



KLASSEN'S COMEBACK

There's a new queen on Canada's speed-skating scene. For many years, Catriona Le May Doan blazed around the Oval ice to earn the title of Canada's Speed Queen. Enter Cindy Klassen, a phenomenal athlete, who, recuperating from a career-threatening injury, has become the new heir to the throne.

By CASEY PEIRCE

POISED TO BE ONE OF CANADA'S most successful athletes next winter in the 2006 Olympics in Turin, Italy, Cindy Klassen has already made a name for herself as one of the toughest competitors on the international speed-skating circuit and regularly surprises herself with her consistent trips to the podium. Her teammates will tell you that her contributions over the last five years have been monumental towards earning Canada's long-track speed skaters the title of the top-

ranked team in the world. Pretty impressive from someone who never even wanted to be a speed skater in the first place.

"I didn't ever want to skate," laughs Klassen. "I hated the skin suit and thought the blades looked dumb. I was a hockey player through and through." Cindy began her athletic career playing lacrosse as well as hockey, reaching the AAA level in the men's league before competing on the Women's Junior National Hockey Team for one year. At the age of 18 she discovered speed skating and wasted no time in finding her way onto the podium.

In just her second year on the national team, Klassen finished third in the 1,500-metres at the 2001 World Championships. She overcame the pressure of her first Olympics in style, bringing home a bronze medal from Salt Lake City in the 3,000-metres. Another bronze followed in the next

season at the 2003 World Championships in the 1,500-metres, as well as the title of World Cup Champion.

Despite all the success, Klassen is one of the most humble athletes you will find at this level of competition. “Cindy has an amazing attitude, and it has a big bearing on her success as a top athlete,” says her coach, Neal Marshall. “She is always humble but also very competitive and driven. She also keeps a great perspective by always looking for the humour in things, even in the most stressful of moments,” says Marshall, the three-time Olympian, who became Klassen’s new sprint specialist coach at the start of the 2004 season. The fit between coach and athlete is a good one, according to Klassen. “Neal is an amazing coach; he’s an inspiration, and he always knows the right things to say at the right time. I respect him because he’s been there before, and I’ve learned so much from him in just one season.”

Perhaps it was part athlete attitude and coach inspiration that gave Klassen the strength to deal with the most challenging part of any athlete’s career, a debilitating injury. In the fall of 2003, Cindy lost an edge during training at the Olympic Oval in Calgary, sliding into another skater’s blade and opening a four-inch gash on her right arm. Every tendon in her wrist was severed, including an artery, resulting in extensive nerve damage and requiring reconstructive surgery. Just as her teammates were off to Europe to compete on the World Cup circuit, Klassen was fighting to regain the use of her right hand through extensive rehabilitation. Everyone thought the speed-skating season was over for Klassen.



It was Klassen's determination and attitude that made her come back after a debilitating injury

True to her personality, Klassen views the ordeal in a surprisingly positive way. “My injury was actually a blessing in disguise. I was able to get some rest, which I think my body needed, and I was able to put everything into perspective. When I stepped onto the ice again for the first time after my injury, I was hungry to skate and excited to race.”

Just five months after the accident, she made a comeback that many didn’t believe possible. After missing 75 per cent of the season, she won two medals at her first return to World Cup competition, followed by bronze in the 1,000-metres and silver in the 1,500-metres at the 2004 World Championships. Her support team was behind her all the way. “Klassen has the drive and work ethic that makes her a winner,” says Dr. Dave Smith, physiologist to Canada’s top athletes at the Canadian Sport Centre Calgary. Matt Jordan, Klassen’s strength trainer, says, “She is a phenomenal athlete and able to make gains in strength and power at a rate that would make

any high-performance athlete jealous.”

This season after rebuilding her strength and fitness levels, as well as improving her opening sprint time, she won gold at the 2005 World Championships in Germany, not once, but twice. A world record time in the 1,500-metres allowed her to triumph over the hometown favourite to become World Champion in the 1,500-metres and the 3,000-metres. “To win two distances was better than I ever expected, and breaking the world record was a bonus. This will certainly give me confidence going into the Olympic year.”

That confidence will likely be shared by her teammates, several of whom mounted the podium with Klassen this year, including fellow distance skaters Clara Hughes and Kristina Groves. Klassen feels unity is strong amongst the team. “Having a strong team helps because it builds the momentum at the competitions. When you see your teammates doing well, it gives you energy and helps you to perform. Whenever one person is racing, there is always a group of teammates on the side cheering them on; it’s a true team.”

Cindy will no doubt continue to succeed, along with the rest of her team, which is ranked top in the world. They are certainly ready to take on the world in 2006 in Italy. “Our team has done well this past season, and it’s only going to get better,” says Klassen. I think you’ll see our team do great things at the Olympics next year.” **i**

FACTS

- Birth date:** December 8, 1979
- Hometown:** Winnipeg
- Residence:** Calgary
- Years on team:** Five
- Education:** Geography student at University of Calgary
- Favourite Food:** Pizza and chocolate
- Favourite TV Show:** Northern Exposure
- Favourite Band:** Blue Rodeo
- Worst Habit:** Procrastination
- Role Model:** Eric Heiden (five gold medals in 1980 Olympics)