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Chair

Mr. Gordon Brown

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• (0855)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gordon Brown (Leeds—Grenville, CPC)): Good morning, everyone.

I'll call to order meeting three of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. We have a very busy schedule this morning.

We are honoured to start today off with a visit from the Minister of State for Sport, the Honourable Bal Gosal.

Minister, you have the floor for 10 minutes. Thank you for coming today.

Hon. Bal Gosal (Minister of State (Sport)): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning. I'd like to thank the members of this committee for inviting me to speak today. With me to take part in the discussion is Lane MacAdam from Sport Canada. Marcel Aubut and Caroline should be joining us any minute. They are on their way.

Like most Canadians, I love sport. I believe it is part of our culture and part of our identity. It has the ability to bring us closer together and instill national pride.

In my role as the Minister of State for Sport, I have been lucky to spend my time supporting our elite athletes on the field, rinks, and hills across Canada. It is incredible to watch the determination and pride that wearing the maple leaf brings to our athletes.

In 80 short days, sporting fans from across the world will focus on Sochi, Russia, as our elite athletes pursue their dream of standing atop the podium.

As we sit here today, our Canadian athletes are in the final stages of preparing to give their everything at the 2014 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Sochi. This is a good time to discuss how ready we are and how well we expect to do.

Our government does not shy away from our record investment in sport. Through Sport Canada, our government is working to ensure that our Canadian athletes have the tools they need to reach their goals in the pursuit of sporting excellence.

Since being elected, our government has been working with our partners to provide our athletes with a strong support system that includes access to high-quality training environments and world-class coaching. The government is also working with national sport organizations to create opportunities to host international competitions on home soil, helping our athletes concentrate on training to achieve their podium dreams.

The Government of Canada supports Canada's sport system and our athletes with an investment of nearly \$200 million a year through Sport Canada's three key programs: the sport support program, the hosting program, and the athlete assistance program.

Since coming to office, our government has invested nearly \$990 million in the Canadian high-performance sport system, making the Government of Canada the largest single contributor to sport in the country. I would also like to point out that this funding represents an increase in support to the Canadian sport system of 52% since our government has come to office.

This support has allowed Canada to emerge as a leading sport nation. It has provided our athletes access to cutting-edge sport science and research, it has allowed our athletes a world-class training environment, and it has allowed our athletes to receive the best coaching in the world.

Our government has invested over \$153 million into winter sport over the last four-year winter sport cycle. This is an increase of over \$25 million, or a 20% increase, since the last four-year cycle prior to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics and Paralympic Games.

Furthermore, this would be an increase of 112% since the four-year cycle prior to the 2006 Winter Games in Torino.

Our government wants to ensure that no stone is left unturned and our athletes are able to do what they do best: win.

The sport support program is our primary funding vehicle to support Canada's national sport organizations, Canadian sport centres, and multi-sport service organizations. The annual budget of more than \$140 million funds initiatives to encourage sport participation and programs for high-performance athletes, and it includes targeting funding to help our athletes fulfill their Olympic and Paralympic dreams.

While our government is working with our partners to allow our athletes to succeed, we're also working to ensure that Canadian athletes are competing fairly and clean.

I recently announced Sport Canada's annual funding to the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport to fund anti-doping initiatives such as athlete testing and an anti-doping hotline. In 2013-14 this will amount to an investment of \$5.9 million.

The hosting program supports the efforts of Canadian communities to host such international sport events as the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Vancouver and the 2015 Pan American and Parapan American Games, which will take place in the greater golden horseshoe region.

Hosting these sport events in Canada benefits our athletes, inspires Canadians, creates jobs and economic opportunities in the host communities, and leaves a legacy of improved sports infrastructure. Our athletes gain valuable competition experience on home soil and benefit from new and improved facilities that allow them to train further and prepare to win for Canada at international competitions, including the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games.

Finally, I would like to highlight for the committee that our government is providing direct funding to our top athletes, to help with their living and training expenses as well as post-secondary education. This allows them to concentrate on their athletic training. Through this program, we are providing \$28 million every year to support more than 1,700 athletes. It is the largest source of direct financial assistance to athletes in Canada, helping our athletes to train full-time in the lead-up to the Sochi Winter Games.

Alexandre Bilodeau, Maëlle Ricker, and Josh Dueck are just three of the well-known athletes benefiting from this program. As you will no doubt remember, Alexandre became the first Canadian athlete to win an Olympic gold medal right here in Canada, at the 2010 Winter Games. It was the first of the record 14 gold medals for our Olympians that year. And the 19 medals earned by our Paralympians in Vancouver showed the world that our athletes can compete with the very best.

As Canadians, we are proud of our country's success as a leading sport nation. That is why, as a government, we are proud to support our athletes and help them achieve their podium dreams. Their success inspires us all, including our future Olympians and Paralympians.

I'm pleased to report that in the four years leading up to the games, our government has done as much as it could to help our athletes and teams reach the podium in Sochi. We are working, and will continue to work, closely with the Canadian Olympic Committee, the Canadian Paralympic Committee, and Own the Podium to ensure that our funding is putting Canadians atop the podium.

In just a few months, Canada's best winter sports athletes will compete against the world's best, and Canada has ambitious goals for success. Our Olympic athletes have set a high goal for themselves, hoping to achieve the top spot in the overall medal count. Our Paralympians are determined to finish in the top three in the gold medal count.

The 2014 Sochi Winter Games promises to be an exciting event for all Canadians. It is an opportunity to promote our culture and our values of openness and fair play. It is a chance to affirm our reputation as a leading sport nation. It is an occasion to come together as Canadians to support our athletes in their pursuit of excellence.

I will now be pleased to respond to any questions you have.

Thank you. Merci.

• (0900)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We are expecting the president of the Canadian Olympic Committee, Marcel Aubut, momentarily. If it's approved by the committee, when he arrives we will give him his 10 minutes, which would start at the end of when that person is questioning. If the committee is okay, we will go on that basis.

On that basis, we will start the first round of questioning. It will be for seven minutes.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to have you here today, Minister. I appreciate your remarks.

Certainly it's great to hear about the funding our government has provided to our athletes and the type of funding they've received over the last four years. I'm sure we can expect a great performance at this year's games.

I hate to put you on the spot, but I'm curious as to what you think we can expect from our athletes. What are your predictions for our Olympic athletes and how successful we will be as a country this time around?

Hon. Bal Gosal: We work closely with the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic committees and national sports organizations.

We're proud of our athletes. Looking at the winter season they just had, they've set a very high goal, and I'm very supportive of that goal. I've been attending numerous sporting events. The way our athletes' training is going, I think we are on target to finish first overall.

Mr. Blake Richards: Excellent. That's great. I hope you're right about that.

I'm sure we have well-trained athletes. Part of that comes from the fact that in Canada one of the things that is being encouraged heavily is former athletes, former Olympians, staying involved in their sport. Whether that be as administrators or coaches, we see a lot of that. Even in my own hometown, we've seen a former Olympian coach the swim club. We see it all the time in Canada.

This can't be completely by accident; it must be somewhat by design. I wonder if you can tell me a bit about the efforts being made in Canada to ensure that some of our best Olympians stay involved in their sport after their competitive careers are over and what we can do to further encourage that.

Hon. Bal Gosal: That is what we do. We work with national sports organizations. The Own the Podium program is a great success story. A lot of countries are looking up to that program. I was at the London Olympics last summer, and the U.K. set up their high-performance program after learning from the Own the Podium program, where we bring in athletes and mentors and encourage all the athletes to stay involved and get into coaching.

Just yesterday, CIBC announced a Team Next program, where they're partnering 67 athletes with some of the past Olympians and Paralympians, to mentor them as they get ready for the Pan American Games in 2015. We're very much involved with national sports organizations and the Own the Podium program, to encourage our athletes to stay involved, either by mentoring, coaching, or training.

● (0905)

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate your mentioning the upcoming Pan American Games we'll be hosting in the Toronto area. In your opening remarks, you mentioned how important it is for us as a country to host games in Canada, and how that creates an excitement for sport among our youth and encourages future athletes, I'm sure.

Do you have any statistics or information on exactly how those kinds of events encourage young people? I think of the 1988 Olympics in Calgary. One of the host communities there was Canmore, in my riding. It's amazing how many Olympic athletes we see coming out of Canmore, a very small community. Obviously, the fact that a training centre is there helps encourage young people to be involved in sport.

Are there any stats or other information on exactly what hosting those international events does for sport in Canada?

