



ZONETALK PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

DUSTIN HEISE, CEO – CANADA SNOWBOARD

Visionary leadership—An Olympic-level CEO's team approach to creating a snowboarding legacy

Introduction

Dustin Heise left the corporate world so that he could make a difference in snowboarding, both in Canada and the world. He has been at the helm of Canada Snowboard as CEO for two years and is leading his organization with integrity, vision, and passion. With a shared vision to be recognized as a world leading snowboard nation, Dustin—along with the Canada Snowboard staff, athletes, partners, and sponsors—is guiding the next generation of young athletes, and bolstering some of the best athletes in the world to create a legacy of snowboarding. And, he is having fun doing it.



Bob Palmer: [00:00:06] This is Bob Palmer, and you're listening to *Zone Talk* by SportExcel - where the magic of the Zone is a game-changer. In every episode, we dive into the lives of high performers and learn their amazing strategies. So that you can take leadership of your game, your team, and your life.

Bob Palmer: [00:00:23] Dustin Heise is the Chief Executive Officer of Canada Snowboard. He has exceptional depth and breadth of Olympic competitive sport experience and was team-lead at the 2014 Paralympics in Sochi. He is currently VP with the World Snowboard Federation and deeply involved in the Federation Internationale Du Ski. He has had significant hands-on experience across all facets of an organization, financially and organizationally, and has been engaged both nationally and internationally, developing and promoting snowboarding. He has a combination of enthusiasm, work ethic, and desire to continually grow professionally. He has a wife and two children. Welcome Dustin.

Dustin Heise: [00:00:59] Thanks, Bob. It's great to be here once again with you, my friend.

Bob Palmer: [00:01:03] Just as a background, can you give me a bit of a summary of your organization? What is Canada Snowboard? Staff, athletes? How would you give the overview?

Dustin Heise: [00:01:16] Yeah, I guess the ten-second elevator pitch for who Canada Snowboard is - We are the national body for snowboarding here in Canada. And ultimately, we are the representative for Canada and snowboarding in particular at the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Our goal is to ensure that snowboarding across Canada has a great vision on ultimately becoming the world leading snowboarding nation.

Dustin Heise: [00:01:43] And how we do that is by ensuring that each of our provinces and territories have the support and the mechanisms to understand what it takes to develop an athlete, ensure that the resources of each of those parts of the pathway have an opportunity to succeed. We do that in multiple disciplines. So, from slopestyle, halfpipe, snowboardcross, Big Air, Para-snowboard, to Alpine snowboard. So there's no shortage of, I guess, versatility and variety within our sport.



Dustin Heise: [00:02:15] And how we try and connect with a fan or a potential future athlete or participant in our sport comes through a variety of means, everything from how we work with our resort partners to making sure that we have a strong media presence in broadcast and other digital tools that can reach out to a number of different people and potential participants across the country.

Bob Palmer: [00:02:42] Cool. I mean, you've got a wide variety of athletes. You've got developmental athletes right up to some pretty big X Games superstars.

Dustin Heise: [00:02:51] Yeah. You know, we've got a mandate, certainly, to ensure that each part of the pathway has the support. We rely deeply on our member provinces and territories to drive the pathway. And then ultimately we've got two key programs that we're responsible for.

Dustin Heise: [00:03:08] So, you know, ultimately five teams and approximately 70 athletes within our national team and NextGen programs, so at our national team level, we've certainly got the athletes that are on the verge of podiuming at any World Cup or major event. And then our NextGen and those teams, you know, those are our young up-and-coming young guns that will ultimately take over the national team spots.

Bob Palmer: [00:03:35] Now we typically think of high performance as being their realm, you know, peaking for that huge event every four years. But is there a role for high performance in leadership?

