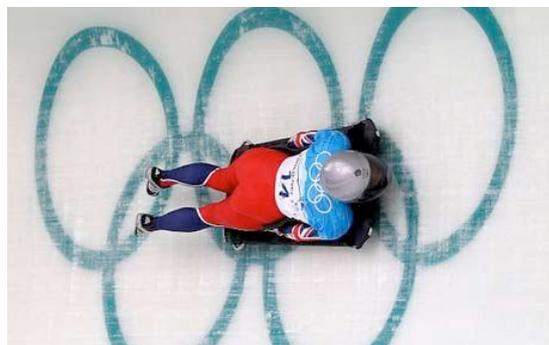

Winter Olympics 2010: Shelley Rudman gets acquainted with the forces of curve 16

Her visor was almost scraping the ice as she fought against "insane G forces" while being catapulted head first on a sled at 85mph round the final chute bend now gruesomely enshrined as the corner which cost a young Olympian his life.

Ian Chadband, Chief Sports Correspondent, in Whistler
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Yet after being among the first sliders since the death of luger Nodar Kumaritashvili to feel the chilling force of the Whistler Sliding Centre track at its unshackled full length, Shelley Rudman made a spin on what has unfortunately now been dubbed a "death track" sound like just another ho-hum day at the office.

Naturally, Britain's skeleton medal hope had been left "very upset" about Friday's tragedy and as a mother of a two-year-old daughter who sometimes comes to her workplace to watch mummy and daddy's treacherous day job, of course it has left her and partner Kristan Bromley, who slides in Thursday's men's event, with a lot on their mind these past few days.



Olympian: Britain's skeleton medal hope Shelley Rudman in a practice run at the Whistler Sliding Centre Photo: GETTY IMAGES

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Yet once she had negotiated the track a couple of times on Monday, satisfied that the heightened and reshaped curve 16 had made it safer, she still expected to hear the same cheery greeting from her No 1 fan, Ella, who is staying here with her grandparents. "I love you, mummy, did you have a good day of sliding today, mummy, did you slide fast?"

Mummy did, but best of all, she slid safely as usual. "Ella is absolutely my No 1 priority and I wouldn't do anything that was absolute high-risk," explained Rudman.

"What happened was awful but I got down OK and I've been OK in the past, so there's no problem.

"There's lots of parents competing here – lots of dads as well as mums – and lots of other situations in life where you can have a risky moment. But I love doing this and I've been on all of the tracks now to know where there are problem areas."

Rudman studied the horrific crash footage "because it was important for me to go through that process of figuring out what happened in that curve", but, like the rest of the competitors, she is satisfied that it was just a tragic one-off.

"It was a very freak thing for the sport. But I think the IOC [International Olympic Committee] and organisers have done everything they can to make it a safe environment now. The first training run has proved that. I feel OK now that I've got down.

"It's a very high-pressure track. I don't want to jinx myself but every curve is important, not just 16, and ironically I'm having problems in the top section of the track, usually my best part, and not at the bottom."

This is the racers' mentality. After the crash, the women lugers were outraged at being asked to begin from the kids' start. The outside world may fret about the dangers, but they only fuss about finding the fastest possible line.

Last March on this very track, Mellisa Hollingsworth, the home favourite for gold when the two-day, four-slides event starts tomorrow, crashed at almost 90mph, was smashed in the face by her sled and was so shaken that the next time she went down, all she could think was, "I am going to die if I go from the top".

So here we are less than a year on and Hollingsworth is whipping round the course faster than most of the men in training and, frankly, along with her Canadian team-mate Amy Gough, looks such an insurmountable obstacle for Rudman, having had 10 times as much practice on the track, that bronze looks the most realistic hope for Turin's silver medallist.
