've got some really good hockey players, and they're way better because of the leadership we get from Greg and his cohorts."

Following the worlds, Westlake spent a week in Sochi, Russia, checking out the venues for next year's Paralympics. He said seeing the countdown clock, with less than a year until the games begin, served as further motivation.

And with a boost of golden confidence, Westlake is ready to start filling up his fingers again.

"I think we learned how to win (at worlds)," he said. "I know it sounds cliché, but we just played a shift at a time. To get 17 guys on the same page and help the young guys through that, I think we're in good shape."



Greg Westlake was named the tournament's best forward while leading Canada to the gold medal at the World Sledge Hockey Championships. The Canadian captain had five goals and three assists in five games. Canada defeated the United States 1-0 in the final.

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