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Canada looks good to go! Olympians expected to leave with record number of medals

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Never has a Canadian team gone into an Olympic Games with such promise and high expectations.

With the Salt Lake Winter Olympics only two weeks away, it's expected Canada will quickly emerge as one of the top competing countries at the Games, and leave with a record number of medals.

In the last Olympic Winter Games, Canada came home from Nagano with a total of 15 medals. That was up from the 13 medals won in Lillehammer in 1994 and the seven won in Albertville in 1992. And so continuing the upward trend, predictions this year have Canada winning 20 or more.

That's still a good step behind the German team, the overall victors in 1998 who went home with 29 medals.

Can this year's Team Canada compete for top spot on the podium and beat out the usual powerhouses -- the United States, Germany, the Russian Federation and Norway?

"We're shooting for third place overall," Sally Rehorick, Canada's chef de mission, told canada.com. "We were seventh in Lillehammer and fifth in Nagano.

"The ultimate goal is to be first by 2010."

Much of the attention, as always, will be on the marquee hockey events, which, barring disaster -- captain Mario Lemieux, Eric Lindros and several others are in questionable health -- should produce medals for both the men and women.

"We have a pretty strong chance for the gold medal," said Pierre LeBrun, sports reporter at Canadian Press. "But the thing about men's hockey is you can go from a gold to sixth place quite easily. There are six really good teams and they're quite even.

"So while I wouldn't be surprised if anyone won the gold, it also wouldn't be a shock for Canada to finish without a medal."

LeBrun predicts that Canada will finish second, behind Russia and ahead of the Czech Republic. Finland, Sweden and Norway will fill out the top six, he said.

The women's hockey team is also a strong contender for a medal, but LeBrun also gives this team a silver --

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behind the United States, which has beaten Canada in their last eight games this year.

"If Canadians don't win at least silver there's something definitely wrong there," he said.

While hockey will enjoy a high profile when the Games begin on Feb. 8, Canada will make its strongest Olympic marks on other ice surfaces, particularly in speed skating.

"The biggest thing for Canadians will probably end up being the long track speed skating," said Michael Petrie of the Calgary Herald. "Catriona Le May Doan and Jeremy Wotherspoon are going to the Olympics as the best in their events. There is no reason why they shouldn't stay on top."

Indeed, Canada's best chance for a gold medal is definitely with Saskatoon's Le May Doan, the current 500-metre sprint and 500-metre single distance world champion speed skater, as well as the reigning 500-metre Olympic gold medallist. Le May Doan, Canada's flag bearer at the opening ceremonies, is favoured to win the gold in the 500 metre, and there is hope she may push for at least a bronze in the 1,000 metre.

Several other speed skaters are expected to perform well, including Winnipeg's Cindy Klassen, Clara Hughes and Mike Ireland -- who pushes Wotherspoon, of Red Deer, Alta., in both the 500 and 1,000 metre and could knock him off the top spot in either event. There are also high hopes for Ottawa-based Kristina Groves and Calgary's Dustin Molicki.

"(Molicki) could be a dark horse, he's got the potential," said Robert Bolduc, performance director of Speed Skating Canada. "If he's having a good day he could win a medal."

In short track skating, high hopes are pinned on both Marc Gagnon of Montreal and Marie-Eve Drolet of Laterrière, Que., Bolduc said.

Another given for a trip to the medal podium is in curling. Both the men's and women's teams are excellent and could probably win gold.

"We win the world championship most years. We're just a powerhouse at it," Petrie said from Calgary.

In figure skating, last year's World Cup results are a good indication of how certain athletes will fare at the Games.

Jamie Salé of Red Deer, Alta., and David Pelletier of Sayabec, Que., are the reigning world champions in pairs figure skating, and Petrie gives them a decent chance of winning a medal.

He's not so optimistic about the chances of snowboarder Jasey-Jay Anderson of Mont-Tremblant, Que., who is also a defending world champ, saying the rules in this unpredictable sport have changed since its debut in Nagano.

"They changed something this year and he's not as adept at it. They make them go head-to-head instead of a timing kind of thing," Petrie said.

Skeleton is the newest addition to the Winter Olympics, making its official return after a 54-year absence.

It uses the same track and start as the bobsleigh, but athletes ride down the track head first on a flat sled instead of in a sleigh. Their faces and chins are only two-and-a-half centimetres from the ice surface as they race down the track at 120 kilometres per hour. There is no steering mechanism on the sled, instead racers use their shoulders -- and at times their feet -- to help guide the sled down the track.

In the women's race, Calgary's Michelle Kelly and Lindsay Alcock will be in medal contention. They finished first and third respectively in women's World Cup skeleton racing in St. Moritz, Switzerland, in mid-January.

In the men's race, Calgary's Jeff Pain -- who is currently ranked fourth in the world -- and Calgary's Duff Gibson are strong contenders for the podium in Salt Lake.

"Skeleton could be a real bonus for Canada," LeBrun said.

On the slopes, Mélanie Turgeon of Beauport, Que., in the downhill and Allison Forsyth of Nanaimo, B.C., in the giant slalom are not regulars on the podium, but Petrie figures either can do it on any given day. And in cross-country skiing, Beckie Scott of Vermilion, Alta., is Canada's best chance for a medal.

Elsewhere, the men's doubles luge team has a chance of making some noise, even though they have yet to finish on the podium this year. Calgary's Christina Smith in women's bobsleigh is also expected to finish well. And although Calgary-based Pierre Lueders is the defending Olympic gold champion in men's bobsleigh, he hasn't had a stellar season and it is unlikely he will finish on the podium, LeBrun said.

All said, it looks pretty good for Canada; the potential is great and the rewards are waiting for a fabulous two weeks of winter competition.

"I'd say it's going to be a welcome event for people who may still have the bad taste of Canada's performance at the Sydney Olympics in their mouths," said Petrie. "This will probably be a good medal haul."

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