Dustin Heise: [00:03:47] Yeah, it's one that, of course, we've had a number of discussions on, Bob. The role of high performance in leadership is just really having that understanding and that essential vision of what it means to be high performance or what we are commonly using as our language is - what is world-leading and then what does world-leading mean? And then the ability for us to all consistently articulate that and see the same vision. And then what does it take to actually work and deliver on that on a day-to-day basis?



Dustin Heise: [00:04:24] And as we all started to wrap our heads around what's high performance? Well, ultimately, it's winning at the highest level. Then you need to understand what is winning? It's not necessarily winning at all cost. It's ensuring that you're doing it the right way with the integrity, with the ethics, in a manner that, you know, we certainly hope that your own kids would want to get into in whatever sport they choose. And that's the way that we want to operate here in our organization.

Bob Palmer: [00:04:55] How does that play out on a day-to-day basis? How does that play out in terms of what you do to elicit that high performance?

Dustin Heise: [00:05:06] Yeah, I mean, for me in particular, and then our team, I think is really seeing that in their own ways, too. But we're seeing just an extremely ambitious goal of what we need to achieve and then the results and the milestones of what those goals look like. And are we on that pathway and then ultimately ensuring that you're relentlessly working towards achieving those.

Dustin Heise: [00:05:37] And yeah, of course, we're going to have a lot of fun and doing that because we're going to continue to progress. We're going to continue to find that success and know that we're doing that as a team and sharing that. But we're going to see something special happen for the sport, certainly in Canada, but we're going to see it happen globally - and the footprint that we can have on that in each of us and I know that right now within the organization, everyone's hungry to be part of this because they know it's bigger than them. We know it's all bigger than us. We're doing it so that snowboarding ultimately can be that winter sport of choice globally. And then how Canada can play that role and have an example, or a way forward for other nations to use as a model.

Bob Palmer: [00:06:30] You mentioned fun. I mean, how does that play out? What is it - intensity? Is that the Zone? What is that to you? How do you engage your staff to engage your athletes?



Dustin Heise: [00:06:43] Yeah, I think for a lot of us, it's being able to consistently progress day in and day out. And when you're learning new things and seeing new things and understanding that you're growing, that what you're part of is growing, that the results and success is there. There's fun in that for us. Of course, it's much more than that too - it's the ability to, during the challenges, as you work through those together. And of course, in our sport, we have lots of falls and lots of failures as you're progressing. And that's no different than in a sport business environment, too.

Bob Palmer: [00:07:27] Now you've been an athlete.

Dustin Heise: [00:07:31] Yes.

Bob Palmer: [00:07:31] And you played the sport at a pretty high level. Does that translate into leadership? Do you have a better idea of your athletes because of your past?

Dustin Heise: [00:07:44] I certainly knew what it takes to progress and gain a certain level of the skillset, so I can feel that and understand that and appreciate what it is that they're having gone through. Of course, we have absolute phenoms within our sport in Canada that by no means could I have understood how that all came together, other than I, of course, I have some form of sport science background to genuinely know that they're special.

Dustin Heise: [00:08:22] And of course, they also outworked the rest of the world to get there and be that good. But, you know, my sport background certainly allowed me to know what it takes to continue to overcome a challenge or certainly to overcome what it takes to land a new trick or something along those lines. And I had a training kind of mind frame from as a young skateboarder and snowboarder, and I wouldn't go in for dinner until I landed ten kickflips, and ten heelflips and all those sorts of things. And it sounds ridiculous, but to me, that was the mindset that I had as a kid and brought to it today.

Bob Palmer: [00:09:04] I guess what I'm getting at is that you, just as your high performance athletes, are setting an example - you believe you're setting an example of what's possible not only maybe to your staff, but to the world.



Dustin Heise: [00:09:18] I certainly think that they know that there's a lot of passion in myself, and I know that that's acknowledged. I also know, and have a lot of confidence that they believe in the fact that I have a vision for how far we can take this together. And if we're in this together and I'm talking about the entire nation and all the athletes, and certainly our national team and NextGen athletes, we can do something pretty special.

