

Shelley Rudman: 'I could feel the blood leaking out of my helmet'

Britain's queen of the ice sled who won skeleton silver four years ago is aiming to go one better in Vancouver

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'As soon as I'm ready, I don't hear anything. I'm on my own. I'm utterly focused,' says Shelley Rudman. Photograph: Tom Jenkins

Hurling head-first down a mile-long tube of ice at 90mph, on a high-tech tea tray without any brakes, Shelley Rudman has experienced both intense pain and exhilaration on her skeleton sled. She knows what it is like, after a frightening crash, to realise that the darkness rising toward eye-level is simply blood filling her helmet. Yet, having also enjoyed the thrilling rush of an unexpected Olympic silver medal in 2006, Rudman is now chasing an even greater ambition.

This year's Winter Olympics, which open in Vancouver on Friday, offer Rudman real hope that she might win gold – while failure to reach the podium will result in sporting anguish and a drastic cut to her funding. The conflicting pressures should be overwhelming for both Rudman and Kristan Bromley, her fiancé, a professor of physics and the designer of her space-age sled. Bromley also has a realistic chance of sliding to a medal in the men's skeleton while knowing that one mistake could ruin everything they have worked towards the past eight years.

Rudman, however, is exuberant. As their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Ella runs between their legs and sings out the letters of the alphabet, Rudman waves a glossy magazine in the air. "Have you seen this?" she exclaims. "Apparently these are the 10 hottest people to watch out for in February. Julia Roberts ... John Barrowman ... Davina McCall and ... wait for it ... Shelley Rudman!"

The 28-year-old grins as she and her little girl dance around a gleaming skeleton simulator in a room in Rotherham. "Poor old Madonna," Rudman laughs. "She's behind me at No6. Hello magazine here I come again!"

Rudman has already lamented how flu ruined her last photo shoot with Hello!, when she and the cerebral Bromley smiled queasily at the chattering camera in the wake of her 2006 breakthrough. She now sounds as serious as she is amused. "How cool is that?" Rudman says. "I'm in the top five. That's made my day. I'll have to frame it when I get back from Canada."

Between now and then Rudman will be tested like never before. Her see-saw rivalry with the world No1, Canada's Melissa Hollingsworth, adds to an intriguing event that continues to be Britain's best hope for Olympic success. Yet four years ago Rudman was such an outsider that her main concern before competing in Turin centred on the battle to raise the £4,000 she needed for a new sled. The money was finally obtained after a retired policeman and a former beauty queen at her local pub, in Pewsey, Wiltshire, led a campaign to help Rudman reach the Olympics.

"The expectations are now enormous," Rudman says. "Everybody is expecting me to bring back gold. I'm pretty focused but I'm going to need that because Melissa will have tested her home track around 300 times. I'll be lucky if I've been down it 30 times. Melissa is a great athlete but all season our times have been very similar. Even though she's just won the World Cup, and I was second, it was huge for me that I beat her in St Moritz last month. She's definitely still the woman to beat but I'll

also keep an eye on the German girls."

Rudman does not mention Amy Williams, her team-mate who is ranked fifth in the world. The relationship between the two British women is strained by the fact that Rudman and Bromley refuse to share their technological breakthroughs. Rudman argues convincingly that, in an individual sport, she should not have to hand over design innovations to her rivals – even if they are British. A few weeks ago, Williams said of Rudman: "I always congratulate her if she's done well. She does not congratulate me."

"I saw that," Rudman says coolly. "We're not the best of friends – I readily admit that. But I'm not going to speak negatively about anyone. The best way of explaining it is to stress how alone you are on your sled. It's just you and the skeleton. But I'm mentally strong. I could be walking to the start and someone could stand on my foot and I wouldn't let it put me off."

"Ella really helps me. I can be on the start line and she'll shout, just as it falls quiet, 'Go, go, mummy!' Or I can be in the crouch position and she'll yell, 'I love you mummy!' Those are special moments but, as soon as I'm ready, I don't hear anything. I'm on my own. I'm utterly focused."

