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No Olympics, but Widmer savours sprint victory

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FEBRUARY 15, 2014

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By the length of a ski tip, Phil Widmer's last-second kick across the finish line was just enough.

It was all he needed to win the Buff Haywood Nor-Am Western Canadian championships open men's classic sprint Saturday at Otway Nordic Centre, finishing a blink of an eye quicker than Sebastien Townsend.

Widmer, a 30-year-old national team veteran from Banff, knows all about the negative implications of being second-best in a sprint. He felt that shot to the gut a month ago at the Olympic trials in Canmore when he lost the final sprint to Jesse Cockney of Canmore and it cost him a spot on the team for Sochi.

Widmer led from the start of Saturday's A-final and he knew Townsend was going to tuck in behind in the same track to try to save energy before making his pass attempt in the mad dash for the finish. At one point it looked like Townsend's strategy would pay off, but Widmer pulled ahead again just before the line.

"Seb came hard but I was able to hold him off," said Widmer. "I thought he was going to come around me but I was able to switch it on again."

Julien Locke of the Black Jack Ski Club of Rossland was third.

The race temperature for the heats was -5 C and rising, and there was some concern the track would glaze over in the sun and turn to ice that would negate some of the grip wax effects, but none of the racers were complaining of slippage.

Townsend, a 21-year-old from the Nakkertok club of Gatineau, Que., had no such problems. He tried out a new pair of skis he picked while racing in Europe and they were fast on the 1.6-kilometre course at Otway. There's a good chance Townsend will be back in Prince George next year as part of Team Quebec at the Canada Winter Games. If trail conditions are similar for the Games, he says the provincial team skiers are in for a treat.

"Probably I will be here again," Townsend said. "The course is super nice, I don't think I've ever skied a better classic sprint course. The hills were not too steep, it was a pretty flowing course with a good finish."

While he was happy to celebrate his win, Widmer couldn't but think about races happening half a world away in Sochi. Having competed at the 2006 Olympics, he had hoped to put a final stamp on his racing career with a trip to Russia, where his 22-year-old sister Heidi is competing as an Olympic team rookie.

"My big goal this year was obviously the Olympics, but I came up just shy as the one available spot as the alternate," said Widmer. "I've been the fastest qualifier all year but they took the selection off the heats and that meant I wasn't going.

"Heidi is the same age as me when I went to Torino and it's cool to watch her but it's also really tough not to be there. I wanted to be there so bad with her. She's still got the 30K left [Saturday] and she could have a good one there, she's a strong distance skier."

Maya MacIsaac-Jones of Athabasca, Alta., led from start to finish in the 1.25 km open women's A-final, winning by several ski lengths over Ember Large of Edmonton and third-place Kirsty Bock of UBC in Vancouver.



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