

THE PRINCE GEORGE CITIZEN

Para-nordic skiers gain competitive edge at Otway

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Para-nordic skiers Andy Lin and Ethan Hess took a giant leap forward last week in their preparation for the 2015 Canada Winter Games.

Knowing they will be representing B.C. when the Games come to Prince George next February, Lin and Hess got a sneak preview of the course when they competed in the Haywood Nor-Am Western Canadian cross-country ski championships which wrapped up Sunday at Otway Nordic Centre.

Hess, a 14-year-old from Pemberton, has spina bifida, a birth defect that prevented the vertebra of his spine from completely closing around his spinal cord, which resulted in nerve damage. He walks with canes and competes in the sit-skier category using a chair with skis and poles. His core strength and ability to lean to either side of his chair transfers weight directly to his skis, which enables him to stay in the track at race speed.

"If you're buckled in right you'll turn super easy, but to keep yourself in the track on a tight turn you really have to lean," said Hess. "You stay in the track unless you want to pop out to go around a sharp turn."

Having grown up with active parents who began taking him downhill and backcountry skiing at an early age, Hess is no stranger to sliding on snow. But he didn't start sit-skiing until late last season. After just one practice he was hooked. He now skis two or three times per week and goes to the gym with the same frequency and that's made him stronger than he ever has been.

"I'm in a lot better shape and I'm not as lazy as I used to be," said Hess. "My core had gotten stronger, which does help me walk. Going down the hills is the best."

In the summertime, Hess paddles a dragon boat and outrigger canoe. He hopes to try alpine sit-skiing but for now he's focused on para-nordic. Para-alpine skiing is the other Paralympic sport at Canada Games, Feb. 13-March 1, 2015. The Games will feature three events for para-nordic skiers -- a 2.5-kilometre interval start race, sprints (600 - 1,200 metres), and a mass start 5 km race.

Each para-nordic skier is rated according to the level of disability and those with the most impairment are given a time-differential head start during races. Because Hess can activate all of his muscles as he skis, he receives no time adjustment on his starts. Paraplegic athletes who have only the use of their arms and shoulders start their races ahead of Hess.

"A lot of people, when they see sit-skiers, think they're all the same but there are different grades of disabilities," Team BC para-nordic ski coach Tony Chin. "The guy who's a paraplegic has to work so much harder. It takes pure strength to get them up the hill. They go so fast, using very few muscles."

Chin expects at least 10 male and seven female sit skiers will enter the Canada Games. There are separate categories for standing skiers and those who are visually impaired.

"We're going to have home-course advantage here," said Chin. "These two guys will know what to expect, whereas everyone else will be coming in cold and they'll have to figure it all out on training day the day before the race. They won't have much time."

Lin, a 16-year-old Vancouver resident, was born with athrogryposis, a curvature of his joints which affects the muscular development of his arms and shoulders. He does not use poles. Now in his third season of racing in the standing category, he's is a strong skier and had no trouble completing the five-kilometre course used by able-bodied skiers during the Western Canadian championships.

"The course is quite hilly and it was really hard going uphill but I like it," said Lin. "Now I know what the course will be like, I'll be able to plan for the race. It will be good."

Chin gave high marks to the Otway facility and predicts Games athletes will like what they see.

"I think it's a fantastic course, I like the flow and they've done a good job grooming," said Chin. "These guys won't have to scrub too much speed [on the downhill] and the climbs are good because there's a nice level area where they can start to recover before the next climb."

"The only time the standing [paralympic] skiers have difficulties is if they're a below-the-knee amputee because they can't edge and put pressure down on one ski. They turn one way really well but can't turn the other way as well and that's where the challenge will be."

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