



Helen Upperton, front, and brakeman Heather Moyse smashed the international start time record during the Torino Winter Olympics. (Michael Sohn/Associated Press)

FEATURE

Fast-tracked development

Helen Upperton has gone from unranked bobsledder to contender seemingly in the blink of an eye

Last Updated Fri., Dec. 1, 2006

Tony Care, CBC Sports Online

Helen Upperton's ascent up the women's bobsleigh ranks wasn't expected to advance so rapidly.

In a sport normally dominated by veterans, a pilot entering only her second full year on the World Cup circuit doesn't usually make Canadian history multiple times. But Upperton, who has only been driving on the national team since 2003, proceeded to achieve unpredicted, but welcomed results.

Of course, she suffered through the usual frustrations and growing pains during the 2004-05 season, growing pains that all young drivers inevitably endure.

However, unlike most green pilots, Upperton overcame her inexperience.

Last season, her goal was merely to find consistency in her driving, but the first competition of the year changed that. With the opening World Cup two-man event held in Calgary, Upperton and brakeman Heather Moyse, of Summerside, P.E.I., became the first Canadian women to win a bobsleigh bronze medal.

"It exceeded my expectations a lot," said the unassuming Upperton. "It's funny to think this time last year I was just hoping to qualify for the Olympic Games."

Building on the momentum of the Calgary race, the pair went on to win two more silver medals, setting the stage for Upperton's sweetest triumph so far of her brief career.

The competition in St. Moritz, Switzerland, last January was the final event for the top teams before the season shifted toward the Torino Winter Olympics. Driving what she considered a mediocre race, Upperton guided Canada to victory, beating the heavily favoured German team of Sandra Kiriasis and Berit Wiacker by 22/100th of a second.

"I thought that I blew it after the mistakes I made in the first heat," said Upperton, who was born Ahmadi, Kuwait, but grew up in Calgary.

"I thought I'd be in sixth or seventh place. Coming up the braking stretch I saw my coach jumping around holding a No. 1 finger and I couldn't believe it."

The win not only gave Canada its first gold medal in women's bobsleigh, but the race also clinched second spot in the World Cup standings for Upperton, finishing behind only Kiriasis.

Suddenly, Upperton was forced to revise her expectations as the Olympics loomed, admittedly feeling pressure to continue her success from the World Cup season.

Leading up to the Winter Games, Upperton couldn't help but obsess over the predictions compiled by various Canadian media outlets, including CBC Sports Online, pegging her as a medal favourite on the heels of a breakout season.

"It's so difficult to remain calm and focused," said Upperton. "It's hard not to be nervous and not change everything you're doing just to try to fulfill all these expectations that you have all of a sudden. Going from an unranked athlete to being a contender when the Olympics arrive has to be one of the hardest circumstances

that an athlete can be put in."

Olympic letdown

The two-man event consisted of four heats with the winner bringing home the gold medal by posting the fastest total time.

Upperton and Moyses opened the first heat by smashing the international start time record – an essential element to a successful bobsleigh run – but the Canadian pilot seemed unsettled while powering her sled down the Italian track, finishing tied for third with American Shauna Rohbock.

As the second and third heats unfolded, Upperton failed to display her World Cup form, uncharacteristically hitting corners three and 11 during both runs.

"I hadn't really figured [the course] out completely in training so I was a little concerned about those corners," explained Upperton. "Our coaches always say, 'If you're worried about hitting the right wall, the first thing you're going to do is hit the right wall.' Those were the two exact corners that I lost all the time in."

Upperton managed to overcome her fears. The Canadians sported the second-fastest final run, positioning themselves in third while awaiting the challenge from Italy's Gerda Weissensteiner for the last podium spot.

With Upperton and Moyses nervously observing the Italian from a distance, Weissensteiner avoided all the potential pitfalls, edging Canada by 5/100th of a second to capture the bronze medal.

"I still feel like I should have done better but that's typical of fourth-place finishers," acknowledged Upperton.

"You do think about where you could have made up that time and there are a billion different scenarios that run through your mind. I think it will keep motivating me for the next four years and the 2010 Vancouver Olympics."

Life without Moyses

Now in her third World Cup season, the Olympic disappointment should keep Upperton inspired as she faces life without Moyses. The 28-year-old former rugby player is taking a sabbatical to complete a master's degree at the University of Toronto.

While Moyses is expected to return the following year, Upperton will have to make do without one of the best women brakemen in the world. Moyses's explosive starts routinely ranked Canada among the top sleds, a talent that won't be easily replaced.

Still, Upperton, who was an accomplished triple jumper at the University of Texas, doesn't view Moyses's absence as a hindrance to her continued development, particularly with Jamie Cruickshank of Saskatoon, Sask., and Edmonton's Jenny Ciochetti joining the team.

The 20-year-old Cruickshank, a two-year competitor, raced with Barrie, Ont.'s Suzanne Granvine-Hlady at the Torino Games, while Ciochetti, who turned 22 on Dec. 2, is entering her rookie season.

Both bobsledders naturally lack extensive international experience, but possess the same kind of athletic ability that Moyses is renowned for, according to Upperton.

"Jamie is a great teammate, a really hard worker and is a proven performer in very high, intense competitions," said Upperton. "Jenny may be a rookie but she was also a terrific sprinter at the University of Alberta. I think we'll continue to remain one of the top-ranked start teams in the world because we have so much depth in our



Upperton, right, and Moyses look on in dismay as Italian Gerda Weissensteiner knocks the Canadian pair off the podium at the Torino Winter Games last February. (Jonathan Hayward/Canadian Press)



Moyses, a former rugby player, will miss the bobsleigh season while completing a master's degree at the University of Toronto. (Immy Jeong/Getty Images)

program."

New season, same challenge

The season also brings the same challenging storyline for Upperton from a year ago, as she looks to knock Kiriasis off her bobsleigh pedestal.

The German has dominated the competition the last two years and remains a formidable driver on the women's circuit.

Kiriasis opened last season winning the first four World Cup races en route to Olympic gold, yet any intimidation built up during that stretch evaporated as the year wore on.

"We beat her twice last year," said a confident Upperton. "Women's bobsleigh is getting closer and more exciting every year. The teams get better and the calibre of athletes are stronger."



Upperton is looking to knock Germany's Sandra Kiriasis off her bobsleigh pedestal. (John D McHugh /AFP/Getty Images)