Hon. Bal Gosal: Hosting is very important. When we host any national or international competitions, the facilities are left behind afterwards and a legacy is left behind. Some good examples include the 1988 Calgary Olympics and the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. For the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games buildings, the Government of Canada has committed \$500 million for infrastructure and legacy programs, and we are going to have the first-ever velodrome in Canada built in Milton, Ontario. Once we build these international-level facilities, they produce athletes. The young kids get inspired while watching athletes, especially when the athletes compete on home ground.

Also, when we have the facilities, that produces a record number of athletes.

I'll ask Lane to add some of the stats.

Mr. Lane MacAdam (Director, Sport Excellence, Sport Canada, Department of Canadian Heritage): There's no question that the gold-medal hockey game during the Vancouver Olympic Games was the most-watched television broadcast in Canadian history. Obviously, Canadians are passionate about sport and interested in watching sport, and certainly many sports have had spikes in memberships following large-scale events. The women's soccer medal in London two years ago certainly resulted in an increase in membership in girls' soccer.

There is evidence of the impact that hosting these events on home soil has, in terms of opportunities for young Canadians to participate in these activities. As the minister mentioned, a lot of these brand-new facilities would not be in place had a particular region in the country not hosted the games.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Minister, in your speech you mentioned some of the most recent efforts to deal with anti-doping, in terms of the hotline and things like that.

Could you tell me what the Government of Canada is doing, including working with partners? I know Mr. Aubut hasn't had a chance to give his opening presentation yet, but maybe if there's time, he may have some comments that you'd like him to provide on behalf of the Olympic committee on what we're doing to further anti-doping efforts.

Hon. Bal Gosal: Thank you again.

Canada is very proactive. The World Anti-Doping Agency headquarters is in Montreal, and Canada is on the executive of the agency. We work closely with the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sports. This year alone, we have funded them another \$400,000 for one year to have extra testing leading up to Sochi, and they work very proactively with national sports organizations to have our athletes tested to ensure fair play. Close to \$6 million is being spent to support the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sports in 2013–14.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We're going to have to end the first round.

We'd now like to welcome, from the Canadian Olympic Committee, President Marcel Aubut.

You have the floor for 10 minutes, and then we'll go back to the questioning once you have completed your remarks. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Aubut (President, Canadian Olympic Committee): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members of the committee, it is my pleasure to appear before you this morning to talk to you about our Canadian Olympic team's preparations.

● (0910)

[English]

Thank you for the invitation to join you today.

[Translation]

You may be surprised to learn that the Canadian Olympic Committee, or the COC, is the most significant source of private funding for high-performance sports in the country.

[English]

This is not to be confused with the Government of Canada's tremendous role as the country's largest contributor to sport. Without question, continued strong and stable government and private sector funding are critical to our success today, tomorrow, and well into the future.

[Translation]

On behalf of Canadian athletes, coaches and all national sports federations, I want to thank Prime Minister Harper, Minister Gosal—who is here today and is a good friend of mine—and Minister Flaherty for this substantial support. That being said, our athletes and coaches need that support to remain as consistent and as strong.

[English]

On top of performance expectations for these games, the goal of the Canadian Olympic team is to contend for the top spot in overall medals.

[Translation]

In Sochi, the Canadian Olympic team will try to change history and make Canada the first host country to win even more medals at the next games. That is something that has never happened. This objective is ambitious and will not be easy to reach, but that is how we like our objectives. Courage and ambition are needed to achieve excellence.

[English]

We know that the Olympic Games are a matter of national pride in many countries, and sport is becoming more and more competitive all over the world.

We now see that for the first time there are as many as five countries all within striking distance of that top spot; there is very tight competition. One or two medals may make the difference between finishing first and finishing fifth. As we know, anything can happen at the Olympic Games. Often it's not necessarily the best athlete who wins, but the one who is most prepared to compete and win in the Olympic environment.

This is why the Canadian Olympic Games preparation initiative and mission team—that is the team behind the athletes—has been working for the last five years to leave no stone unturned in preparing for Sochi.

[Translation]

The COC has done everything for the Canadian athletes to have the best possible conditions in order to perform to the fullest of their potential and talent during the games.

This is the first time the winter team is going to Sochi after having a full tour of all the preparation programs in place. We have never been so well equipped.

[English]

Our Olympians who are heading to Sochi will be the first Olympic winter team to have gone through a full cycle of our games preparation program, which I will describe to you today. This is critical, because the Sochi games will be the largest games ever, with more sports, more competition, more athletes, and a lot more attention.

We anticipate that we will send our largest winter team ever, with more than 215 athletes and 90 coaches, with a supportive team of 550 people.

[Translation]

A team of 550 Canadians is going to Sochi.

[English]

Second, we will have the greatest number of rookie athletes. That creates part of the complexity, the unknown. They are there for the first time.

We are sending the greatest number of team members to Sochi for the greatest number of familiarization visits.

This one is important. We have the greatest number of facilities to operate. We have to operate ten different facilities in Sochi. Because of all that complexity, we will need the greatest number of mission team members ever.

I am also pleased that, due to the cooperation of various groups, for the first time ever, every single athlete will be subject to doping controls before leaving our soil.

● (0915)

We do all of this because we know it makes a difference to performance, especially when a fraction of a second or one point can make the difference between a medal and no medal. There is an absolute science behind the preparations we undertake in partnership with the athletes, coaches, and national sports federations.

[Translation]

Our greatest strength and expertise lie in listening to our athletes and their coaches and acting accordingly. That has helped us see how different the Olympics Games are from the competitions our athletes generally participate in. Those are two entirely different things. That is why some athletes have amazing performances at certain major competitions, but not necessarily at the Olympic Games.

[English]

I mentioned earlier that these games would require us to deliver the largest mission operations. Here are some examples. For the first time we have chartered a whole ship to take 145,000 pounds of Canadian products and equipment, valued at \$3 million, to Sochi.

[Translation]

This is the first time we are doing that.

[English]

We will be distributing 60,000 pieces of team clothing in over 550 bags, and hopefully these bags will come back home, not only with red and white clothing but also with the colours gold, silver, and bronze.

We have transmitted 22,500 pieces of data to register the team for the games.

We have looked at every aspect of the uniqueness of these Olympic Games and have systematically delivered the program against a background of all those elements in order to best prepare our athletes and coaches. These preparations include heightened media attention, preparation, and increased family and friends services. They also include team building and using other Olympian champions to inspire and motivate the team.

[Translation]

That way, we are making sure that the whole Canadian Olympic family will be well prepared to support our athletes in Sochi.

[English]

I mentioned earlier that we will manage ten facilities. Three of those facilities are the Olympic villages where our athletes will live: the coastal village, the mountain village, and the endurance village. There will be more complexes than there usually are.

[Translation]

In those three villages, the Olympic Committee will provide some very diverse services.

[English]

The village is also where Canadian athletes come together to meet each other, share stories, and get advice from COC athletes services officials, who are all Olympians themselves. It was in the athlete lounge, if we remember, in Vancouver that our famous Sidney Crosby was playing table tennis with his fellow teammates from sports other than hockey.

[Translation]

Canadian athletes will also benefit from the famous second home program in Sochi. That program was developed by the Canadian Olympic Committee to provide the athletes with a very comfortable and family-like environment.

[English]

We will provide the physical preparation and recovery area for the exclusive use of the Canadian team in the village with a complete health and science clinic filled with an expert Canadian health team.

[Translation]

The support team includes physicians, therapists, operations staff, the communications group and the RCMP security personnel.

[English]

There is a wellness centre that is very important because it provides a calm and relaxing environment on site.

Again, this is an example of the unique things we offer to the team. We know it makes a difference. We remember Vancouver and Joannie Rochette's coach, who was the pillar of her strength and who used this to turn around the situation that Joannie was facing. We know the rest of the story about her performance.

[Translation]

Our health and wellness specialists will help our athletes remain focused on performance, rather than on the numerous distractions associated with an Olympic environment.

We also have a centre devoted to technology and performance.

● (0920)

[English]

This centre includes the video analysis technology to capture and analyze all Canadian Olympic team performances.

[Translation]

Of course, we have a high-performance gym in Sochi with the same equipment we have at home.

[English]

Canada Olympic House will be the main hub for everything Canadian at Sochi: from medal ceremonies to corporate partners, and activation and management offices, all mainly for the family and friends of the athletes to make sure they focus on their performance and forget any distraction.

[Translation]

You can imagine that the task is huge and that I cannot tell you more about that today. This is just an overview of the incredibly important preparations at play.

