

Shelley Rudman satisfied on safety and focused on Winter Olympic gold

- Briton confident after changes to sliding track
- Came ninth and fifth in practice for skeleton

Press Association
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 16 February 2010 18:31 GMT

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Shelley Rudman during her first run of the skeleton training heats. Photograph: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images

Shelley Rudman says the presence of her biggest fan – two-year-old daughter Ella – track-side for her attempt to become a two-time Winter Olympics medallist in Vancouver on Friday night will help to keep her quest in sharp perspective.

The 28-year-old Rudman, considered one of Britain's best hopes of a medal when the skeleton competition proper starts on Thursday night, spent some anxious days in the holding camp in Calgary pondering the safety of the controversial Whistler track after the death of the Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili last week.

"I would always think of my own safety," she said, "and what happened was very difficult for everybody. But I felt more at ease when I saw the changes made and now I don't feel it is a dangerous track.

"Ella is my number one priority and I wouldn't do something that was absolutely high risk. If there's been an accident on the road, am I not going to drive my car any more? I'm here, I'm safe and I've just got to perform."

Motherhood is not the only major change in Rudman's life since she came from nowhere in Turin, setting the fastest time in final practice before clambering from a first run of fourth four years ago to take the silver. This time round it will not be just Rudman's daughter cheering her on but a nation which has come to regard her as a contender – a belief borne out by consistent World Cup performances and a second-place world ranking.

"I know everyone wants me to get gold and I want to get gold but these are totally different circumstances," said Rudman. "I've got better as a slider but everybody else is really aggressive in our sport.

"I couldn't have done anything better in the last four years in preparation. I just hope I have two good days of sliding and not a situation where I think, 'Why did this have to happen?' I just want it to be as neat and tidy as possible with nothing freakish happening around it. You don't want to hit a groove or anything like that when you've had four years preparing for it."

Rudman placed ninth and fifth in her first two Olympic practice runs yesterday while her team-mate, Amy Williams, was 11th and 13th. Rudman's fiancé, Kristan Bromley, improved from eighth to sixth in the men's event.

But Rudman maintained little could be read into the practice times as many racers experiment with different race lines. "I'm being honest here – I'm up against it a lot against sliders like Mellisa Hollingsworth and Amy Gough. I'm not as close to Mellisa in training as I have been, so I've got four runs to correct it. It's going to be a race against time."

The Canadian favourite Hollingsworth swept all before her on the World Cup circuit this season and was fastest in each of the first two practice runs, underlining her status as the clear gold medal favourite.

But it is a sign of the extent of Rudman's journey from total outsider to respected Olympic contender that Hollingsworth is keen to single her British rival out as one of the biggest threats to a home gold.

Hollingsworth said: "Shelley is an amazing competitor and one of my favourite competitors because I think we both stand for the same values and morals in the sport. We have a lot of fun when we compete and it is a friendly rivalry."