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Gillings

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ZOE GILLINGS

Think of a sport that Britain might win an Olympic gold medal in and the chances are boardercross probably won't spring to mind. But thanks to Zoe Gillings, who's currently ranked number five in the world, this action packed snowboarding discipline might just become Britain's new golden sport.

Although selections for Team GB for the 2010 Winter Olympics are still to be announced, one woman who's sure of her spot is Britain's top snowboarder Zoe Gillings. As the only British female who has the Olympic qualifying standard she hasn't exactly got tough competition for her spot on the GB team, but this has done nothing to quash her competitive and determined spirit.

"I would be happy if I broke into the top three. But as with every competition I enter, in Vancouver I want to get to the top of the podium. That's my goal. It's not guaranteed to happen, but that's what I am going for."

This steely determination has already brought 24 year old Zoe great success in a sport for which Britain is not exactly known for excelling at. World Cup events are dominated by countries with a long line of winter sports heritage – Switzerland, Austria, Canada, the United States and more recently Japan.

But being the lone Brit doesn't concern Zoe. Her and her coach have adapted her training to accommodate for Britain's lack of snow. At Bath University, where she trains when in the UK, a special start gate like she uses in competition has been installed to allow her to practice, over and over again, that crucial section of the race that can make or break a time.

But the bulk of Zoe's year is spent abroad. She's already been competing in South America this year, securing a strong start with a remarkable second place in the opening Parallel Giant Slalom (PGS) South American Cup of the season - despite PGS not being Zoe's usual snowboard discipline. She also had a 10th place finish in an Argentinean World Cup event, when if it wasn't for world number 1 Lindsey Jacobellis crashing in front of her, her final standing would no doubt have been much higher.

She'll be heading out to Europe in November, most likely to Austria, where she will be training and doing some competitions before Christmas before finally heading out to Canada.

"I usually train for about four days in a row, and then I take one day off. I'll train from nine in the morning to about two in the afternoon on the mountain, and then go back down in the valley and get some food.

"I might also go to the gym and do some strengthening work...and then it's usually more food! I'll meet with my coach and we often use video analysis to assess my riding."

Away from the slopes though, funding problems through SnowsportsGB have been causing her extra problems. It appears that what was described as a 'major budget overspend' in the last two years left the UK's governing body for skiing and snowboarding in major debt. As a result some British skiers and snowboarders were left without crucial funding.

In the 12 months prior to an Olympic Games an athlete wants and needs to be able to focus 100% on their training, performance and preparation – it's the final leg of what has often been at least a four year plan. Zoe didn't need to point out to me that having to worry about not being able to attend training camps or if your coach is going to get paid is far from ideal.

"The funding is getting better, it's not brilliant, the whole year is not going to be as good as it should have been – but it's certainly not quite as bad as it was earlier in the year," Zoe told me. "It's incredibly bad timing to have this the year before the Olympics. I'm just trying to not worry about it and just concentrate on the training."

But all that will be forgotten once she hits the snow at the Olympic venue of Cypress Mountain. Dubbed motocross on snow, boardercross is not for the fainthearted. Riders are faced with a course lined with jumps, rollers, bank turns and slalom flags, with the single aim of getting to the bottom in the fastest time.

The first two rides of the day you get the course to yourself to try and get the quickest time possible, usually taking about a minute to a minute and a half. The top 16 girls then go into a knockout round, racing four at a time. The top two from each race progress until you have a final race with four riders and one winner crowned.

"It's really exciting," Zoe tries to convince me when I say it sounds slightly kamikaze. "You get four people racing down the course at the same time and you don't know if you're going to get to the bottom or not. It's great fun really!"

"You need similar skills as you would for regular snowboarding – good leg strength, good balance, coordination, good reactions and good awareness for the jumps – you need to know who and what's around you.



"Even though you can't see them, you need to hear them and figure out where they are so you can react. You also need to be able to go fast, so you can't be scared of the speed."

It's clearly not a sport for the fainthearted; guts and determination are a pre-requisite. And it's not all about training your body, like all elite level sportsmen and women, Zoe needs to make sure her mental preparation is just as thorough.

"It's so easy to get overconfident about something. Or you can get psyched out by the other girls or scared thinking that you might not be able to do something, so it is really important to be mentally prepared."

"Particularly for a sport like boardercross where you get quite a few injuries and you need the mental strength to get through that and get back on the slope again and start doing the same actions that caused you to get injured in the first place."

The Olympics is one of the few events in the snowboarding calendar where you can be guaranteed, injuries aside, of getting the best boarders in the world competing against each other.

The fractured nature of this sport means that throughout the year different riders choose to compete in any number of the different events around the world. For some it's all about World Cups, others it's the X-Games. A rider can have a top of the podium finish at one event, and not even feature in another, depending on who has shown up to ride. But all this changes at the Olympics.

Snowboarding is still a relatively new Olympic sport, and has only featured in the schedule since 1998. Zoe's discipline of boardercross, also known as snowboard cross, is newer still.

Its first appearance in the Games was in Turin in 2006 which was Zoe's Olympic debut too. She finished a credible 15th.

But this time round she'll be gunning for a podium finish and to become Britain's golden girl of the snow.

Louise Hudson, Sportsister.

Up close and personal

What's your favourite meal?

Lasagna's pretty good.

What's your favourite film?

Pirates of the Caribbean.

What do you listen to most on your ipod?

Good question, a real mix. Rock pop, randomness and some other weird things thrown in there like Monty Python! I went to Glastonbury last year which was good.

What's the last book you read?

James Patterson's Cross Country

If you could appear on any reality TV show what would it be?

I'm not sure I would to be honest, definitely not Big Brother! Maybe Strictly Come Dancing but I'd be absolutely awful at it though! I'd have no grace whatsoever, I can't dance!

What for you is the best thing about being a snowboarder?

You get loads of free stuff!

Zoe's motivational tip:

I have days just like everybody else when I'm feeling tired, often after doing a lot of travelling. But I find it helps if you put a bit of music in your ears, something upbeat, and that helps to get you going a bit.



Snowboarding Fact File

Are you feeling inspired by Zoe and fancy giving snowboarding a go? Here's some tips for beginners to follow on the slopes this winter.

It's recommended that you have a lesson at an indoor snowdome before you head on your holiday. It's a really good way to familiarise yourself with the sport and hit the ground running. Just small things like knowing how to fasten your boots and clip into your bindings will really boost your confidence on that first day of the holiday.

When choosing where to go, make sure the resort is beginner friendly. Look for a good ski school with smaller class sizes, English tuition, plenty of beginner friendly slopes close to the village and try and avoid busy resorts as you don't want to be fighting for piste space.

Beginners should always book into ski school on holiday. Even if you are going with a friend or partner who knows how to snowboard we would always recommend you have some lessons. Learning to snowboard is challenging and being taught by someone you know can test everyone's patience.

Make sure you have the right clothing. As a beginner, there will be quite a bit of standing around and sitting in the snow. If you aren't wearing the right kit you will get cold. It can be expensive buying everything new so for your first trip why not hire or ask to borrow from friends? Once you are hooked you can buy some new gear for yourself.

Photo shoot credits:

Zoe is wearing Nike ACG kit, riding a Donek snowboard and using K2 boots and bindings.

Photography: Sean Malyon www.seanmalyon.co.uk

Hair & Make up: Liz Eades

Shot on location at Sno!zone Milton Keynes www.snozone.co.uk