For the Canadian Olympic Committee, these games are by far the most expensive and the most complex to date, but thanks to your support, we are ready to compete fiercely for first place. Our goal is winning.

[English]

Thank you for your attention today. I'd be happy to answer any questions with my colleagues, the chief of sport—she is the boss of sport of our country—and the executive director of communications with the Canadian Olympic Committee, Dimitri Soudas. I'm very proud to be with them here today.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Monsieur Aubut.

We'll go back to our questioning. From the official opposition, Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by thanking the minister and the president of the Canadian Olympic Committee for taking the time to be here to talk about preparations. We all appreciate the enormous efforts that are going into preparing for these games.

I'm pleased to have an opportunity to talk about these preparations from the point of view of inclusive Olympics, so that all athletes, their families, and spectators can feel free to participate in the Olympic Games. I want to start by noting the very positive work the Canadian Olympic Committee has done in promoting an inclusive Olympics.

The challenge for these Olympics is that they're taking place in Russia, which has recently passed a law known as the anti-gay propaganda law, which, as I'm sure most people are aware, makes any public discussion or demonstration of pro-gay ideas illegal. Individuals and organizations are subject to fines and detention and non-Russians to deportation and a ban from returning to the country.

This morning I've asked the committee to circulate two posters. I wonder if those could also be made available to the minister and the witnesses. I'd like to ask very specifically about these posters.

The anti-gay law in Russia has already been enforced against Russians and non-Russians alike, including an individual who held up a handmade sign saying, "Being gay and loving gays is normal. Beating gays and killing gays is a crime." The individual was arrested and fined for holding up that sign.

Non-Russians, including a Dutch delegation from Groningen who were visiting their sister city, were arrested, detained, fined, deported, and banned from Russia for three years. So we have clear examples of this law being applied.

I have a specific question to the Minister of Sport. These posters, which I'm not sure he's received yet, prepared by Fondation Émergence de Montréal, depict two male hockey players kissing and two female snowboarders. These posters would be illegal in Russia, and if any of our Canadian participants chose to display these posters they would potentially be subject to the anti-gay law. Or if an athlete with a same-sex partner wishes to celebrate by kissing their partner, as in the poster, this is also illegal in Russia.

I'd like to ask the minister specifically what is Canada doing to make sure that all Canadian athletes, families, spectators can participate freely and fully in these games?

Hon. Bal Gosal: The Government of Canada has raised concerns directly with Russian authorities on this. We all know that the protection and promotion of human rights is a hallmark of Canadian foreign policy. We are very proactive....

[Technical difficulty—Editor]

As I was mentioning, Canada is very proactive. We have raised our concerns with Russian authorities. Promotion and protection of human rights is a hallmark of Canadian foreign policy. The International Olympic Committee has received assurance from the Russian government that this law will not affect any of those taking part in Sochi. We're working with the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic committees as well.

I think Mr. Aubut can add more to this.

● (0925)

Mr. Marcel Aubut: Yes, Mr. Minister, you are absolutely right.

Our position on this is pretty clear. First of all, as a general comment, it's not our job to get involved in any political debate. Our job is to win and be prepared.

Secondly, we are basing all our rationale on the absolute right to play sports, regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation. That has nothing to do.... Sport has no limits, as far as being a right.

Also, we brought it to the IOC, the International Olympic Committee. We are a subsidiary of the IOC. We were in Canada, and with the cooperation of the Minister of Sport, we received an absolute assurance from the highest authority, the International Olympic Committee—which was really handling this on behalf of all of us and dealing directly with the government of Russia—that this legislation would have no impact on our fans, our athletes, our media, or our Canadian Olympic team at large. We have an absolute guarantee. The IOC and the COC are satisfied with that guarantee.

The priority, I repeat again, is to be prepared. No distractions—concentration, focus, preparation, and more preparation. The best answer to all of this is to win.

Mr. Randall Garrison: With respect, though, for gay and lesbian or gender-variant athletes, it is a distraction to have such a threat. Both the minister of sport for Russia and the minister of the interior

have contradicted the president and said that these laws will be enforced at the time of the games.

We in the NDP have suggested that a special consular official be appointed at the games to assist any Canadians who run into problems with the application of this law. We haven't had an official response from the government on this idea of appointing, as New Zealand has done, a special consular official to assist any Canadians with problems resulting from this law.

Hon. Bal Gosal: As I said, we are working with the Russian authorities. The consular officials from the consular's office in Russia will be in Sochi to help all Canadians with any issues that arise. That is already done.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Well, with respect, Minister, it's not just all Canadians. We have a specific problem with the Russian anti-gay law.

What we're asking is that someone be prepared, and that the person be identified, so that anyone who has a problem with the laws could contact that official in Sochi to receive assistance. Once again, we're not asking for the same general assistance that all other Canadians would receive, but for some special measures to be taken. Given the statements by the minister of sport and the minister of the interior that the laws would be enforced, I think it would be prudent to have someone who is designated to assist Canadians in this way.

Mr. Lane MacAdam: To add to what the minister has said, we've certainly been working with Foreign Affairs over the planning period going into Sochi. The Moscow post has been actively involved in the preparations and planning. There will be specifically designated consular officers posted in Sochi for the period of the games, and certainly this will be something they will be watching carefully for.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Garrison.

We'll move to Mr. Dion for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (0930)

[English]

Thank you so much for being with us, Mr. Minister and Monsieur Aubut.

Minister, I wish you the best. I wish Canada the best. On this issue, partisan politics has no role to play. I am on your team, as I am when we play soccer against the media.

[Translation]

Good luck to you, too, Mr. Aubut.

[English]

At the point we are at now, a few weeks before the event, what are the most pressing tasks you have to do and how can this committee help?

Hon. Bal Gosal: The preparations are going well. We have daily briefings. Our teams are ready, and whatever support they need, Sport Canada is providing it to them.

We are working very closely with national sports organizations and the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic committees to make sure there are no issues, that our teams are ready and they have all the facilities and services they need.

I'll ask Mr. Aubut if he wants to add anything about the other preparations.

Mr. Marcel Aubut: We have a modest list. We have a worldwide reputation as far as preparation for Olympic Games goes, and we are even improving a lot. These will be the most complex games coming up, and we are absolutely prepared to meet the challenge.

I will ask Caroline to add a few things. She is leading all the preparations—detail, detail, detail, quality, quality, quality, check, check, check—and she is doing that 20 hours a day right now.

Ms. Caroline Assalian (Chief Sport Officer, Canadian Olympic Committee): Thank you.

With respect to what you can do, what the public can do, what Canadians across all communities can do, I think it's surprising to hear this, but every single athlete feels the support of Canadians. They feel the support when Canadians are cheering or sending them messages or supporting them. I think we just need to continue to do that. As our president said, we have 215 athletes who are going to be part of the Sochi team. They come from 215 communities across our country from coast to coast to coast.

When our athletes are competing at home or at events, show them how much we take pride in their achievement and how much we are behind them. Showing them support comes with a financial package, but it's also the human one on one. I think that's something we as the Canadian Olympic Committee can do. Literally, we are responsible for 550 people for every minute of every day for 21 days. We are going through rehearsals and what-if scenarios. What if plan A doesn't work? Do we have a plan B? Do we have a plan C? Every single element is what we're doing right now. We're going through our rehearsals.

Mr. Marcel Aubut: As you know, Mr. Dion, there is a very special connection between the team and Canadians, a very strong connection. That is probably the best thing they need to feel as far as support goes when we are doing that detailed preparation. That's why we already made the announcement in August about the short track, and we have done the announcement for each of them. It's an initiative of our communications department. There are 17 more announcements about teams leaving for Sochi that will be made between now and January.

This is why we believe it will elevate the connection between the team and Canadians, and this is probably the best element of our preparation that you can imagine.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you very much.

Mr. Aubut, I completely agree with you that the objective is to win. At that level of competition, participating is nice, but winning is even better.

However, any issues related to human rights—such as sexual orientation issues—could seriously upset the athletes and the Canadian public on location. That's exactly what Mr. Garrison's questions were about. So we have to have maximum guarantees both in terms of human rights and in terms of performance. That is the first issue.

Here is the second issue. We are Canadians, and we know what that means. No issues with regard to official languages should arise, as that could really spoil the celebration we all want to have. I am repeating my colleague's question, but from the perspective of success. Are we taking all the necessary precautions to avoid those kinds of problems, which could upset members of the Canadian team?