Dustin Heise: [00:09:46] And we can take this sport, especially in these challenging times, because we have a socially distancing niche within this sport and the ability to continue to deliver major international competition. And maybe it's an ability for us to put snowboarding on the map better than ever before. So I know that we'll get it there. We just need to work towards the goal.

Bob Palmer: [00:10:15] So you went from a director in your organization to the CEO. What was your workload like before and after?

Dustin Heise: [00:10:25] I've grown a lot since being a director and I had great mentorship and support along the way. Of course, you know my affinity towards how you've helped me to remain in the Zone. Certainly resilience was a big part of what allowed me to continue on to progress into the role.

Dustin Heise: [00:10:50] But even having a vision of what you believe the role to be, prior to getting it, to then getting it, to then where I know I am today, two years later, after being in the role, I'm certainly a different person and I've evolved considerably and have now been able to kind of set my sights on, you know, even new growth and new challenges and how we can all ultimately get there together.

Bob Palmer: [00:11:17] Have you applied any specific strategies to bring the complexity down to manageable? I mean, I'm sure the workload has ballooned in terms of your previous role. How do you manage that?



Dustin Heise: [00:11:32] Well, if you wanted, one could always keep working. You can always ensure that there's never an end to it. What we're all really trying to focus on right now is, and that's the right word, is focusing on what really matters and what's ultimately going to lead to achieving the goals that the organization will see that others can also recognize inside and outside the sport - that we are a world-leading snowboard nation.

Bob Palmer: [00:12:07] Now it's said that leaders can't stop leading. As though it's innate - you lead in the community and recreational activities as well as in the workplace. What's your experience been around leadership and how have you found yourself embracing it in general and accepting that role that you've been thrust into?

Dustin Heise: [00:12:33] I had a vision for myself to kind of always be in a leadership space. I never saw it otherwise, and I knew I had some skills to offer. And I think a way of delivering a message that was inclusive of everyone's perspective and then ultimately how we managed to achieve a shared perspective.

Dustin Heise: [00:12:40] And so I think that's why, you know, those that I worked together with—I have a role as a leader and they have a role as a leader, and together as we have different accountability or responsibilities, we all have that opportunity to make a massive difference in the world and using snowboarding as that vehicle.

Bob Palmer: [00:13:29] You mentioned passion as being one of your key traits. What other of your traits have helped you in this role, do you think?

Dustin Heise: [00:13:39] Extremely aspirational vision and a work ethic that I think can go along with it. So I expect a lot of myself - I want to be part of only something that is going to make a difference, and be a tool to make something really special for other people that share in similar likes or love. And that happens to be snowboard. And so I'm really looking forward to working with a board or an organization or especially with the team operationally that we have, at Canada Snowboard - that's a shared vision and very aspirational people that want to deliver on that.

Bob Palmer: [00:14:32] Did you have some role models along the way that push your buttons in ways that you saw the possibilities of leadership?



Dustin Heise: [00:14:41] I saw some good best practices on how you carry yourself, how you do it in a professional way, how you do it in a mature way, how you certainly learned from a number of folks on what that can look like. I think that it would have to be some pretty significant visionaries that I would have to point to, to see kind of the vision that we're trying to achieve here that I'm hoping that I can be a part of.

And leading Canada Snowboard, you know, from a Steve Jobs and the vision that he had for Apple to what any major sports franchise, be it the All Blacks [New Zealand rugby team] or others that have built a vision, instilled a culture, delivered on it, done it for a period of time that is consistent, and then now you have a legacy and a history that allows it to be special and others point to that.

Dustin Heise: [00:15:50] My hope and expectation of the organization that we've got to work towards this, that Canada Snowboard would be that sport organization that other sports and other organizations, internationally or domestically, would point out that we want to be like them.

