

# Local Heroes

YOUR WEEKLY GUIDE TO GRASSROOTS SPORT IN THE NORTH-EAST

## McNeill in confident mood ahead of Innsbruck test

By Scott Wilson

**M**ICA 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 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



**COOL RUNNINGS:** Mica McNeill is preparing for next weekend's World Junior Bobsleigh Championships Pictures: RON LE BLANC

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 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.

"I think it's probably harder for your friends and family who are watching. I've been doing this for more than three years now, but when I'm away, I still get phone calls from home to see if I've got any bumps and bruises."

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."

### Grassroots Memories

BY JOHN PHELAN

60 Years Ago

ON Saturday, December 6 1952 a record crowd of 16,319 crammed into the Kingsway Ground, Bishop Auckland to watch Bishops play Coventry City in the second round of the FA Cup, a game they lost 1-4 with Nimmins their scorer. The following Saturday, December 13, the Kingsway Ground recorded its smallest ever gate when a grand total of eight paying customers contributed gross takings of three and fourpence (3s/4d or 17p) to watch the Bishop Auckland Reserve team play Barnard Castle. There were more goals than spectators as the Reserves won 14-0.

Jimmy Nimmins the Bishop Auckland goalscorer in the Coventry game was the Nobby Stiles of his day and was part of the most famous half back line in Amateur football, ie Hardisty, Cresswell, Nimmins, so it remained a mystery why he never got an international cap. He had one chance and "fluffed it" in a North v South trial at Blackpool. Left half Jimmy got a lift from his right half partner Hardisty to the game at Blackpool and on the way over they agreed to reverse their normal pattern of play, which was for Jimmy to win the ball and give it to Bob at the earliest opportunity. To give Jimmy a chance to "shine" Bob was to win the ball and give it to Jimmy to distribute up the field. It was a disaster and it was only in the last twenty minutes that Jimmy and Bob reverted to their usual game, but by then the damage had been done. The Consett iron moulder never got another trial.

He did however remain a "hard man" and former team-mate Bob Thursby recalled, "I was next to Jimmy when we were changing one day and I noticed a long brown burn mark on his arm. I said, 'What's that mark Jim?' He replied, 'I was pouring some molten metal this morning at work and it splashed on my arm.' I said what did you do? 'Just brushed it off' he said.



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