Mr. Marcel Aubut: When it comes to official languages, you have seen that, since we have been in charge of the Canadian Olympic Committee, some drastic changes have been made in that area. The official Olympic language is French, and that also helps. Everything we are doing as part of our activities in Sochi is 50-50. You can rest assured that we will defend our Official Languages Act.

Moreover, everyone will have to do their job properly, so that the athletes, families, friends, Canadians on site and the support team are well protected from the disturbances you are talking about. We will separate the boys from men, from parents. Everyone must do their job to ensure good protection, maintain the concentration and provide effective tools for reacting to certain situations. The minister assured us that those tools will be in place. I am under the impression that, if all that work is done properly, those disturbances will not take away from our athletes' performances, if any such disturbances should arise. We are not sure that they will arise, but we have to prepare for the worst.

● (0935)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: What do you think about that, Minister?

[English]

Hon. Bal Gosal: The Department of Canadian Heritage plays a leadership role. In all of the contribution agreements we sign, the commitment is there for both official languages. CBC is the broadcaster, and they are broadcasting in both official languages. Radio-Canada and CBC have broadcasting rights for the games.

As the Government of Canada, we are committed to official languages. All the competitions that are held in Canada are held in both official languages. It's in the signed contribution agreements.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

[English]

I will move to Mr. Young for seven minutes.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today. I appreciate it very much.

Madam Assalian, I was very interested in what you said about moral support for athletes, that they really feel it from Canadians. I've felt that in the past with our athletes and para-athletes from Oakville.

How are you planning to use social media to connect with the athletes, to give them the kind of boost they need from the Canadian people? Are the athletes using Twitter now? Are people following our athletes? Is that building up? And how do you plan to maximize that during the games?

Ms. Caroline Assalian: If you don't mind, I'll defer the question to our executive director.

Mr. Dimitri Soudas (Executive Director, Communications, Canadian Olympic Committee): I'll give you an example. About two years ago, the Canadian Olympic Committee had roughly 4,000 followers on Twitter. We're approaching 40,000 followers today. I would say that it's moving in a positive direction.

Yes, with our social media platforms, whether it's our website, www.olympic.ca, our Facebook page, or our Twitter account, we try not only to have one-way communication with fans but also to engage and interact with them and to tell our athletes' stories, to talk about our athletes' performances, whether they be at world championships or the Olympic Games.

Our athletes are obviously very much engaged in social media. They themselves quite often interact with their fans.

The key thing is to connect with fans on the platforms they use. Some people connect with athletes by going to local town halls or to local meetings. That's why over the last 12 months we've had more than 1,000 Olympians re-engage into communities across the country with more than 140 events.

What we try to do is provide all the support to the athletes across all platforms, whether it's social media or communities across the country, whether it's in Santa Claus parades or St. Patrick's Day parades.

As well, just to go back to a couple of questions that were asked, for the first time ever this year, for the first time ever in Canadian Olympic Committee history, our athletes participated in pride parades across the country before it even became an issue.

Mr. Terence Young: That is actually very interesting. When you say "stories", I think everyone remembers when Alexandre Bilodeau won the first gold medal in Vancouver. The beautiful story was his relationship with his brother. That stuff is very touching, and it helps us remember.

Mr. Aubut, along that line, everybody remembers the people who win the gold. I want to ask you a question about our athletes who don't win, because more don't win than do win.

What support do they get by way of coaching and moral support when they lose?

Mr. Marcel Aubut: On site, at Sochi?

Mr. Terence Young: Along the way—on site and then after.

Mr. Marcel Aubut: When we took over this job we all decided that the core of our business would be the future athletes and coaches; everything else is ancillary. We need finance. We need all kinds of other initiatives, but our core business is athletes and coaches. For the winners and for those who don't win now but could win later, this is very much analyzed, and they have absolute support at all times.

Of course we want to win, and the pressure is strong to do so. We prepare everything to create an environment that allows this. But as far as the athletes—you should have seen the Joannie Rochette situation. The environment was irritated as soon as she lost her mother. It was very impressive. One of my best memories is how we surrounded her and found a way so that she could still perform and win.

No athlete is left alone in our organization.

• (0940)

Mr. Terence Young: I'm very glad to hear that.

Go ahead.

Ms. Caroline Assalian: I have a couple of things. As we speak, there are athletes who will not be going to Sochi. They are being de-selected from the team. We are starting right now to work with the Canadian Sport Institute network on an athlete transition program. Some athletes are not going to win, we know that, and we're working with the centres.

The other thing is, as our president said, we have experience dealing with athletes who will not have their best performance at the Olympic Games this time. They may next time, so we need to make sure they stay motivated for next time.

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you.

In a different vein, Mr. Aubut, does the location of Sochi in southern Russia present any unique challenges, and if so, how are you addressing them?

Mr. Marcel Aubut: It is no secret that Russia itself presents challenges, and to hold games in such a small area is also a challenge. Also, we expect the weather to be like Florida on the ground and very cold and snowy in the mountains. This is the kind of weather that no winter sport has experienced before, and challenges will be tremendous. That's what we often talk about, this being the most complex games. That includes all those elements. But we went there many times. The COC set a record as far as familiarization with the location is concerned. On the other hand, we feel we can get around any of those challenges.

It is a small area, but everything is close too. We are going to get from the mountains to the Olympic Park on a fast train that will take minutes. Also, in the park itself, most of the greatest facilities, like the arena and the stadium, are all within walking distance.

There are always big challenges, but there are always advantages that every site, every country, and every city offers. Sochi offers a lot, even if it is a very complex situation.

Mr. Terence Young: Just quickly, could you please tell us the state of your preparations for the Sochi games for both Paralympic and Olympic athletes?

Ms. Caroline Assalian: Olympic preparations are going extremely well. Again, we have the experience. We equate Sochi very much to Beijing and the Beijing Olympic Games. Athletes weren't very familiar with the Beijing environment, so we're using the best practices from what we did in Beijing and applying them to Sochi, whether concerning language or other things.

I want to touch on your question on challenges. When our president says we leave no stone unturned, we believe that the challenges, which are going to be challenges for all countries, because of our meticulous preparation, will be an advantage for the Canadian team because they are so well prepared for the Sochi environment.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have two minutes left, and we're going to move to Monsieur Dubé.

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

I want to take this opportunity to thank the witnesses for being here. We heard from the Department of Foreign Affairs and the RCMP representatives who are ensuring the athletes' security and will provide them with information sessions. We just saw that the NDP was justified in asking that they be invited to appear before the committee for this study.

Mr. Aubut, the preparation exercise for the games is done often. I am convinced that, as always, you are well prepared on the sports front.

I have a specific question for you. Vancouver was host to a first-time initiative, I think. I am talking about the Pride House, which was set up by non-governmental organizations, NGOs. The same initiative was set up in London and will once again be implemented in Rio de Janeiro.

Now, a Russian judge is preventing the sponsoring of a pride house in Russia. We are asking that national organizations like yours support those who want to have a pride house. You talked about the record number of facilities on site for these games. Is this something you have thought about and will support once you are on site in Sochi?

• (0945)

Mr. Marcel Aubut: I will ask Dimitri to answer this question first, and then I will complete his answer.

Mr. Dimitri Soudas: Mr. Dubé, thank you for your question. It is a pleasure to see you again.

Vancouver, London and Rio de Janeiro did have or will have gay pride houses. That decision is actually made by the local organizing committee. That body decides who can have a place in the Olympic park and who cannot. That being said, I want to remind you that Canada will have its own Olympic house. As Mr. Aubut said, that house is primarily meant for our athletes' families and friends. In addition, we are currently preparing something—perhaps a special day—to attract more Canadians to visit the house. As Mr. Aubut said earlier, all Canadians, regardless of their sexual orientation, are always welcome.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're going to have to end on that note. I would like to thank our witnesses for coming. We are going to briefly suspend for our next round of witnesses.

• (0945)

(Pause)

• (0950)

The Chair: We're calling the meeting back to order. Perhaps our next round of witnesses could come to the table and our past witnesses could have a seat. We'd love it if they stay.

We have two organizations. First of all, from the Canadian Paralympic Committee, we have Karen O'Neill, chief executive officer, along with Martin Richard, executive director of communications and marketing. And from Own the Podium, we have Anne Merklinger, chief executive officer, and Joanne Mortimore, director of planning and operations.

Is there any preference at the table?

Ms. Karen O'Neill (Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Paralympic Committee): We already did rock, paper, scissors, so I'm going first.

The Chair: Ms. O'Neill, you have the floor for 10 minutes.

Ms. Karen O'Neill: Thank you very much, committee members. On behalf of Martin Richard and myself, from the Canadian Paralympic Committee, we're absolutely thrilled to be here on what appears to be the eve of a terrific experience in Sochi.

