

Interview With Tom Kelly, U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Famer

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For more than 30 years, Tom Kelly was the voice of U.S. Ski and Snowboard, the national governing body for Olympic skiing and snowboarding. As vice president of communications, Tom told the athletes' stories and in 2018 was awarded the U.S. Olympic Committee's Building Dreams Award for helping Olympic athletes reach their potential. In April 2019, Tom was inducted into the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in Ishpeming, MI.

Headquartered in Park City, UT, U.S. Ski and Snowboarding provides leadership and direction for skiers and snowboarders from over 400 member clubs representing more than 30,000 athletes, officials, and coaches. U.S. Ski and Snowboard is the most diverse of any Olympic sport organizations, with six different athletic sport programs that account for nearly 50% of the Olympic Winter Games events.

Interviewer: This year you were inducted into the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame. Congratulations on that, by the way.

Kelly: Thank you.

Interviewer: What do you make of that honor?

Kelly: It's kind of awkward, but also very gratifying to see you are recognized in your profession. One notable recognition was the USOC (U.S. Olympic Committee) Building Dreams Award last spring. That was an interesting one because I had nominated other people for that award every year. In fact, I had worked for 2 months on a nomination for one of our U.S. Ski and Snowboarding cross-country coaches. I worked very strategically behind the scenes for him to get the recognition he deserved. And I thought I had this thing in the bag, and then all of the sudden I hear that I am getting the award. My first thought was, "Well geez, what about this other guy? That's who was supposed to get this!" It was an honor.

The Ski Hall of Fame, who I have been aligned with for many years, was a huge honor. That recognition was particularly important because, while I have had a long career in the Olympic world, the roots of that are in skiing. Even though I work in multiple sports now, skiing is the root of it.

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And finally, this past summer I received a local award, which is given out every year in Park City by the Chamber of Commerce and Visitors and Convention Bureau. They do what they call The Spirit of Hospitality Award. They told me a couple of months out that I was going to get this, and I thought, “What do I have to do with hospitality?” They had a really great way of portraying it. I went back and looked at others in the community and I understood the fit at that point. While I have not been directly involved in tourism marketing in the community, I think a lot of the things that I had done here by drawing attention through the community through our former athletes have really helped in the community. So that was a real honor, as well.

Interviewer: In Europe, you can be a superstar as an alpine skier every year, while in the United States everything revolves around the Olympics. Do the athlete brands have to reinvent themselves every 4 years or has that changed over time? Do we still struggle with the problem of the Olympics’ creating seasonal brands like Shaun White, and others?

Kelly: For sure; we are a very Olympic-centric country. More so, probably, than any other country. Our sport stars do rise and fall on what happens in the Olympics. That honestly has not changed all that much. I do feel that in the last 20 years or so, more of our sport stars have transcended that challenge. Still, though, the catalyst is the Olympics. If you take Picabo Street, Lindsey Vonn, and maybe Shaun White—each of them won one Olympic gold medal. Their careers were more extensive than that, but it was that Olympic gold medal that provided the catalyst to really launch them in the United States. I think that is particularly true of Lindsey Vonn because she has accomplished so much outside of the Olympics. If she did not have that one gold medal from 2010, I do not think she would have been able to have gotten to the brand status that she has accomplishing all the other things. She is going to hopefully break Ingemar Stenmark’s record this year. I would say that if she did not win that gold medal in Vancouver in the downhill, she would have a harder time promoting herself. In that sense, it is very much the same in that we are an Olympic-centric country. Now, Shaun White is a bit of an enigma there. I do feel that he has been propelled through the Olympics, but he has done an amazing job at keeping himself relevant outside the Olympics, as well.

Interviewer: I remember Lindsey Vonn doing a pretty extensive interview with *60 Minutes*. One of her points in her interview, she said she thought she was a bigger star in Europe than she was in the U.S. She was followed closely there and people knew about her career and her World Cup wins. I just found it fascinating that even she thought she was a bigger brand in Europe than she was in the United States. I think your point about the Olympic gold is valid. We seem to focus our attention around those Olympic gold medals. People like downhill racer Tommy Moe come to mind and how he just exploded into brand consciousness after his Olympic medal.

Kelly: He is a good example, and compare him and Lindsey. First, to your point about Europe and the U.S., in general that is true. I think Lindsey has worked hard in changing that and she is invested in it. After she won the medal in 2010, she invested in outside public relations (PR) counsel that was specific to her, and that was her investment. She went to the biggest and best firm in Hollywood to manage her public image. They essentially made her a pop culture icon. Her visibility in the