



KAILLIE HUMPHRIES: ON THE RIGHT TRACK

by Dave Bowden

Being a brakeman on an Olympic-calibre bobsleigh team is a bit like being the runner-up on Canadian Idol. You might work just as hard as the winner, but when the competition's over, it's not your name people will remember.

Calgary's Kailie Humphries learned this lesson all too well when she went to the Torino Olympics in 2006 as a brakeman, only to be named an alternate before the race and miss out on the chance to compete.

"Right after that, I became a pilot," she recalls.

The 24-year-old Olympian has been in the driver's seat ever since. In the four years since she made the transition to the front of the sled, she's racked up an impressive resumé, including a

World Cup win on the Whistler track last March. With another gold medal win in Germany in late December, Humphries seems to be peaking at just the right time, a feat she attributes to the experience she gained at the back of the sled.

"I had been a brakeman for three years before," she said. "So when I transitioned to pilot I was able to focus just on the driving aspect of it, which I think has

definitely gotten me as far as I am today. Experience plays a big role."

The Canadian bobsleigh team is counting on it. By the end of the Olympics, Humphries estimates that the team will have driven the Whistler track between 150 and 200 times, while their competitors' experience will be limited to a World Cup event hosted there last year.

"The speed makes it very technical, and the more runs you have on it the better," she explains. "Because it's newer, the more times you can get down on it and make mistakes and figure each corner out, you'll know exactly what to do when you're entering an inch more to the left or the right, or how to get out of sticky situations, or how to have the perfect line."

Of course, lofty goals bring lofty expectations. While the entire world casts its eyes on the Olympics, no country will be watching its athletes – and its medal count – as closely as this year's host. For her part, Humphries says she isn't sweating the extra attention.

"I think every athlete dreams of being able to compete at a home Olympics," she said. "Yes, it could be construed as a negative, and definitely more pressure, but I personally am going to use it as a positive and show my country, and the rest of the world, what Canada's all about."

WHISTLER SLIDING CENTRE: BY THE NUMBERS

\$104.9 million: Cost of construction, funded jointly by federal and provincial governments

12,000: Seating capacity

1,450 metres: Length (bobsleigh and skeleton)

1,374 metres: Length (men's luge)

1,198 metres: Length (doubles and women's luge)

938 metres: Elevation at top of track (men's luge start)

786 metres: Elevation at low point of track

152 metres: Vertical drop

16: Number of corners

13: Days of Olympic sliding competition

8: Gold medals up for grabs

7: Track access points



THE ICE MEISTER

It will take less than two minutes for Olympic bobsledders to plummet down the track at the Whistler Sliding Centre, but the ice they'll carve beneath them was nearly five months in the making.

"We start making ice in late September or early October," explains track chief Tracy Seitz. "Ambient temperatures can be around 15 to 20 degrees Celsius here, so we start by sending the refrigerant out to the track, cooling the concrete, the ice surface. Then we spray maybe a millimetre at a time until we have about two inches."

Seitz is no stranger to the process. The 2010 Games mark his third time creating Olympic sliding ice, after handling the responsibilities at the 2002 and 2006 editions in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Torino, Italy, respectively. His prowess has earned him the nickname "The Ice Meister" among athletes and organizers.

The Whistler track uses NH₃ anhydrous ammonia, which runs up the track through pipes with a one-inch inside diameter that were built into the track during construction.

Did you know?

In its storied history, the Olympic flame has only gone out once during the Games. In Montreal, on July 27, 1976, rain extinguished the torch for a minute or two, until a plumber named Pierre Bouchard rekindled it with a cigarette lighter and a rolled up newspaper. Olympic officials later relit the torch a second time in a more official fashion.



"Depending on the size of the curve, you could have 50 one-inch pipes or you could have 100 or 25, depending on the surface area of the piece of track," he says. "(NH₃) is probably the best refrigerant you can get in an outdoor direct refrigerant system."

While both the system and its technician are top notch, Seitz found a formidable foe in the unique British Columbia conditions.

"Here at Whistler we have quite a humid climate. It's a rain forest, it is much more humid than what you get in say Park City, Utah," he says. "For good conditions, humidity poses a problem."

And that problem is easy to describe: Frost. Should the temperature of the track dip dramatically below the dew point, frost quickly accumulates on the ice. This creates a layer of snow that can significantly slow down sleds and affect race outcomes.

"If we put water on top of the frost, we create an insulating layer between the surface and the base layer of ice, and that can lead to a lot of problems, like ice breaking up and not being able to get really good refrigeration to the surface," he says.

Seitz would prefer to keep the track around minus-five degrees Celsius, but to combat the frost, he adjusts the refrigerant to bring the temperature as close to the dew point as possible while still maintaining a solid sheet of ice.



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