I'd like to make a few opening comments in terms of the Canadian Paralympic Committee as different from the Canadian Olympic Committee. Clearly our view is that we ought to be the world-leading Paralympic nation, and we view that through a focus on both high performance—that would be the support of our high-performance athletes, games teams—and also a development stream, because you cannot acquire the heights of greatness in Paralympic domination and results without a strong system and an aligned system leading up to that.

Our Paralympic athletes train hard. They compete with intensity and push the boundaries of human achievement. They are athletes first and they do it for athletic achievement, competition, and they are driven by their passion. Every Paralympic athlete has an inspirational story.

The Vancouver 2010 Paralympic Games were Canada's best ever winter games in history, as Canada placed third in the gold medal count, with 10 gold medals, and 19 medals overall. As a result, Vancouver was a catalyst in Canada for Paralympic sport and a time when we saw increased funding and resources for Paralympic athletes, and that continues to this day.

So our Sochi team is better prepared, with an increased number of training camps, augmented support for our coaches, increased competitive opportunities, augmentation to equipment, and technical expertise for sport medicine and science.

For Canada to be world leaders in Paralympic sport we must continue to invest in the critical areas of athlete recruitment, athlete development, and athlete retention, as well as supporting the fundamental leadership of our coaches through all of that. Clear momentum and energy has been established to support the Paralympic movement moving into Sochi.

If you'll move to slide 3, it's again a bit of an overview of what we do. With the tremendous support of the federal government and many of our corporate sponsors, this is probably the easiest way to describe what our business is and the scope of what we provide. In the far left cluster entitled "Grassroots", that really details the type of programming that encompasses things like awareness, first exposure to sport, almost a "see it, try it" for basic skills, and particularly the focus will be on building and exposing participants to fundamental movement skills.

The next block in the middle we term "Next Generation". Once fundamental movement skills and exposure to some of the basic sports have been provided, that's when we really increase the level of expertise, sport, and technical leadership to support the athlete to further hone their interest and capability within each sport. Again, you can see a number of the programs we provide support for, such as the equipment, the coaching program, funding directly for our athletes, and also sport science.

On the far lefthand side is our Paralympian program, our national team program, and this is what we'll be focusing on today for Sochi. Clearly this is where our national teams come in, where we provide support and partnership with our national sport federations for coaching, competition opportunities, IST, sport medicine and science, and also research and development. We don't do this alone. Throughout the presentation we'll be speaking about our partners, two of which are beside us right now. We call them our performance partners. They are Own The Podium, the Coaching Association of Canada, and Sport Canada.

In listening to some of the questions before in terms of what are some of the barriers or challenges, it is clear that one of the largest challenges is system alignment and coordination. There's a tremendous amount of talent here in Canada, and the real key, especially for the leadership and at the national levels, is to be able to coordinate and align our efforts to optimize what we can do.

Turning to slide 4, we'll get into Sochi, which is what we're here to talk about today. From March 7 to March 16, our Canadian Paralympic team will be over in Sochi, Russia, to compete in six sports. There will be alpine, biathlon, Nordic, sledge hockey, paracurling, and snowboard, for the very first time in Paralympic history.

At the bottom of the slide you'll see a phrase encased in the quotes. It's "Perform in the Moment, Take Pride in the Journey". This has been a guiding principle throughout the games.

• (0955)

In fact, it was developed by Canada's chef de mission, Ozzie Sawicki, who is both a previous coach and a technical director in the area of sports. It's really to give the intention that everything counts, all athletes are there to do their best, and the journey is as important as the result.

On the next slide, which speaks to current standings—and I know Anne and her colleague Joanne will be reviewing the results and standings in more detail—we would like to make one particular point, which I think is different for the Paralympics going into Sochi.

As you can see, Canada is listed five rows down. After the 2012–13 season, Canada currently sits fifth overall in the gold medal

standings. If you pay particular attention to the countries above, you will see that the difference of just one additional gold medal would push Canada into third standing. If you ask what would make the difference, it's performance, the environment over in Sochi, and again, as our Olympic colleague spoke about, there has been rehearsal after rehearsal for this moment. You can see the difference that preparation and support will make, because one gold medal is the difference between fifth and third position.

On the next slide is our performance objective. Our performance objective for Sochi is as it was for Vancouver: to place in the top three nations in gold medals. Anne will speak about the details later.

This goal was established in collaboration with our performance partners Own The Podium, Sport Canada, and our national sport organizations. It's an aggressive and ambitious goal, but we feel it is attainable.

On the next slide is a thumbnail of the Team Canada summary. We have approximately 110 accredited team members and a total of about 20 additional team members off-site, just outside of the village. You have heard lots about accreditation, but you only get so many tickets, so you use those tickets very carefully.

The question to our sports, our athletes, and our coaches is, what will make the difference in optimizing your performance? It's those answers that help us decide who gets the accreditation to be right in the village and on the sites. There are going to be approximately 46 athletes overall, and in five of the sports, six guides accompany those athletes.

In terms of qualification, two team sports, curling and sledge hockey, have already qualified. As with our Olympic colleagues, the remaining four sports do not qualify until about mid-February, so you can see how problematic that is as the qualification occurs. It's as if you planned a trip to Florida; you would much prefer to plan three or four months in advance, because there certainly is a cost when you know you only have four or five days for what ticket, what plane, and when you are going to leave.

For the four remaining sports, that's in essence what we have to be prepared for—part of the cycle, part of the qualification—and that's part of our planning to be ready for this.

We have medal potential for athletes in every single sport. In fact, many of the athletes who have been previous gold medallists in some of our prior games are returning.

On page 8 is a listing of the full set of enhanced team services. I know you have heard a lot about this from our Olympic colleagues. We work hard. We don't do this alone. We do this in collaboration with our performance partners every step of the way, so the preparation of not only what we do but also how we work together is well rehearsed.

Listed are games operations, medical support, security—of which there were a number of questions this morning—IST, which is our sports science and technology. We take people over to videotape performance. We have a particular software called Dartfish. By the time the coaches and athletes get off the hills or off the side of the rink, they have a full-scale analysis broken down with our sport medicine people and our coaches, to be able to review the performance so they can review, revise, and plan for the next day.

Communications is a very large part of this. The question asked earlier was, “What would make the biggest difference?” The answer is communications and promotions.

My colleague Martin will address that. We're in a bit of a different situation. In fact, we took the bold move of acquiring the rights, and Martin will provide some additional details.

● (1000)

Friends and family are absolutely critical. At Sochi there will probably be a much smaller group than at Vancouver. But again, it's no less important. We will establish a Canadian Paralympic house in two sites, so that friends and family can join the athletes, the coaches, and the team members while over there to support them throughout their journey.

On VIP and partner hospitality, again, our partners support us 365 days of the year, and this is the set of 10 days for the games that all of our partners will be joining us in Sochi. We will probably look at two waves. At the front end, with the opening ceremonies, there will be a program for our partners so that they'll be able to meet our athletes, be exposed to many of the sports and certainly some of the preliminaries, and then we'll have a second wave on the back end, where the second group of corporate sponsors and supporters will join us for the closing ceremonies, and again will be meeting many of the athletes, who by that time will have medalled.

The Chair: Ms. O'Neill, we'll have to let you expand in the questioning.

We'll move on to Ms. Merklinger from Own the Podium for 10 minutes. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Ms. Anne Merklinger (Chief Executive Officer, Own the Podium): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

[English]

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear with you again. It is of enormous importance to Canada's athletes to know that the Government of Canada and you, the elected politicians, continue to care about how they perform. Allow me to acknowledge the critical role the Government of Canada plays in high-performance sport in Canada. As we heard earlier from Marcel Aubut, the Government of Canada is the single largest contributor to excellence in sport in Canada, and it is the primary reason why Canada's athletes and coaches have enjoyed the successes they have to this point on the world stage.

I've circulated a detailed performance update for you on the Sochi Olympic and Paralympic Games for your review. I'll focus my remarks on three primary components: first, how Canada stands heading into Sochi; second, Canada's performance objectives for the

Olympic and Paralympic Games in Sochi; and third, the level of financial investment and investment strategy that we've adopted throughout the last four years.

Let's look at how Canada stands heading into Sochi. As we just heard Karen say in terms of the Paralympic team's preparation, and as we heard as well from the Canadian Olympic Committee's statement, we are in an excellent position heading into the games.

