

# Luge rivals become friends

BY KRISTEN ODLAND, CALGARY HERALD JULY 27, 2009



Olympic-bound lugers Regan Lauscher and Meaghan Simister are rowing to keep in shape during the off-season.

**Photograph by:** Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

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Regan Lauscher always kept her cards close to her chest.

Because, for a while, it felt like she had to.

Long before the 2010 Olympic Games were booked for Vancouver, Lauscher dominated the Canadian luge scene as the only female on the national senior team.

But with younger, stronger and enthusiastic athletes like Meaghan Simister quickly moving up the ranks, Lauscher thought keeping the secrets of her success under wraps seemed like a perfectly logical method of ensuring job security.

“You think to be good and to be fast and to always beat them, you always have to keep something to yourself,” said Lauscher at the Olympic Oval, as she took a breather between training sessions. “I think that might have been part of the adjusting, feeling like I had to keep something to myself so I would solidify my spot on the team. I’ve tried all of those approaches. Tried keeping to myself, writing down something that works or just knowing in my mind.

“I think (Simister) did, too. You kind of half-share, but maybe not fully share the details. Now, we’ve grown.”

So much so that in these crucial days, hours and minutes leading up to the 2010 Olympics — Lauscher’s final five-ring circus appearance — the veteran slider and Simister are attached at the hip during their day-to-day training routine.

Carrying more than a decade's worth of experience in the sport and with two Olympic Games under her belt (2002, Salt Lake City and 2006, Turin), Lauscher, 29, has a lot to offer on the track. Her silver medal from a 2004 World Cup at Lake Placid was the best-ever time by a Canadian female luger.

Meanwhile, Simister, who is seven years younger and has less experience, is naturally gifted with strength. (Says Canadian coach Wolfgang Staudinger: "She's strong like a bull, let's face it.") She's also a world-class starter, having earned a handful of track records still standing in Europe.

Both are extremely competitive with each other.

But once they realized that spirit could be used to fuel their fire — rather than secretly duking it out for a podium position — both athletes benefited. Despite being in an individual sport, fighting for thousandths of a second on the ice, communication became a solution, not a problem.

"I've talked to a lot of athletes in a lot of other sports to get their take on it," said Lauscher, who was born in Saskatoon, raised in Red Deer, and now calls Calgary home. "Skiers, they're like us. They train together but they race against each other. Almost all of these great athletes, whom I admire and have had great success, consistently say, 'No, I share everything I know. If I find a line that's fast, I'll tell my team right away. (A certain) wax on my skis, I'll tell my team right away.'

"Meaghan and I have talked and that's the way we need to be."

Like Lauscher, Simister, a Regina-born, Calgary-raised product of the National Sports School, was the token girl on the junior roster before moving up

to the senior team only a few years after getting into the sport.

At the beginning, Lauscher knew very little about her — other than those physical attributes: incredible strength, natural ability and heaps of potential.

"That much I knew about her, right from the very beginning," said Lauscher. "Her experience in sliding was not there, at all. But her potential and her athleticism for luge was.

"I was well aware of her strength at the start (line), which is a big component of our sport. And it's one of my weaker components I've always had to work on; it's something that comes very natural to her.

"But to most people in the sport — and on earth — being that strong and just naturally athletic like that is something you have to work at. I knew with time, as she got more experienced, she'd be one to watch out for."

Growing up in the sport, Simister had always admired Lauscher who was, at one time, Canada's poster girl for luge.

"The main thing for me is her position. It just comes naturally to her," said the 22-year-old, who

enjoyed one of her most consistent seasons last year, finishing 13th overall on the World Cup circuit. “The start comes naturally to me. Her position on the sled and her driving style comes very natural to her.

“We often joke, ‘If we could put the two of us together, we’d be a world champion — no problem.’ ”

When the two started training and competing together more frequently, Lauscher says there was no animosity between the sliders, really. But both girls certainly had to make adjustments.

“For a long time, she was the only girl on the junior team. I was the only girl on the senior team. It’s an adjustment because you always feel like that person is trying to push you out. Not just push you, but push you out,” said Lauscher.

“Once you realize that, you can take that and turn it into motivation for yourself to work hard. And maybe if she wasn’t there, I wouldn’t feel the need to get that much stronger.”

Staudinger says that in his two years with the Canadian team, he has seen a lot of competitiveness — but not one cat fight.

“They don’t pull each other’s hair, or anything like this,” he said. “But they are definitely like any human being in high-performance sports. If you don’t have that competitiveness, you shouldn’t be in a high-performance sport.

“I let these girls know that this is exactly what you want in a team. You are able to have one world-class starter, which Meaghan is, and for Regan to actually look up and try to beat her, because that way you grow together.”

By training together, Lauscher and Simister have made each other better.

“I know in Calgary, which is probably her best track, if I’m beating her it’ll be a top-five result,” said Simister. “If we’re close to each other, or I edge her out by a little bit, I know it’s going to be in the top 10. We’re a good gauge off each other. She knows if she pulls a start that’s a couple hundredths slower than mine, it’ll be a world-class start.

“It would be hard to be enemies, let me put it that way.”

As time has passed, the gap between their strengths and weaknesses has become less pronounced.

“I’m allowed to feel pressured by her and how strong she is and fast she is at the start,” said Lauscher. “She can feel frustrated if she has a strong start and makes a mistake at the finish line. Whatever the scenario is. Now, those gaps are narrowing. There’s not that great distance between us within our strengths and our weaknesses.

“At the end of the day, we compete against each other. She wants to be faster than me and I want to be faster than her. And that’s normal. And we shouldn’t be here if that’s not the case.”

This summer, as a way of supplementing her training, Simister signed up for rowing lessons — a five-session stint at the Calgary Rowing Club — and mentioned the idea to Lauscher. Having gone through dual shoulder surgeries last year, Lauscher was happy to join her since the sport uses similar motions to luge and would help build strength.

The added teamwork and training is simply a bonus.

“We both don’t know anything about the sport,” said Simister, grinning. “But it kind of relates to our sport, using the same muscle groups, and it’s fun to do something together in the summer.

“I think (it’s important) to scare yourself, try new things, and humble yourself.”

In Turin, Simister’s first Olympic experience, Lauscher earned her best finish at an Olympic Games — 10th in the women’s singles event, moving up from placing 12th in Turin — while Simister crashed on her third run and was eliminated.

“In Torino, I was fighting, a lot of the time, to make it down the hill,” she said. “Now, I’m fighting for thousandths of a second and to actually get really good results. I’ve seen myself come leaps and bounds from where I was.

“If it was just me on the team, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I definitely need that extra, healthy competition. I can’t do it by myself.”

And while Vancouver is Lauscher’s swansong, she doesn’t care if it’s herself or Simister on the podium — just as long as they have a Maple Leaf on their back.

“If she got a medal and I got 10th, I would be ecstatic for her. And Canada,” said the Mount Royal College journalism graduate, who wrote an online journal for CBC during the 2006 Olympics.

Lauscher said that as well as helping each other as training partners, the once-competitive duo room together on the road.

Now, says Lauscher, “they’re pretty good friends.”

“If Canada is so lucky to get our first Olympic medal in luge at those Games, at home, I would be happy for any one of my teammates,’ she said. “Although, of course, I’d be lying if I said that I wouldn’t want that to be me.”

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