And that may be 30 years down the road Bob, but we will have built the right foundation now. And, you know, at that time, whether I'm blessed to still be on the planet, then we'll be able to look back and know that this group built that and they're still succeeding because the culture was set right.

Bob Palmer: [00:16:32] Now you're working with an Olympic organization. Do you find it interesting managing your life around time zones? I mean, even in Canada, you've got a four-hour divide between one coast and the other, but you're working worldwide. You're VP, you're working on different organizations. How do you manage that?

Dustin Heise: [00:16:55] Oh, man, my DNA. I was blessed thanks to my parents or grandparents. I don't need a lot of sleep. I'm good that way. I'm not saying that's a good thing. I'm just saying that I'm okay that way so I can get up whenever I need to and show up to a meeting. Of course, the international piece here - you are dealing on a lot of time zones. So either you're staying up late or you're starting real early and that's all good.



Dustin Heise: [00:17:22] That's again, that's part of the cause or getting us to the end destination. But I live on Vancouver Island, as you know, and, you know, right now during COVID, it's certainly all home-based for the time being, but I really enjoyed those early morning ferry rides for starting my calls with our Atlantic provinces, and working my way west, and, you know, just staying in touch that way. And that was a really fun part, especially in those early days as I really was learning how to manage those types of challenges or, you know, enjoyed those and [had] fun with that.

Bob Palmer: [00:18:05] Under your watch, especially this past year, you put on several World Cups in Canada. What's the value of having those kinds of competitions in your own country?

Dustin Heise: [00:18:18] Yeah, three-fold and, you know, I can ramble on, but we got a high-performance strategy around that, so we've got to make sure that our team has its own home barn. So, for each of our disciplines, the vision was always we got to have that home barn, that home field that they can count on consistently.

Dustin Heise: [00:18:22] We wanted to make sure that we could do these on home ground as well so that the next generation of youngsters and our future can see what this is like and get the sense and be inspired by it - to be able to train on the same venue after these have happened. And you'll run some camps and be able to meet and understand what it takes to get to the national team, that top level.

Dustin Heise: [00:19:00] And then if we're going to drive the business forward, we've got to make sure that we've got commercial assets that get on broadcast and digital broadcasts that, you know, those that want their product or brands to be seen and be aligned with ours, then that's the purpose of making sure that we can get our product in front of people that want to be fans of the sport.

Dustin Heise: [00:19:27] But unfortunately, it's been a real challenge because it's really been an every four year thing that people get to see because of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. And we've got to make sure that they can see that product really consistently here and start to digest and understand the brilliance of the athletes in our programs and who they are as people, who they're as athletes. And then for us to tell the story of snowboarding, hopefully we can draw some more people in.



Bob Palmer: [00:20:00] Do you have a role? I mean, we know you're in the background, you're organizing the whole thing as CEO. But when you go to a competition, is there a role for you?

Dustin Heise: [00:20:11] Yeah, so, Bob, you've always taught me about making sure that I go into whatever I go into with an outcome, and I've got a number of outcomes that I go into for each of these World Cups. And of course, it's a lot to ensure that we are making those international connections and have some great opportunity to work with our international federation colleagues on ensuring future consistent events that can be held in Canada and just putting those in lock and making sure that, again, those same broadcast partners that we have internationally are seeing the same vision that our product is at the quality that meets and exceeds what it should.

Dustin Heise: [00:20:57] And I think those are some of the early reasons for me to go. But then, of course, it's important to make myself available and to listen to our athletes, and listen to the parents of our athletes, and be there to speak and meet with our provincial territorial partners, because none of this happens without them. And just to spend quality time and invest. You know, there's one thing to have a vision and drive the business. It's another thing to be able to remain authentic and sincere and you can then get to know me and vice versa in those one-on-one opportunities.

Bob Palmer: [00:21:43] It must be interesting staying sane when everyone wants a piece of you.