Our performances at the 2013 world championships are the best indicator we have as a nation in terms of how we will perform in Sochi. In 2013 Canada's athletes and coaches won 29 medals in Olympic events. This placed Canada in a tie for second place on the overall nation ranking list. There's a tight race amongst the top five nations, as we heard earlier. Finishing second, third, and fourth on the overall medal ranking can be decided by a single medal.

On the Paralympic front, as Karen just mentioned, Canada finished fourth overall based on gold medal ranking in the 2013 world championships. We were only one medal away from second place. We know it's an extremely tight race in terms of the gold medal race.

Importantly, when you look at the detailed material I've circulated, you can see that we showed significant depth in our silver and bronze medal finishes in the 2013 Paralympic world championships. We're now very focused on working with those national sport organizations to convert those silver and bronze medal performances to gold.

The margin between second, third, and fourth is so tight. As Karen mentioned, the goal of finishing top three in gold medal count is still well within our reach.

Moving on to Canada's performance objectives for 2014, we've been talking about that all morning. In the Olympic Games, our goal is to improve on our medal count from Vancouver. We won 26 medals in Vancouver and finished third overall in total medal count—the third-ranked nation based on the number of medals won in the Olympic Games. Our goal is to contend for number one in Olympic medal count, so to do better than we did in Vancouver. In the Paralympic Games, we want to finish top three based on our gold medal count. Again, both of those objectives are very obtainable.

We want to be the first host nation to have won more medals in the next set of games—ever. No other nation has won more medals in the subsequent set of games of their hosting experience.

The final area I would like to address is the level of financial support that has been provided for Canada's Winter Olympic and Paralympic sports heading into Sochi.

An additional \$10 million has been provided for the four years heading into Sochi compared with the level of investment heading into Vancouver. That's remarkable when you think that we were the host nation in Vancouver: \$10 million over the last four years into Sochi.

The lion's share of that investment comes from the Government of Canada. This is testament to the tremendous commitment that you, our elected politicians, and our government have made in high-performance sport. Of course that includes our private sector partners. We are always out there, together with our partners, the Canadian Paralympic Committee and the Canadian Olympic Committee, trying to leverage additional resource investment from the private sector.

Own the Podium's investment strategy is very deliberate and focused. Our goal is to ensure that every podium-potential athlete and team has access to three key ingredients.

The first is access to the world's best coaches and technical leaders. We know that without the best coaches, our athletes have a slim possibility of reaching the podium.

Secondly, we want to make sure they have access to a great daily training and competition environment. Those are the basics.

•(1005)

Finally, quality sport science and sport medicine support is the last critical ingredient. Research and innovation is a key element in sport science support. Research and innovation can be the 1% factor that brings an athlete from being fourth to being on the podium.

In the final year of preparation for Sochi we have focused on ensuring that all athletes are fully prepared and have had the opportunity to fully familiarize themselves with Sochi. We know Sochi will be a very challenging environment, and it's those athletes who are the most resilient and adaptable who will find their way onto the podium.

Last but not least, keeping athletes healthy and injury free is a key area of focus with 80 days to go before the Olympic Games and 108 days to go before the Paralympic Games.

Winning medals in sport continues to be important to Canada. We continue to develop a culture of winning and focus on excellence in Canadian sport, maintaining the momentum we generated in Vancouver and maintained in London. A whole new generation of heroes will emerge from Sochi. With each medallist crowned, we need to ensure that these heroes go back to their communities, your communities, and reinforce the importance of sport and physical activity, healthy living, and being active for life.

Canada's children need Olympic heroes. They need positive role models whom they can aspire to emulate. Success in high performance sport, we know, strengthens and builds Canadian communities. We have seen our athletes and coaches and we know they are our future leaders. We know they will play a critical role in

developing civic pride and instilling a belief that we can win and that it is okay to win.

Thank you once again on behalf of all of Canada's athletes and coaches for the tremendous support you have provided in Own the Podium's quest to help more athletes win more medals in Sochi. Knowing that you care, believe in, and support the athletes in their pursuit means so much to them and to all the sport leaders who are trying so hard to help Canada's athletes. Knowing that they have an entire government and a country behind them will truly make a difference as they head into Sochi.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

•(1010)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to the questioning.

For seven minutes, Mr. Leung.

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Willowdale, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing.

If performance is measured by medals to be won, and, as you indicated to us, Canada invested more than \$10 million into this, can you tell us what the additional marginal investment is that we need to make, if it's in terms of dollars, to win additional medals, or is money the only situation?

The second question is, how do we compare to other countries, like some of the Nordic countries, like Norway, which has a much smaller population? How much do they invest in their athletes to attain that position?

I also see that there are much bigger countries than us, like Germany and Russia. Is their investment per return on medals less or better than ours?

Ms. Anne Merklinger: Great questions.

First of all, we will do a full analysis after Sochi to determine the merits of our investment strategy. Did the incremental \$10 million from the private and public sectors result in an improved return on investment in terms of medals? It's premature at this point. Just as we did post-London, we need to really identify where we had the greatest impact in terms of delivering medals.

We have made some changes based on our analysis post-London in terms of our investment strategy. We know that those sports that have the potential to win multiple medals deliver the greatest return on investment. So we'll make the same kinds of strategic changes post-Sochi based on our analysis.

The additional \$10 million is spread over four years, so even just in terms of the incremental costs to deliver a program in year four of the games as opposed to year one of the games will account for some of that. But a full analysis will unfold after both the Olympic and Paralympic Games to assess the return on investment.

As to what other nations are investing, first of all, we know that Canada is investing more than we ever have, and we need to acknowledge that and recognize that. Many sport organizations will always want additional resources. We want to make sure that we are investing the money wisely and that we are delivering on the objectives that have been established for Canada.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Okay, because an underlying thought is that investment in sports or athletes or athletic-related activities has far-reaching implications for society and will benefit society, in terms of long-term health, and so on.

Has any analysis been done as to what we invest in sports and what the other ancillary benefits are to society as a whole, in terms of better health, better nutrition, and, in terms of the Paralympics, better equipment and tools to aid mobility, and other ancillary factors? Have we done that type of analysis?

•(1015)

Ms. Karen O'Neill: That's a great question, because there's been a tremendous amount of research done on the Paralympic side or on individuals with a disability. There's no question that degrees of independence, degrees of fewer requirements, degrees of ability to engage with society increase substantially, with great enormity, once an individual is able to get up and be active—and also from a health perspective.

I would also say that if our colleagues from PHE Canada were here.... Probably one of the most grounding principles is for our youth of today, with the tremendous challenges of obesity. One of the strongest indicators for health right now, especially with our young children, has to do with physical activity, and particularly the proponent of at least an hour of physical activity a day. This would be the whole foundation, I would say, our entire sports system right now is galvanizing around to be able to support across the country.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: I certainly look forward to a post-game analysis of how we compare against other nations, and also how our funding for athletes and sports can benefit the health and welfare of the entire population.

Mr. Chair, is there additional time?

The Chair: You have two more minutes.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Okay.

I'll come back to how we stack up against other nations. Nordic sports are only for northern climates, and perhaps for some of the few countries like Chile and Australia that may have athletes... Having the natural environment in Canada that we have, do we invest enough money in those venues so that they could be part of our tourism attraction for other countries? Can you give us a sense of whether that type of funding is going into developing venues for winter sports?

Ms. Anne Merklinger: Certainly. Given that Canada hosted the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we are rich in facilities that

are ideal for Canada's winter sport athletes to train and prepare for games.

Canada is particularly strong in the new Olympic sports, so the freestyle and snowboard sports. If you look at a nation like Norway, they are stronger in some of the more traditional sports. Those are also the sports where there's an extremely deep competitive field. Canada has really emerged as a dominant nation in new sports, like freestyle and snowboard. We have great facilities in pockets across Canada, both as a result of our hosting of the games in 2010 and the culture within the new sports.

I'll let Karen speak on the Paralympic front.

Ms. Karen O'Neill: I would echo the same thing, particularly with the trend with some of the new sports, where we expect to do quite well, with the addition of para-snowboarding. I would say the trends are similar, if not the same.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Leung.

We will move to Monsieur Dubé.

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for joining us.

My question is mainly for our friends from the Canadian Paralympic Committee.

During the post-mortem study on the London Olympic Games, this issue was raised by one of my Conservative colleagues who was then on the committee. I know that this is beyond your control and that the decision-making power belongs mostly to the international committee. However, is the fact that the Paralympic Games are not taking place at the same time as the Olympic Games an impediment to the growth of those athletes or to their public profile? The Paralympic Games will be held in March, and the Olympic Games, in February.

