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Sarah Burke remembered at Whistler service

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WHISTLER, B.C.
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A lit candle lights up a picture of freestyle skier Sarah Burke during a memorial service for her in Whistler, B.C. Tuesday, April 10, 2012.
JONATHAN HAYWARD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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Admirers of Sarah Burke gathered in Whistler, B.C., on Tuesday night to bid a sad farewell to the late freeskiing pioneer.

Burke, who was born in Ontario and lived in Squamish, B.C., died in January, after a fall while training in the Superpipe at Park City, Utah. Burke, 29, sustained severe irreversible brain damage due to lack of oxygen and blood when one of the arteries to her brain ruptured.

The public memorial service was delayed until near the end of the ski season so freeskiers around the world could attend and pay their respects. Family, friends and fellow athletes held a private memorial on the Blackcomb Mountain earlier in the day at the halfpipe, a place Burke loved best.

"Today in the halfpipe it was unbelievable how much Sarah's memory has pulled us all together," said Trennan Paynter, coach of the Canadian freestyle halfpipe team. "Things will never be the same without her but I can tell you that when we walk into the Sochi Olympic stadium, Sarah is going to be the one leading the team."

A normally raucous Whistler crowd fell silent while watching images and videos of the multiple X Games gold medalist. Fellow athletes, friends and family members shared memories of Burke's accomplishments in sport and life. With tears, laughter and a lot of noise, Whistler brought the memory of a local athlete back home.

"Whistler was a special place for Sarah," said freeskiier and friend Mike Douglas. "More great things happened to her here than anywhere else. She had such strong feelings about this place."

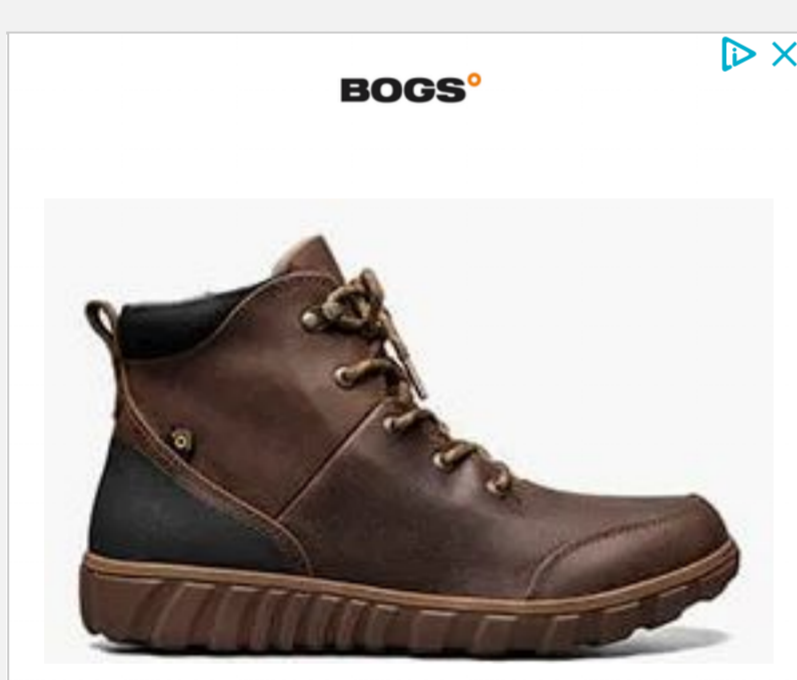
Burke is celebrated as one of the most influential athletes in winter sport. Her success is unparalleled in the sport of freeskiing.

Burke was the first woman to land a 720, then a 900, then a 1080-degree spin in competition. She was also instrumental in helping to get her sport into the Olympics for 2014 in Sochi.

Along with her success as an athlete, Sarah is also remembered for her humility and energy. Rory Bushfield, Burke's husband, referred to his late wife as his best friend and inspiration in life.

"She was so kind and fearless. It wasn't the gold medals that made her a champion, it was the little things she did for others," Bushfield said. "It's hard for me to put into words how much you mean to me, Sarah."

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The story of Burke's death received global attention. A fund was set up to help cover hospital bills, which raised well over \$300,000 within days of going live on the Internet. "Remember Sarah" and "Believe In Sarah" stickers contributed over \$15,000 to the total, and have been seen on athletes' gear at every major ski event this year.

In honour of her legend, the overall champion trophy, one of the biggest awards in pro skiing will now be named for Burke and presented for the first time at the World Skiing Invitational/Association of Freeskiing Professionals world championships at the end of April.

Burke's impact on the sport won't be forgotten in Whistler as her words flickered on the screen and echoed through the crowd.

"It was never my goal to be recognized. I love the sport, I love doing it and I want as many girls as possible to do it too. That has always been my goal."

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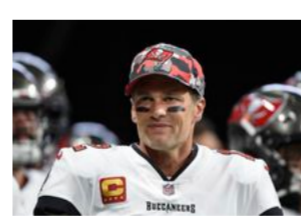
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