

Fortius Raptors training camp puts spotlight on Vancouver facility

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Mining financier Scott Cousins is the driving force behind the Fortius Sport & Health centre in Burnaby, B.C.

BEN NELMS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A decade ago, mining financier Scott Cousins staked **\$23-million – most of his personal fortune** – on a bold idea of a new and better way to conduct sports medicine: bringing together an array of elite medical talent under one soaring roof, complete with top-tier sports facilities.

Building what has become Fortius Sport & Health, in the Vancouver suburbs, became an odyssey. For several years, the now-gleaming facility was essentially an abandoned construction site, spikes of rebar rising into nothing. But Mr. Cousins persevered, driven by memories of his own football career ended by injury, and Fortius – "pioneering something unique," as he puts it – finally opened last year.

The centre, an ambitious financial gamble, faces its latest challenge as it aims to become a cornerstone of Canadian athletics and sports medicine – attracting as many people as possible, from average patients to amateur and professional athletes. This week, Fortius receives its first burst of national attention, as the Toronto Raptors hold four days of training camp at the centre.

"As soon as you walk in, you realize the magnitude of the facility," said Bobby Webster, Raptors vice-president of basketball management and strategy. The team scouted the location last winter and again in summer, when coach Dwane Casey saw it. The Raptors were impressed, and the camp schedule in Vancouver was doubled to four days from two.

J.D. Miller, a co-founder of B2ten, which connects private money with Olympic athletes, has worked closely with Fortius. "Whether you look on a provincial, national or international yardstick," Mr. Miller said, "this is an exceptional facility."

Fortius joins a small but growing group of new high-end facilities in Canada – such as the \$207-million Markin MacPhail Centre in Calgary – but unlike other centres, Fortius did not receive an infusion of government funds. The man who pulled it off is Mr. Cousins, a 50-year-old whose day job is director of capital markets at Vancouver's Hunter Dickinson Inc., the largest privately held mining company in Canada.

His \$23-million is billed as the largest philanthropic sports donation in Canadian history.

The project broke ground in May, 2008, but was quickly knocked flat by the global financial meltdown. Lenders cut off money. Mr. Cousins spent several million dollars to connect Burnaby civic services to the centre's concrete foundation and complete the turf field. Three years ago, with the skeleton not much changed, he got construction

moving again, driven by his own wallet and bank loans that began to flow.

For Mr. Cousens, it's personal. After finishing high school in Calgary, he played cornerback for the junior football Calgary Colts. He dreamed of autumn days in the red jersey of the CFL's Calgary Stampeders at McMahon Stadium and took his shot at two Stamps' rookie camps, but a succession of injuries, which were not treated as well as they could have been, killed the dream of a pro career.

"I lost half a step and" – Mr. Cousens drew a deep breath – "I was done. Before I got started." A quarter century later, he laughed heartily at the memory, coloured by a touch of regret. "Both knees, shoulder, and hip. If I did have the skills, I didn't have the body that could do it any more. I get it. I get what we're doing here."

A key challenge remains financial. The \$60-million centre – concrete and glass, splashes of wood to reflect the region – was built by Fortius Foundation, a charitable entity, which collects lease money from tenants. Those include everything from doctors to retail outlets (the inevitable Starbucks) and sports groups that use facilities such as the basketball courts – the Raptors – and the on-site residences, like Canada's national women's soccer team for a training camp this fall ahead of next year's World Cup.

Mr. Cousens wants to raise money to have the centre's mortgage paid off within three years, so the foundation can free up \$2-million to funnel back into athletics and medicine. It is Fortius CEO's Craig Thompson job to get the word out. "We're building awareness," Mr. Thompson said. "Every day we have all different types of people walk in and say, 'Wow.'"

That's essentially what the Raptors said last winter. The team, which often stages part of training camp in different Canadian locales, was pointed to Fortius by Alex McKechnie, their director of sport science who is also a pioneering Vancouver physiotherapist and a Fortius co-founder.

This summer, Mr. Casey, the Raptors coach, travelled from his off-season home in the Seattle area to see several of his promising young players, including 18-year-old Brazilian Bruno Caboclo, who were working at Fortius under the tutelage of Mr. McKechnie. Mr. Casey sparked the decision to spend four days at Fortius, rather than the initial notion of two.

While the Raptors focus on basketball, the core of the centre remains medicine. The list of specialties is long: physiotherapists, chiropractors, massage therapists, kinesiologists-hydrotherapy, sports physicians, optometrists, biomechanists, physiologists, dieticians, pedorthists, strength and conditioning, podiatrists, orthopedic surgeons, pediatric rheumatologists. Early returns are positive.

Jay DeMerit, the now-retired Vancouver Whitecaps captain, suffered a ruptured Achilles tendon in March, 2013. He was back in game action in just six-and-a-half months, a return bolstered by rehabilitation at Fortius. It included extended time on a specialized \$200,000 underwater treadmill, which accelerates recovery by allowing movement with the forces of gravity lessened.

Kaya Turski, a B2ten-supported freestyle skier, pulled off a remarkable recovery at Fortius last year. She had torn the ACL in her left knee in August and, five months later, won gold at the X Games in Aspen, Colo.

Steve Nash, the two-time NBA MVP, is on the centre's athlete advisory board and has worked closely with Mr. McKechnie's protege, physiotherapist Rick Celebrini, who is employed by the Vancouver Canucks and Whitecaps and is, like Mr. McKechnie, a co-founder of Fortius. Mr. Nash has high praise for the two men's medical talents. "Their abilities as physiotherapists exceed 99 per cent," he said. "Working with Rick, I've never come across anyone as good as him."

At Fortius, Mr. Celebrini has evolved into a leadership role – chief sport officer – making sure the idea of everyone working together actually works. The arrival of the Raptors has built momentum.

"We're still in our infancy," Mr. Celebrini said, "but we're growing exponentially."

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