You do not have the power to change that, but what do you think about it?

[English]

Ms. Karen O'Neill: That's a big question, but a very good one, because it touches on a couple of items.

The two international organizations that govern us, the IOC, the International Olympic Committee, and the IPC, the International Paralympic Committee, have had an open discussion about this, particularly under the banner of what I would call "inclusion". For many, many years the model of "same as same as" would mean the games would be imbedded or integrated, so they would be at the same time, with the same framing all in. I would say we've had an avid discussion over the years, and we've probably evolved to a point now where—given the specificity of each of the sports in their own right, the number of events, and the fact that each event, including the number of athletes involved, is very large—even at an operational level it would be very difficult to do. You would have to cut down on sports, on athletes, on the games themselves, and on opportunities, so in fact the games would become much smaller with less opportunity to compete.

Particularly for the Paralympics in their own right, I'm going to say that the sport, the movement, and the very strong decision to promote Paralympic sport in its own right, with its own set of games, have many other benefits. Top of the list would be the number of athletes and countries that can participate in the games, and also present athletes in their own right. We like to say our games are no different from the Olympics, certainly in terms of the athletic prowess and the training and the degree of commitment our athletes have and certainly in terms of that platform of exposure to have that opportunity with the Paralympics.

The only other point I would make would be on the broadcasts, and I alluded to that a little bit earlier. There's a lot of activity around the Olympics, and then there's far less during the Paralympics, and that's what I referred to earlier. We decided that wasn't acceptable. You made a comment about the London debrief, and in fact Channel 4 in London was a groundbreaker in the amount of coverage it provided.

If there was one lesson we learned, aside from all the other lessons from London and Vancouver that we will take into Sochi, it was that we're not going to have what happened to us in the previous games ever happen again, where the exposure was maybe a highlights package at the end or maybe a half hour. We've bought the rights, we've created a media consortium, and we are going to have unprecedented coverage here in Canada, which I hope will be the banner and set the bar for what is to come, not only for Sochi, but for 2015 and for Rio thereafter.

● (1020)

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: That is very good news. However, what more can be done in terms of publicity? Broadcasting the games is one thing, but people have to be interested in watching the event. Nine out of ten channels could be broadcasting the games, but if everyone decides to watch the tenth channel, things will not be moving forward.

Shouldn't the government talk about it more? This may be a matter of perception, but we hear a lot about Olympic athletes and perhaps a bit less about Paralympic athletes.

What do you think about the publicity for the games, above and beyond their broadcasting?

[English]

Ms. Karen O'Neill: Absolutely, and let me turn to my colleague.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Richard (Executive Director, Communications and Marketing, Canadian Paralympic Committee): Thank you, Mr. Dubé.

One of our strategies is to ensure that our athletes are known before they show up in Sochi. Of course, in order to ensure that Canadians are able to watch the Paralympic Games, we have to plan to have over 65 hours of content for Sochi for our Canadians and over 350 hours on digital platforms.

We feel it is crucial to provide all Canadians with an opportunity to get to know our heroes and create an emotional connection with

them. That way, people feel proud and want to encourage our athletes.

On November 27, when we will have 100 days remaining before the Paralympic Games begin, the International Paralympic Committee will launch a promotional campaign that will reach all Canadians across the country. The goal is to ensure that Canadians know as much about our Paralympic athletes as they do about our Olympic athletes.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Aubut has said so often, and even the minister said so. The private sector is an important asset for Canada's sports. Are issues in terms of broadcasting and the public interest posing challenges for you when it comes to private sponsorships? I am talking about the fact that Canadians and television stations may be less interested in the Paralympics, contrary to the rest of the Olympic Games.

Mr. Martin Richard: That's an excellent question. On November 27, we will issue an announcement on the first Paralympic consortium. That consortium will bring together various media outlets that will be covering the games.

We should not forget that media coverage carries costs. We from the Canadian Paralympic Committee have ensured the support of four sponsors to fund this new strategy. Our partners are listening. They are ready not only to contribute financially, but also—through their internal and external marketing campaigns—to promote the Paralympic program and give it more publicity.

● (1025)

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dion, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you very much, to each of you, for being here.

I would like to know at this point, a couple of weeks before the Olympics, what are the main challenges you have to face. You've prepared yourself for so long; now it's the blitz.

To all of you, it would be helpful for the committee to understand the main tasks that we need to carry out.

Ms. Karen O'Neill: Well, I think it's probably a question for both of us actually.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes, indeed.

Ms. Karen O'Neill: From a Paralympic team perspective, not unlike our Olympic committee members, we've been to Sochi double-digit times, so having established the pattern and established all of the scenarios, it's really practice, repeat, and looking at every single opportunity where there might be something that might go wrong. It's rehearsing and going over all the details that we've been developing for the last couple of years.

I would say that the travel—because I talked about the late qualification, which goes into February—unlike the Olympics, remains a challenge. We've been able to mitigate that by working with our corporate premier partner, Air Canada, and to also look at some of the partner airlines. What happens is that after the Olympics, all of the other partner airlines substantially reduce the air travel pathways to Sochi, so we're having to look at rather creative options for air travel. They're all within the intention of team performance, but certainly it doesn't make it any easier.

I would say that all the other items that were alluded to earlier—safety, security, welcome, the friends and family—are all well in motion.

Further to the other questions outside of this, it's a tremendous investment leading up to the games, and if we cannot display the athletes and the performances and the experience over there, that would be such a shame. That's why I go back to the broadcast. We're clear and we're confident on the operational aspect and ensuring that our athletes and coaches have what they need right now; we need to make sure we have the platform to tell their story. That's uppermost for us so that we don't lose that part.

Anne.

Ms. Anne Merklinger: Own the Podium's role is to make sure that when the athletes and coaches and support staff get on the plane to Sochi, they have no regrets, they have been fully prepared, and they're able to look in the mirror and say they've done everything possible to perform to their best at the Olympic and Paralympic Games. We feel very comfortable and confident that we've done that.

We take that responsibility very seriously, and we know that when the athletes do arrive in Sochi for both the Olympic and Paralympic Games, they will be fully prepared. They will have ample opportunity to experience Sochi. It is quite a unique environment. Having been there and experienced it, to live, eat, and breathe, day in and day out in that particular environment will be a significant advantage for them.

They also need to manage distractions. We work very closely with athletes and coaches to protect what we call the “athlete-coach bubble”, make sure that it's distraction-free, that they are able to focus exclusively on their performance.

Both the Canadian Olympic Committee and the Canadian Paralympic Committee are the world's best when it comes time to executing the missions of the games. We are above and beyond the rest of the world in that particular area. We know that our job is essentially done when they get on the plane, but, more importantly, we hand it over to our partners in the CPC and COC to executive a world-class games mission.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Is the controversy about the anti-gay law in Russia something that you need to be very careful about, to protect our athletes and the whole Canadian team?

Ms. Anne Merklinger: I would say that both organizations have reviewed that particular issue and are comfortable in briefing the teams.

I'll let Karen speak to that from a CPC perspective.

● (1030)

Ms. Karen O'Neill: Absolutely. Our response would not differ much from our colleagues before, and Anne is right. Certainly from a communications perspective, we've run through a number of scenarios, in addition to ensuring that our team throughout our mission—staff working with the RCMP and security, our strategies, communications, the options, and the way we're going to manage it... that the athletes, who are most central to this, have the information they need before they go to Sochi. Every effort is being taken to be able to mitigate and manage that.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Have the proper preparations been made in terms of official languages? Will everything be done to avoid any unnecessary problems that would ruin the celebration?

Mr. Martin Richard: Yes.

All our athletes—the anglophones and the francophones—will be served in the language of their choice. Of course, all our communications with Canadians, including broadcasts, will be in both official languages. That's an extra step for the Canadian Paralympic Committee. It's very important to us that everyone have access. In addition, all television coverage will also be described. So visually impaired people will be able to hear the broadcast on our channels in English and in French.

[English]

The Chair: You have a minute and a half left.

Ms. Karen O'Neill: I just want to add that for the Paralympics, it's the official languages and also alternate formats in both official languages. Individuals might be hearing or visually impaired. We want to ensure, as Martin referred to, that they're all in alternate formats, especially with our media broadcast strategy. One of the consortium partners deals with alternate formats.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: It was a question I should have asked the minister because it's about security. It's difficult to comment on security, by definition, but Canadians want to know if everything has been done to protect our athletes from any physical threat that may happen—athletes and the whole team.

