

OPINION: 2021 – the fourth time a duo will win the Lou Marsh Award



In 2020, Kansas City Chiefs offensive linemen Laurent Duvernay-Tardif (left), and Bayern Munich defender Alphonso Davies (right), became the third duo ever to win the Lou Marsh Award.

When Canadians hear the phrase "Lou Marsh Award," it's fair to say that the greatest athlete in the country may pop into mind. Someone who has competed at the highest level, and has had success in competition.

But what if there were two athletes who were equally deserving? What if there were two individuals who displayed exceptional performances?

Guess what? It's possible.

Since the award was first given in 1936 in honour of former Canadian athlete and journalist Lou Marsh, only three pairings have shared the title in any given year.

1978: Ken Read and Graham Smith

The year 1978 marked the first time in the history of the Lou Marsh Award that multiple athletes were chosen as recipients.

Ken Read, who grew up in Calgary, Alberta, was best known for being a member of the [“Crazy Canucks” alpine skiing team](#), which consisted of fast and reckless Canadian skiers.

In his nine-year career, Read posted 14 podium finishes, with three of those coming during his 1978 campaign. The year he won the Lou Marsh Award, he captured victories in Les Houches, France and Schladming, Austria, as well as a third-place finish in Val Gardena, Italy – three of the toughest runs in the world.

Graham Smith, a native of Edmonton, Alberta, posted one of the greatest performances in Canadian swimming history, at the 1978 Commonwealth Games in his home town. Smith won gold in the 100 and 200-metre breaststroke, the 200 and 400-metre individual medleys, the 4x100-metre freestyle, as well as the 4x100-metre-medley-relay.

In those same games, Smith broke the men’s 200-metre individual world record twice, while becoming the first competitor to win six gold medals in a single Commonwealth Games.

1982: Wayne Gretzky and Rick Hansen

Arguably the most recognizable pair of co-winners came in 1982, when National Hockey League great Wayne Gretzky, and track and field athlete Rick Hansen shared the accomplishment.

Gretzky, also known as “The Great One,” led the NHL with 212 points, including 92 goals in his Lou Marsh Award winning year – the same season he [broke Phil Esposito’s record for most goals](#) in a single season (76).

The native of Brantford, Ontario became the first Canadian ever to be named the Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year in 1982, as well as earning the Sportsman of the Year by Sports Illustrated that same year.

Gretzky capped off his historic year by helping Canada defeat Sweden in the World Championships in Finland, capturing a bronze medal.

Hansen, who is nicknamed “the Man in Motion,” won nine gold medals at the 1982 Pan-American Wheelchair Games in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Later that year, Hansen was named Canada’s Disabled Athlete of the Year, for the third time in four years.

In the mid-80’s, after he had received the honour, Hansen set out on a worldwide tour, in which he [rode across 34 different countries in four continents](#), in an effort to raise money for research for spinal cord injuries, much like he suffered from.

Although he only won the Lou Marsh Award once, his impact is constantly remembered in the Canadian sports world.

2020: Alphonso Davies and Laurent Duvernay-Tardif

Most recently, Bayern Munich defender Alphonso Davies, and then Kansas City Chiefs offensive linemen Laurent Duvernay-Tardif were co-winners in 2020.

Davies, who became the first Canadian man ever to win a Champions League title, quickly emerged as one of Europe's greatest young talents. At 20-years-old, Davies earned the Bundesliga rookie of the year, and in the same year, was named Canada's top male soccer player.

Duvernay-Tardif, on the other hand, was praised for his heroic efforts in a long-term care facility. At the time, the 29-year-old McGill University medical graduate took a year off from football, and worked on the front-lines in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. For his sacrifice, Duvernay-Tardif was awarded [Sports Illustrated's Sports Person of the Year for 2020](#).

It's fair to question when this rare feat may happen again, and who the co-winners would be.

The answer is simple – Penny Oleksiak and Damian Warner in 2021!

Oleksiak has already solidified herself as one of the greatest Canadian athletes of all-time.

The 21-year-old swimming prodigy recently shone at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Games (held in 2021 due to COVID-19), taking home a silver in 4x100 metre freestyle, and a bronze in the 200-metre freestyle. She also won a bronze in the 4x100 medley, becoming the most decorated Canadian Olympian ever, with her record setting seventh medal.

However, what makes the Toronto, Ontario native's 2021 performance much more impressive, is the fact that she took off most of 2020, and the early months of 2021 during the pandemic, in order to focus on her mental health. Her comeback was not only historical, but also admirable.

Warner can be described as the greatest athlete in the world – literally. The 32-year-old from London, Ontario captured a gold medal in decathlon at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, dominating in all 10 events.

In the process of becoming the oldest athlete ever to win the Olympic decathlon, Warner made history. He set Olympic records in long jump, 100 metre sprint and 110 metre hurdles, while becoming only the fourth person ever to score over 9000 points in a decathlon. Warner scored 9018 – an Olympic record.

Although it's rare to have co-winners for an award that celebrates the best Canadian athlete of the year, it's not far-fetched in 2021.

The performances by both Penny Oleksiak and Damian Warner were historical. It would be fitting to have these two Canadian icons make history, as part of the first group ever to have back-to-back co-winners.