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Canadian luge team in Whistler to see how they stack up to the competition

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WHISTLER, B.C. — Canada's luge team is getting a firsthand look at the opposition this week.

Unlike other sports which keep training secrets close, luge lays all the cards on the table. The world's best luge athletes have gathered in Whistler at the new Olympic sliding centre for an international training week, giving the Canadian team a chance to see how it measures up.

"You never really know where you stand if you rely on your own timing," said Canadian coach Wolfgang Staudinger. "This is a chance to know how we compare to the rest of the world."

After an off-season training regime that included up to 10 runs a day and multiple hours in the gym, Staudinger said the Canadians are closing the gap on the likes of powerhouse Germany.

"To be fair, we are looking to finish among the top six in 2010 but anything is possible and Canada just might see a medal," Staudinger said. "Until then, we are going to give it our best."

Staudinger should know. He was part of the German coaching staff until the Canadian Luge Association lured him to Calgary. With the Games less than 15 months away, Staudinger said the Canadians are on track but the competition in luge is extremely tight.

A luge race is won at the start as athletes pull and paddle out of the start hut. Training for explosive strength is key and Staudinger is pushing the team's home track, the Canadian Olympic Park in Calgary, to update starting equipment to match elite tracks around the world. In order to win, he believes, everything needs to be at the top level.

"We have a lot of work to do on the technical end of things but our athletes are catching up on the track. We'll be spending a lot of time working on our starts," Staudinger said.

The Canadian Luge Association named its team Monday for the upcoming season. Jeff Christie will lead the men, all from Calgary, joining Sam Edney and Ian Cockerline. The women are Regan Lauscher of Red Deer Alta., and Calgary's Meaghan Simister.

Brothers Chris and Mike Moffat serve as Canada's doubles team.

Canada hasn't produced nearly as many World Cup or world championship medals as the two other sliding sports: bobsleigh and skeleton.

Lauscher, 28, achieved Canada's best result yet - a silver in 2004. Despite coming back from double shoulder surgery, Lauscher will be able to use the international training week to prove what she can do,

This week's training kicks off a busy season and Lauscher insists that starting off in Whistler puts the team in good standing.

"It's been wonderful to have support from fellow Canadians and test our skills on a really fast track," Lauscher said. "I love having a minute to myself on this track and feeling the ice fly beneath me. It takes me back to the basics and reminds me why I love luge."

Staudinger already likes what he sees with the Canadians.

"I can honestly say that if we were racing for real today we are not far off and that is a really good sign," Staudinger said.

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