

Stronger, faster Canadian luge team making strides

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WHISTLER - Canada's World Cup luge team will begin training for the 2008-09 season at the Whistler Sliding Centre Thursday.

And head coach Wolfgang Staudinger can hardly wait to see the results of a tough off-season training program that's made his small but keen group fitter and stronger.

"I don't want to say we're going to really smoke this season and kick some ass," said Staudinger, a German who signed a seven-year contract last summer to coach the Canadians through the 2010 and 2014 Olympics.

"We're not there yet. But the progress (that his athletes have made) is extremely visible."

All summer long lugers like Regina's Meaghan Simister a 21-year-old who broke onto the world stage with a ninth-place finish at the 2008 world championships last March have been dutifully subjecting themselves to a gruelling daily training regimen. Circuit training in a gym, strength training, even paddling their sleds around the ice inside a hockey arena, have been part of the daily grind.

"We've amped up our training and it has really paid off," said Simister. "I'm stronger than I've ever been before. I know my technique has come a long way and hopefully in the races I'll see a huge change."

"Wolfgang always says that world champions are made in the summer not in the winter. The time we spend training in the summer is more crucial. It was a lot of hard work but I know the Germans, who are the best in the world in luge, are doing the same things we're doing now. To compete with them we have to step up to the same (fitness) level as them."

The team will train in Whistler for two weeks before heading to Calgary for Veissmann World Cup series trials on Oct. 25-26. The season starts Nov. 29-30 in Igls, Austria. The circuit comes to Whistler Feb. 16-22.

Simister would be a lock to make the team. It'll be particularly interesting to watch her progress this season. She's already one of the three fastest starters in the world and when her times through the remaining four or five intervals catch up with her start times she'll be a consistent medal contender.

"My biggest thing is just getting the experience and the run volume up so I can compete with some of more experienced people on the circuit," said Simister, noting that Germany's Sylke Otto was 36 when she won the gold medal at the 2006 Olympics. "I'm strong. I have a fast start. I just need to get that experience and the kilometres down the track."

Staudinger agrees.

"Meaghan is a very young athlete," he said. "She has the potential to be one of the best in the world because she has one of the fastest starts already. The basics are covered but the international experience is lacking.

"I think she has the potential to have a very good result in 2010. She has the potential to become one of the best in the world."

Staudinger, a bronze medallist at the 1988 Olympics in Calgary, was a national team coach in Germany before being hired here. He knows how strong the Germans are and he said his group Simister, Calgary's Chris and Mike Moffat, Ian Cockerline, Jeff Christie and Sam Edney who also finished ninth at worlds and Red Deer, Alta.'s Regan Lauscher are the Germans equal in the weight room.

Catching up to them on the hill is another matter.

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