

Published November 13, 2008

Luge team eyes home-track edge

Canadian World Cup team announced in Whistler

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As luge teams from all over the world flocked to the Whistler Sliding Centre for International Training Week at the 2010 Olympic track, Canada's homegrown sliding stars are already feeling comfortable on the fast, new course, and hopeful about the opportunities that experience could bring.

The members of this season's national World Cup luge team, announced by the Canadian Luge Association at the Whistler Sliding Centre on Monday (Nov. 10), have already logged about 170 runs here in training. The Canadians were the first national luge team to hit the Whistler track, and Mike Moffat, a two-time Olympian who races doubles luge with his brother Chris, said the chance to figure out the course themselves offered a huge advantage.

"Our team has been having amazing training here. Our advantage definitely is going to be coming from partially that we were so early on this track — we developed the lines on this track, and when you're responsible for finding your way down the track, you're going to do it a lot better than if you were just dictated what to do," Moffat told *The Question* after the team announcement press conference.

He joins his brother and six singles on the national team that will push for top-five results on the World Cup circuit this season. While the bulk of Olympic qualifying will happen in next season's events for the luge team, the Canadian athletes are faster and more fit than ever, thanks to an intense regimen of summer training instituted by head coach Wolfgang Staudinger. Moffat said consistent top-10 results have become an expectation for the team.

The men's side is led by Calgary's Jeff Christie, who finished among the top 15 sliders in the world in six races last year. Fellow Calgarians Sam Edney and Ian Cockerline, who posted personal-best finishes of ninth and 15th, respectively, at last year's World Championships, will also carry the Maple Leaf into World Cup competition.

The women's side boasts a powerful one-two punch of speed and experience courtesy of Meaghan Simister, the speedy Calgarian who finished ninth at last year's World Championships, and Red Deer, Alta.'s Regan Lauscher, a two-time Olympian and Canada's only World Cup silver medallist in luge.

Calgary's Alex Gough, who competed at the 2006 Olympics, will round out the powerful women's squad. As the season begins, injuries are hampering Lauscher, who had two shoulder surgeries over the summer, and the Moffat brothers, as Chris is recovering from a broken wrist.

Lauscher is learning about patience as she recovers and improves her physical conditioning in anticipation of rejoining the team on the World Cup circuit in 2009. The veteran has her sights firmly set on February 2010, and she said her instinct is to want to be in top form right now.

"It's been a good lesson in patience, but it's been hard — you kind of feel like the clock is ticking and time's running out. We've got 400-odd days left until the Olympic Games; you want to feel you have everything now... All those World Cups leading up to the Olympic Games are important steps in the process, but the big picture for me is focusing on my races at the Olympics here in February 2010," Lauscher said.

She was disappointed that her injuries kept her away from the team's first training session on the Whistler track last winter, but she said it did not disappoint when she finally hit the ice at the start of this season. "I had heard a lot about the track, and all good things — I heard that it was really fun, that it was really fast. A lot of my teammates know me and they really thought that I would enjoy it, so I was waiting in dire anticipation to come out with the team, and was hoping that I was healed and healthy enough to come out with the team at the beginning of the season, which I was," Lauscher said.

“As soon as I got on it and I got to the bottom on my first couple of runs, I had a big smile on my face, and really (you) can’t ask for more.”

Mike Moffat is effusive in his praise of the fast track, and of the Whistler community. Working out at the Meadow Park Sports Centre on Monday, Moffat said he was thrilled to notice someone wearing a Luge Canada T-shirt. He said that level of support was unexpected and wonderful.

“That’s cool, to come to a place where people actually care about sport, care about who we are and really want to support us. Couldn’t have asked for a better place in Canada to have an Olympics,” Moffat said. The luge association recognized the community support at Monday’s team announcement by honouring Whistler resident Thomas Chamberland. When Chris Moffat’s bag full of equipment and valuables fell off the team’s truck after a training session this fall, Chamberland found the bag lying in town and returned it to the sliding centre.

The luge association named Chamberland an honorary member of the World Cup team in recognition of his generous act, which followed a less pleasant incident last spring where computers belonging to Edney and Cockerline were stolen during a break-in, though Mike Moffat said one was eventually found and returned.

“We wanted to recognize Thomas for this nice gesture in returning these valuable items. It is acts like these that make the team feel at home with the support of the community, and contribute to giving us home-track advantage,” Tim Farstad, Canadian Luge Association executive director said in a statement.

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