Dustin Heise: [00:21:50] Yeah, it's not the same - you just honestly really just need to make sure you're getting the rest in those evenings and finding the right way to get some shut-eye and shut it down and get ready for the next day. But again, that comes back to, you know, having a plan and the outcome and all those pieces in mind. And when I get home and I've been on the road for a while, then of course, you certainly appreciate a little R and R after a bit.

Bob Palmer: [00:22:29] Getting into some specifics, some countries specifically, allot money for sports they know that can win. And I believe yours is one of them. Does that put extra pressure on CEOs?



Dustin Heise: [00:22:43] I want to say yes, but I don't feel it as pressure because we've grown with our performance partner so much over the last several years in that it's simply a partnership. So they're not trying to apply pressure. They're trying to help us out and be as successful as we want us to be. And so it's really - I want to prove them right. I want to show that, you know, your investment in us, you were right to believe in us. And I really thrive off of that because they care a lot about how well we do and about our athletes.

Dustin Heise: [00:23:23] And so, we want to demonstrate that we're a good partner, too, because, yes, the targeted excellence model is the appropriate one for right now in Canada, because there are finite resources and that's the way for us to perform.

Dustin Heise: But we are hustling just as hard to get our discretionary dollars through sponsorship or other revenue-generating opportunities to go and make up the difference for our non-targeted disciplines or to top up, even more, for our foundational, core-targeted disciplines. So it's a real team effort, to be honest. And the greatest pressure is the one that we put on ourselves because we have such high goals and I keep using the word aspiration, but we just strive to meet our own, and if we come close, we're going to be in good shape.

Bob Palmer: [00:24:25] So the last question talking about aspiration - what's one piece of advice you would give an aspiring ED or CEO who would love to have a leadership role in sport, the sport industry, just like you.

Dustin Heise: [00:24:40] Do it for the right reasons. I think that if you have a vision and you know what that will look like, I think that you will have that opportunity to achieve that. Be nimble on expectations. Know that it's going to take some time to fully comprehend what you think is the role versus what the role really is, and you can be an outstanding operator and know every element of the business going in and understanding all the tools that you would go and apply - It's a completely different ballgame than what you thought it was, because those moments that you get to drive the business forward, those are luxuries.



Dustin Heise: [00:25:33] And oftentimes, especially in your early years, because you're trying to prove so much that they chose the right person for the role, that you can quickly get bogged down by the demands and really wanting to meet and exceed those expectations of others. Meanwhile, after a little bit of time, you'll start to comprehend how you can really ultimately achieve the goals that you and the board are establishing. And then you and your team will build the strategies to achieving those goals. And you rely on your people.

Dustin Heise: [00:26:16] And if you have the right people on the bus alongside you, then you're going to have a lot of fun doing it, because then you can trust your skills and knowledge and abilities to make good decisions.

Bob Palmer: [00:26:32] And it sounds like that requires a bit of balance in terms of having your family behind you as well.

Dustin Heise: [00:26:41] Boy, I guess I'd almost start the answer over again, to be honest with you, on that. I recognize the real cost because there's a real cost. Is it worth it? Of course it's worth it. It's phenomenal. While you are underpinned completely by an amazing spouse or partner and an amazing family, that's patient to share mom or dad with others because they're doing something that they believe is important or has a lot of value to give to others. I think it's certainly not lost on me that I am where I am today because of great support from so many - you know, from obviously my parents and family that helped bring me up to, you know, my wife and family around me.

Bob Palmer: [00:27:38] Perfect. Thank you Dustin. It's been good.

Dustin Heise: [00:27:43] Yeah, thank you, Bob. As always, we can go on forever.

Dustin Heise: [00:27:48] You take care. Be safe. Thanks so much to you as well.

Bob Palmer: [00:27:51] Bye.

Bob Palmer: [00:27:54] This episode of *Zone Talk* by SportExcel has ended but be sure to subscribe and be sure to read and review us so that we can continue to bring you the best Zone and high-performance content. See you on the next episode.



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