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**UW-Milwaukee alums win bronze at Olympic Art Festival snow sculpting competition**

Written by Maridel Allinder, UW-Milwaukee

Over the past 40 years, UW-Milwaukee alumni Mike Martino, Mike Sponholtz and Tom Queoff have carved blocks of snow into everything from mythical beasts to Mount Rushmore. As the members of Team USA, they’ve won awards worldwide, using their fine art degrees to sculpt in a cold and cantankerous medium.

“We’ve been carving together since 1986,” said Queoff, a Milwaukee-based sculptor who earned a master of fine arts degree in 1977. “We’re like old musicians who just keep performing together.”

With help from Martino (’78, BFA) and Sponholtz (’79, BFA), Queoff created the 6-by-12-foot bronze panther that stands in front of UWM’s Enderis Hall. The sculpture, commissioned by the UWM Alumni Association, has become a beloved campus icon since it was unveiled in 2015 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the university’s mascot.

This month, Team USA competed in the Olympic Art Festival’s 2026 International Snow Sculpture Competition in San Candido, Italy, a mountain town about 25 miles from Cortina d’Ampezzo, where the mountain events were held at the 2026 Winter Olympics.

The team was one of eight selected from more than 300 applicants worldwide. Their piece, “Zenith,” depicting three figures holding an Olympic torch and laurel wreath, earned a bronze medal.

“We’ve always treated snow as a serious artistic medium,” said Sponholtz, a Mishicot-based sculptor who works primarily in wood. Martino, a La Crosse-based artist who sculpts in wood and bronze, agrees. “We share a love for creating beautiful forms and being out in nature.”

The three friends have traveled thousands of miles to snow sculpture competitions from Canada to Japan, where they won a bronze medal at the 1998 Winter Olympics Art Festival near Nagano. Their luggage includes customized carving tools and a gridded plexiglass box containing a polyurethane scale model of their competition sculpture.

“It keeps us on the same page. An inch square on the model is a foot square in the snow,” Queoff said.

They’ve honed a system of defined roles. “I’ll be roughing in shapes on top of the block,” Sponholtz said, “and Tom will be working from the bottom. Mike will be clearing the snow. Once the form is roughed in, we all work to add the details.”

**One more collaboration**

After four decades and more than 250 snow sculptures, the members of Team USA also collaborated on their final piece together Feb. 14-15 at the Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, where they have created snow sculptures annually for 35 years. The museum [featured a photo retrospective of their work](https://www.lywam.org/exhibitions-archive/captured-in-cold-photographs-from-35-years-of-team-usa-snow-sculpture/) in January, “Captured in Cold: Photographs from 35 Years of Team USA Snow Sculpture.”

“A 10-by-10 block of snow is 17 tons,” Sponholtz said. “We carve and clear all that by hand. We’re all in pretty good shape, but we don’t move like we used to. It’s a great feeling when you’re finished, but then you wake up hurting the next morning.”

Time may be catching up with the members of Team USA, but as all snow sculptors know, time is never on your side when using a material that melts.

“Snow sculpture is like performance art,” Martino said. “It’s here and gone. You have to appreciate it in the moment.”