The arduous track at Whistler will demand that deep concentration. "There's no doubt it's the fastest in the world. Some elements do flow but there are also intricate parts where a tiny error knocks you off-line. And, from halfway down, it gets really technical and you need to be perfect with your sliding and timing. At the bottom there's also a big right-hand curve and if you go into that at the wrong angle the pressure is so intense it shocks you. You can't see the exit and the temptation is to panic because you've got 5g pressing on you and you're thinking 'OK, where is it, where is it?' You have to rely a lot more on instinct – otherwise you're in trouble."

Rudman is recovering from a broken finger and a smash at Königssee in Germany last month which left her feeling "really apprehensive". Television footage captures her rocketing helplessness as, through the eerie, clattering hiss of the skeleton, Rudman is flung off and bounces against the ice walls before disappearing down a rushing white vortex.

"It really hurt," Rudman winces. "I hit the inner wall which was just so hard it flipped me over and I banged my head. The track was cambered and so I slid this way and that, smacking into the walls every time. I then flipped over again. It woke me up a little. You can be in the middle of a really great season and the track can still catch you out. You have to be 100% alert."

Rudman forced herself to race again in the second run at Königssee and she won bronze in that World Cup event. Her defeat of Hollingsworth the following week also proved her resilience. But Rudman is too honest to gloss over the dangers – and she recalls an even more dramatic accident at Salt Lake City. "I went hard into bend six. The pressure slammed my head down and I just nudded the ice. I couldn't remember anything from bend 6 to 11. I suddenly saw I was flying towards bend 12 and thought, 'Wow, what happened to the last four bends?'"

"I could just see the darkness rising. I knew it was blood filling my helmet. That's when you start panicking. You think, 'How much damage have I done?' It doesn't help when the officials at the bottom are running towards you, looking horrified. I could feel the blood leaking out of my helmet and my nose was broken. I had to have an operation because the septum had divided."

Rudman laughs lightly. "Let's not talk about that anymore. It's been straightened but I don't want people looking weirdly at my nose."

If she fell into the sport by chance, after deciding it looked like fun while she was a student at the University of Bath, Rudman is now emotionally involved with the most obsessively precise man in skeleton sliding. "The first time I actually went on a track it was with a bunch of army guys and some of them were crying after they reached the bottom. We only started halfway down but I didn't feel that great myself. I hated being out of control. But I decided to give it another few tries and the following week I went on a full run and I got the knack of it really quickly."

"We've now got a great team at Bromley. It's like something out of Formula One. Kristan's brother, Richard, and the other engineers have hardly slept the last week as they make the final technical adjustments to give us an edge. It's because of the engineering brilliance of Kris and Richard that we can compensate for not having a proper track to train on in the UK or the money of the Canadians and Germans."

Are she and Bromley similar in any way? "God, no," Rudman laughs. "Kristan is very intricate and pays so much attention to detail. He's the most analytical person I've ever met. I just like to jump on the sled and give it a real go."

Bromley finished fifth in the men's skeleton in the 2006 Games – and still saw his funding slashed by 30%. He recovered and, in 2008, became the first man to win the world championship, the European Championship and the World Cup in a single season. The vagaries of British lottery funding are such that Rudman knows her own income will be cut should she finish outside the medals next week.

"It happened to Kris four years ago and it could happen to both of us again. I've got some loyal

sponsors but it would be a big blow if the funding dropped. I was on a four-cycle because I won a medal in 2006 but that funding's just ended. It's pretty tough."

Asked how much of their own money they have spent, Rudman grins and says: "We'd better ask the expert." She shouts across to Bromley who reveals that, "in terms of technology we've contributed around £250,000 ourselves. But from a wider perspective it's cost us far more. We've just spent everything – and remortgaged the house".

"We've also had to put marriage on the backburner," Rudman says. "Everything has been poured into this dream of ours and that's why so much is riding on next week. But I think we're ready. We've done everything we can and, now, we're going to really go for it."