
Shelley Rudman: ice queen melts at speed

Shelley Rudman is addicted to the extreme sport of skeleton sledding.

By Nicholas Roe

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Spare a thought, in this raw British winter, for ice queen Shelley Rudman. Her idea of joy is to crash headfirst down slick slopes at a blistering 80mph, never more than a heartbeat away from potential disaster.

You want to know what it's like, streaking down an ice-track on little more than a £3,000 tea tray in the fast-growing sport of skeleton sledding? Then listen to Rudman as she prepares for the forthcoming World Championships.



Sledder extraordinaire: Shelley Rudman says 'the rush beats everything' Photo: REUTERS

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"It's such a rush, such an addictive sport," bubbles the 27-year-old British champion as she hones her skills at Canada Olympic Park near Calgary in Alberta. "There are so many thoughts going through your head in the click of a finger that it takes to go through just one bend. And there are 16 to 19 bends and you're going through so fast, you're trying to exit properly, trying to get the entrance right, different angles, left, right, the middle, off-centre. You might need to drive through a bend, cut through, really drive hard. It's such a technical sport. It's like Formula One racing."

That has to be the perfect description of skeleton sledding. It neatly encapsulates the combination of physical and technological excellence that is currently pushing Britain high into the top world rankings.

As Bryn Vaile, president of the British Bob Skeleton Association, says: "It's a scientifically based programme and we're leading the world in preparation and sled technology. We should be proud. Shelley is currently number one woman in the world and Britain is also the reigning top nation in men's skeleton."

A one-time supply teacher from Pewsey, Wiltshire, Rudman is now the reigning European women's champion and was silver medallist in the 2006 Winter Olympics. And she will test herself further at the World Championships in Lake Placid, New York, this month. Her success, and that of other Britons, is all the more surprising given that we have no ice-tracks (there are 13 worldwide). But a £2.2 million training programme funded by UK sport and the National Lottery is boosting skeleton athletes and designers, drawing in new talent.

The key, says Rudman, is to have a sprinter's mentality combined with instant calm that lets the rider "feel" the track. "You go from a really explosive state of mind to being completely relaxed at once, because if you're tense you don't slide well."

It's exciting, too, standing at the top of a mile-long drop, 30-second warning light catching your eye, waiting to explode into action. "You just want to do the run," says Rudman. "You're eager to get going." Hitting the start line she sprints furiously, covering 30 metres in around five seconds, while one hand is pushing the 34kg (75lb) sledge. Then she leaps aboard and is hurtling downhill facing forces of up to 5G.

It's rough, fast and dangerous. Once, in St Moritz, Rudman's head was forced into the ice by a turn, breaking her nose. Other races have seen her break a tooth and suffer ice burns. Indeed, while speaking to *Weekend* she was nursing a broken finger.

It is, she insists, an activity geared towards the mentally strong, because the combination of physical and emotional demands is daunting. The slightest weight shift turns the delicate craft into fast-looming bends and the position for each approach is absolutely crucial. "When I get to the bottom on some of these tracks, I'm quite shaky. It's really such a huge rush. That's why we only do two runs in a day because it knocks your body quite hard. The thinking, the cold, the g-forces. It all takes its toll."

Her sport swallows up her life. She trains all summer – sprints, weights – then the five winter months are devoted to the competition circuit.

Rudman got into skeleton sledding almost by accident, having been entranced by films of champions while studying at Bath University, the home of British sledding. Here, you find Britain's only "dry" track, 140 metres (153 yards) devoted to start practice. Rudman gained experience at a training camp in Norway, but soon showed enough promise to get taken up by the British team.

With such a track record, you can be sure however she performs when she hits the World Championship track in Lake Placid on February 26, she won't give up. "I just love to try and go faster," she says. "The rush beats everything."

FANCY A GO?

- The British Bob Skeleton Association runs talent days looking for hot sledders, www.bobskeleton.org.uk. (<http://www.bobskeleton.org.uk>)
 - The Association can also advise leisure sledders how to get a taste of the sport on courses abroad (office@bobskeleton.org.uk (<mailto:office@bobskeleton.org.uk>)).
 - To taste the thrill of a downhill run, winter sports centres such as Canada Olympic Park, Alberta, www.coda.ca/cop (<http://www.coda.ca/cop>) offer bobsleigh and luge experiences.
 - There are 25 elite and about 150 recreational skeleton riders in Britain. Athletes in sports such as sprinting do very well.
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