



Mica has high hopes for Austria

MICA McNeill's career is going downhill fast. But you won't find the County Durham teenager complaining as she prepares for next weekend's World Junior Bobsleigh Championships in Austria.

McNeill has spent most of the last month competing at senior level on the America Cup circuit, with her gold medal winning display in Calgary confirming her status as one of the most exciting prospects in British winter sport.

The 19-year-old, who drives the two-man bob with either Frances Slater or Amy Hill, will start as one of the favourites for this month's showpiece championships in Innsbruck.

And having finished ninth in last year's World Junior Championships, the Consett youngster is determined to give an even better account of herself this time around.

"I'm going there with high hopes," said McNeill, who has deferred a university place after completing her A-levels at Durham High School for Girls in order to pursue her bobsleigh career.

"It's going to be a lot stronger field than I've been competing against in North America, but hopefully the experience I've had out there will stand me in good stead. I think we've all learned a lot

by **Scott Wilson**

Chief Sports Writer

and hopefully that will show this month.

"We're using the same track that was used in last year's World Junior Championships, so hopefully that will work in our favour too because we'll be used to it."

There might have been snow on the County Durham hillsides earlier this week, but bobsleigh is hardly a sport that is synonymous with the North-East.

McNeill divides her summer between British Bobsleigh's high-performance facilities at the University of Bath and her home in Consett, where she is able to use Durham University's sports facilities at Maiden Castle.

She spends the winter months travelling the world to compete on the junior and senior circuits, but first took up bobsleigh thanks to a taster session in North Yorkshire.

"One of the teachers at Durham liked to show us different sports, and she arranged a bobsleigh session on a dry track at Camp Hill in Bedale," said McNeill. "The person who took the session was Nicola Minichiello, who was a world champion at the time.

"She watched me and thought I had potential, so



DOWNHILL: Mica McNeill in full flow – Picture: Ron Le Blanc

suggested I gave it a more serious go. I was playing a lot of sport at the time – I represented the county at netball, hockey and discus – but hadn't really found the sport I really loved.

"I had another few bobsleigh sessions, then trialled for the GB team and things really went from there."

This January, McNeill achieved her biggest success to date when she claimed a silver medal at the Winter Youth Olympics.

Her performances earned rave reviews from British Olympic Association chief executive Andy Hunt, but weren't her parents worried about the sight of her hurtling down the track at more than 100mph?

"It can be a dangerous

sport, and I guess the first thing a lot of people think of is some of the crashes," said McNeill. "But you've got to put that to the back of your mind and get on with it."

The biggest forthcoming event on the winter sport calendar is the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, and while Britain boasts a senior women's squad competing on the World Cup circuit, McNeill is hoping to force her way into the reckoning over the next 12 months.

"I've still got hopes for that," she said. "It's a possibility, although I don't really know how big the chances are.

"I'd love to be involved in Sochi, but if I don't make it, I should be even stronger for the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea."



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