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Pain learns to have fun again

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MLADEN ANTONOV/AFP/Getty Images

Canadian slider Jeff Pain celebrates after taking the silver medal in the men's skeleton event at the Turin 2006 Winter Olympics in Cesana Pariol, Feb. 17, 2006.

WHISTLER, B.C. - Trouble with the steel runners on his skeleton sled kept Calgary's Jeff Pain, the 2006 Olympic silver medallist, from qualifying for the World Cup circuit this past season.

While having to drop to the second tier Intercontinental Cup circuit was initially a blow to his ego, he used the experience to rediscover the fun and passion that initially brought him into the sport.

"I actually had a lot of fun," Pain, 36, said this week while wrapping up three weeks of training on the technically challenging Whistler Sliding Centre track. "The people there still have a freshness to them. I think, looking back, it will probably be the key to my return.

"I went to Winterburg (Germany), my first World Cup back at the end of the season and walking into the start house during training day, the first thing I noticed was nobody was smiling. I was the only guy smiling. I was like 'OK, something to remember. This is supposed to be fun.' We're not going to going to make millions of dollars at this . . . might as well have fun at it."

With the International Bobsleigh and Tobogganing Federation reducing World Cup

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quota spots to three per country from four in 2006-07, Pain missed out when he was fourth at the Canadian trials in October.

The six-foot-three, 200-pounder said then that his runners were bending slightly under his weight. Other countries say their heavier sliders also experienced problems.

FIBT rules mandate that all runners must be made from steel manufactured by a Swiss supplier to help ensure that an athlete's driving ability, not technology, is paramount. Pain, however, thinks the steel is too soft, particularly for a guy his size.

Perhaps the largest man on tour, Pain puts more rock, or bow, into his runners than most sliders. Runners are usually good for several races without needing adjustment, but Pain, who because of his size must use a lighter sled than other competitors, was finding that his runners were flattening by four millimetres in a single run.

Even though he recorded two wins and two seconds on the Intercontinental Cup, he still had problems with his runners.

"I started out with a stockpile of eight pairs. By the end of the season, I was down to my last one."

He said sliders are proposing some solutions that the FIBT's materials commission will look at in April.

"By June, (at the FIBT Congress), we'll know what direction they're going to go in, whether they say we're stuck with what we have, or they're going to give us new steel, or open up the rules so we can use more variety.

"I have no indication (what might happen), but I'm confident whichever way they go, this very, very painful year of learning will do some good. We're at a point now, where I should be able to have some equipment, regardless, that I can start to get back into form with."

Vancouver Sun

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