Ms. Karen O'Neill: I can honestly speak to the strong leadership and generosity of sharing information and moving along with our security plan. We've had several briefings with senior staff, with our partners—Sport Canada, our Olympic colleagues, and Own the Podium—and several of us now have increased security status to be able to access the information, in addition to their commitment for briefings and alternate scenarios. Obviously there's more, and he can probably respond to that, but certainly from our perspective, we are feeling very well supported at this point in our preparations.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Boughen for seven minutes.

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to the panel for taking time to share your thoughts with us about the Paralympics. We appreciate your being here.

I have a couple of things to hear from the panel on. Can you share with us what's been happening on and off the field in terms of preparation, particularly when you hear professional athletes saying that 20% is skill and 80% is mental? What's happening in terms of setting that mental clock in place so that our athletes are ready to go when their term comes up? Can you share with us your thoughts on that?

Ms. Anne Merklinger: Sure. I'll start, and Karen can add to it.

The preparation for the Olympic and Paralympic Games starts the day after the previous games finish. It's four years of preparation.

Around each athlete there is a very specific, well-trained team, and that team will include what we call a sports psychologist or a mental performance consultant. That specialist will work with a national sport organization and a particular athlete or team in the full preparation through to the Games. That sport psychologist or mental performance consultant will go to Sochi. They'll be familiar with the environment. They'll develop a customized approach for each athlete as they prepare for the games. Even our pro teams that may not have the exposure to that level of support in the early part of the four years leading up to the games now have a sports psychologist or mental performance consultant who is fully entrenched in the team's preparation.

It's something that is very important to Canadian high-performance sport and an element that we take very seriously. We're in the midst now of looking at succession planning and development for the next generation of sports psychologists and mental performance consultants so that we can be assured that every podium-potential athlete is equipped with that important service.

• (1035)

Ms. Karen O'Neill: And specifically to the Paralympic team, each of our teams and athletes who are vying for a berth have the option to be or are currently engaged with a sport psychologist. We deal with a group of centres under the Canadian Sport Institute and Canadian Sport Centres, and it's through these centres that we work in partnership to find and work with the skilled sport psychologists to assist our athletes.

In addition to what Anne has said, because it really did start as soon as London was complete, I'd also say that each one of our athletes, both the full teams and those athletes in contention for a berth right now, have all competed in Sochi. What you want to do during the athletes' preparation is expose them to as many circumstances as possible that are close to competition conditions—both practice and four-by-four competition elsewhere. But the athletes have also been able to see, try, and compete in Sochi already, and that's a tremendous advantage going into the games.

Mr. Ray Boughen: We heard about communications from the Olympic folks who were with us earlier. There was some talk about communications. I wonder if you could share with us how we're going to have access to the Paralympic folks in terms of saying, "Good job. We watched you do what you do, and it was great." In this age of communications, a couple of whacks on the old computer and you have a little recognition to folks who are competing.

Will there be a list of people so we don't have to hunt too far to find that address?

Mr. Martin Richard: Absolutely. One of the main areas for us is ensuring that our athletes are connected to Canadians, and using technology to connect them from Sochi with Canadians, whether it's social media...is very important. We encourage our athletes to be engaged in social media, sharing their experiences and their stories, and answering questions and communicating directly with Canadians.

As far as government officials and MPs are concerned, we do encourage you, through our team announcement, to participate in that, and we'll make sure that all the athletes' hometowns are listed so that you know who is from your area of the country and you are able to communicate directly with the athletes, whether it's through the communications agents for each sport or directly with the athletes through various mechanisms.

Ms. Karen O'Neill: That would be in all of our activities leading up to Sochi, during Sochi, and then all of the activities after Sochi, because there's a tremendous celebration when we get back with this whole school program, the parades, and the welcome home. So you would be apprised of that every step of the way.

Mr. Ray Boughen: Thank you.

How are we doing, Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Mr. Ray Boughen: Good.

One of the things that all athletes face is performance objectives: how well do I run that hundred yards, how high do I get off the ski slope, and all the rest of those things.

Have there been performance objectives established with the Paralympic athletes so that they have a chance to do better than their very best? Are they going to be clocked at what it is they do? Can you tell us about that?

Ms. Karen O'Neill: Maybe I'll respond from a Paralympic perspective, and then my colleague, who lives and breathes performance on a daily basis, will jump in here.

Absolutely, it's "same as same as". I would say that each of our member sports presents a plan to Own the Podium that clearly lists their entire quadrennial plan. It would be called their yearly training plan, with key targets throughout. The difference between our Olympic colleagues and us is that there's an additional item called classification. For instance, if you're at a swimming meet there will be a number of classifications, so an individual who might have no arm, or might have spinal cord...will have a classification, and there will be a different designation for their performance targets.

But make no bones about it. They are world-class performance targets that each of these have built into their plans and aspired to in terms of targets along the way and in their final completion for a berth in Sochi.

Ms. Anne Merklinger: Thanks, Karen.

Every athlete will have their own personal performance objective. Every sport will have its own sport objective, and we as a nation have our performance objectives for both the Olympic and Paralympic Games, as you've heard.

An important element that Own the Podium has introduced in the last two years is not just looking at Sochi, but looking at the next set of games and making sure that we're developing that next generation of podium-potential athletes. So that is another important metric that we will look at in this set of games, and we're already looking at 2022. As a nation we want to sustain our performance at the Olympic and Paralympic Games from games to games to games. We need to invest a little bit deeper in that next-generation athlete, so there are performance objectives established eight years out as well.

• (1040)

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much.

We'll go to the second round, in which there will only be one questioner, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair. And thank you so much for all of this information.

It's clear that you've done a remarkable amount of work in regard to what I think is the most significant piece of this, and that is the preparation of athletes, the celebration of athletes. We haven't recognized these incredible talents the way we should have. I'm very grateful you've made that special effort because these are special people by virtue of the level of skill and incredible aplomb and dedication they bring to their sport.

I had a couple of things in regard to these elite athletes. There has been a great deal of discussion about how to prepare an elite athlete and the impact they have on the general public, as role models and in defining what it means to function in a community. To what degree are you able to develop young athletes? There have to be all kinds of kids out there who have no idea what they can become. Are you able to direct some of your energy toward saying, "This is a possible for you and we will develop that talent"?

Ms. Karen O'Neill: Thank you very much. I wish I had the next hour. Let me respond to that in two ways.

I'll ask Martin, in a minute, to speak to the communications campaign. It's one thing to present the achievements of the athlete, but we're trying to tie that into the get-involved campaign afterwards. It's one thing to celebrate the heroic achievements of our athletes in Sochi, but there needs to be something afterwards. It'll be for naught if we can't leverage that and inspire the next generation. In fact, I would say a good third of our athletes on our current hopeful Sochi team have shared with Martin and his team many of the stories they saw or heard about one of the athletes on TV or in the newspaper.

And that's how, particularly for an individual with a disability, they knew it was possible—they were exposed to it.

In my opening remarks, I made a comment about system. In fact, with the generous investment post-Vancouver, that's what we've been working on. Our goal is to increase the participation rates of individuals with a disability from 3% to 6%. We have research to say that exposure is good. But unless exposure has an opportunity to see it and test it, or try it afterwards, then the exposure is really for naught. That's why the system pieces have to fit together like a puzzle—a person sees the opportunity, then knows where to go, then has some assistance to navigate the system. We need a catchment system, so that programs and quality coaches can appeal to new individuals and get them to try the sport activity.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you.

Mr. Martin Richard: All athletes inspire. They inspire Canadians. And those are the stories that we want to bring to the Canadian public during the Paralympic Games. The Paralympic Games provide us the opportunity of increased awareness of the sport.

We want to make sure that the younger generation sees themselves doing Paralympic sports. We have a campaign entitled "It's More Than Sport" that showcases the benefits of sports, the benefits sports bring as a lifelong skill. During the Paralympic Games, in the 100 days leading up to the games, we're ensuring that this PSA campaign is shown on all our media partners' platforms to drive the awareness that sport is available to all.

• (1045)

Ms. Irene Mathysen: We talked about the school programs. How do the school districts connect so that they can participate?

Mr. Martin Richard: Between the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, the Paralympic Committee is launching its Paralympic Schools Week. We'll be reaching out to over 75,000 schools, schoolchildren, and teachers, and we'll be using our summer athletes to promote the Paralympic movement. This will be key for us in increasing the awareness for the Paralympic Games, but also in making sure that young kids are exposed to these individuals and their stories.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank our witnesses for joining us today. It was very informative, and I know the committee appreciated it.

The meeting is adjourned.

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