

How U.S. Olympians pay the rent

By Chavon Sutton, staff reporter

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NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) -- Even Olympians have to pay the rent.

These world-class athletes are in the spotlight for two weeks every couple of years. But for the most part, they're just regular people who have to make a living as teachers, fitness instructors or market researchers, all while putting in hours of grueling sports training.

For every Shaun White and Lindsey Vonn, two gold medalists who have scored multi-million dollar endorsement deals, there is a Tyler Jewell.

Jewell, a two-time Olympic snowboarder who finished 13th in Saturday's men's parallel giant slalom at the Winter Games in Vancouver, supports himself with a patchwork of odd jobs.

"I sold sausages at a state fair in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for a bunch of years," he said. He's also worked at a golf course and as a concrete crew man, among other things.

"It's hard to hold down a full-time job," said the 33 year-old Boston College graduate. "I have 5 hours a day of training."

Jewell has also worked on and off at the Home Depot ([HD](#), [Fortune 500](#)) since 2004 as a part of the Olympic Job Opportunities Program (OJOP), a partnership with the U.S. Olympic Committee that paid athletes full-time salaries and benefits for working part-time hours. But the retailer folded OJOP in 2009, after four years as the exclusive sponsor.

USOC spokesman, Keith Bryant, says the organization is hoping to revive the 33 year-old program, which in the past has partnered with hundreds of companies including Anheuser-Busch and J.C. Penney ([JCP](#), [Fortune 500](#)).

"It's a shame that it's gone, but to have had it at all was an amazing thing," said Jewell. Without the Home Depot job to fall back on, he wonders: "how am I going to make it?"

Of course Jewell and most other Olympic athletes do receive some funding from the USOC, which relies on corporate sponsors and private donations. But that generally isn't enough to cover their travel, tournament, and equipment costs.

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Those expenses pile up fast. Nicole Joraanstad, an Olympic curler, says a single season competing just to qualify for the Olympics costs as much as \$150,000.

Joraanstad, 29, works full-time as a human resources recruiter at TDS Telecommunications in Madison, Wis., but she does have to take a lot of time to compete. She took almost four weeks off just to make her first Olympic appearance in Vancouver this year. In 2009 she used up all of her vacation time traveling to tournaments, and had to take a few weeks unpaid.

Balancing the day-to-day demands of both work and curling is tough too. During the height of her training, Joraanstad worked eight hour days, and trained another four hours a day. "I'm proud of myself. I think I handled it well," said Joraanstad.

Joraanstad was lucky enough to score her job independently, but the USOC also partners with staffing firms to help athletes secure flexible positions. The Adecco Group, a Zurich, Switzerland-based global staffing firm, renewed its contract with the U.S.O.C. through 2012. Since 2005, its Athletes Career Program has helped over 5,000 athletes worldwide.

In February, Adecco and Hilton Worldwide announced a partnership to provide U.S. Olympic and Paralympic athletes with career training and jobs in Hilton's more than 3,150 hotels and 30 corporate offices in the United States.

Strong work ethics and time management skills make athletes attractive to employers,

says Patricia Wilson, brand director for Adecco Group North America. "Athletes know how to succeed independently, but they [also] know the importance of being a team player," she said.

Still, athlete workers, who often travel for two to three months at a time, are a hard sell in an economy with 9.7% unemployment.

Winter athletes have the hardest schedules, since their sports are more popular outside of the United States. The women's curling team, for example, had nine curling tournaments between September and January, eight of which were in Europe and Canada.

"It's definitely more challenging, especially in an economy in which companies are asking less people to do more," said the USOC's Keith Bryant.

"We're asking companies to take athletes with great transferable skills, but that need flexibility [in their schedules]. It takes a special organization to help athletes to get these assignments."

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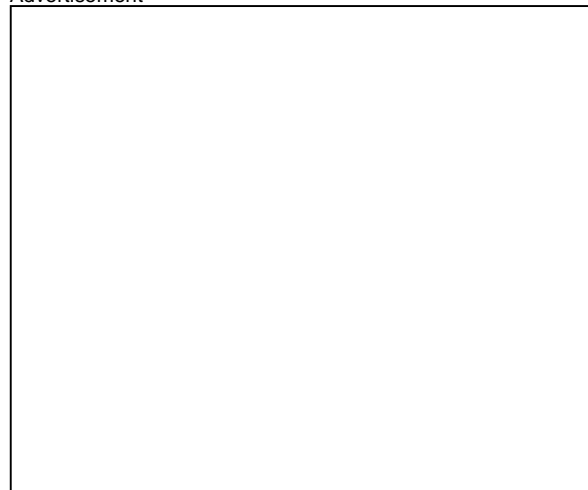


What's worse is that the United States won't host an Olympic winter or summer event for some time, pushing U.S. athletes further out of the spotlight.

"Athletes fade from attention in off-Olympic years," said Bob Dorfman, an endorsement expert and executive creative director at Baker Street advertising and marketing agency. "But they still have to support themselves."



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