

# Going for gold

YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD OF TALAN SKEELS-PIGGINS YET, BUT HE'S CURRENTLY FIFTH IN THE WORLD AT DOWNHILL AND HE'S LOOKING TO MAKE HIS MARK ON VANCOUVER 2010. HERE'S HIS STORY



**m**y name is Talan Skeels-Piggins and I'm part of the British Disabled Ski Team. In March 2003, at the age of 32, I was run over by a car and paralysed from the chest down. Having been a skier all my life, I was not going to let something as trivial as not being able to walk get in my way of enjoying the mountains, so I contacted the Back-Up Trust, a charity that supports people with spinal cord injuries to "surpass their aspirations". Eleven months after my accident, I joined a Back-Up Trust sit skiing trip to Winter Park, had a fantastic time and joined them for a further trip that season to Whistler.

I'd already realised that sit skiing was something I wanted to take further, and while in Whistler, I was fortunate to bump into the CEO of Disability Snowsport UK, Fiona Young. She told me about an upcoming team assessment week in Tignes, so I went along to that and, flying in the face of all medical advice, 14 months after my accident was selected for the British team. My doctor had told me to expect to be in hospital for 18 months to two years, so she now uses my story at conferences to show the resilience of the human body.

I get the same thrill from sit skiing as I did from able-bodied skiing, I'm just now a lot closer to the white stuff. Given that I'll hit 60 to 70mph in a downhill race, I feel justified at being scared of how fast I'm travelling. Being on a sit ski gives me the thrill of independence again. It's an opportunity to escape my wheelchair for a while and, quite simply, makes me smile inside. I, along with the other team members, are all sit skiers and we're always on the look out for new members. If there are any blinkys (blind skiers) or three trackers (amputees) out there, we'd love to hear from you.

As a team, we're got our sights set on the 2009 World Championships in South Korea and the Winter Paralympic Games in Vancouver in 2010. After the season we've had, everyone's hopeful of our chances, providing we can secure enough funding to get there.

The highlight of the season was the team trip to Canada in February for the NorAm Cup, the North American equivalent of the Europa Cup. The trip was a complete success, as both training and races went exceptionally well, despite a number of the team suffering equipment disasters. I even managed to break my sit ski in the first downhill training session, when I flipped it and landed, tangled in the netting. The training week brought us together for the first time in many months, and the sight of seven sit skiers

IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY TO ESCAPE MY WHEELCHAIR FOR A WHILE, AND QUITE SIMPLY, MAKES ME SMILE



Above: Lining up in Kimberley, complete with Mohawk in the middle and Talan far right Left: Talan racing at the British Army Champs in Serre Chevalier

playing follow my leader down the main pitch at Kimberley at 40mph caused many skiers to stop, stare, then applaud.

On the men's team was Sean Rose, Russell Docker, Tim Farr and myself, while on the women's team was Anna Turney, Joe Willoughby and Jane Sowerby. Sean took the gold in the first downhill race while I was squeezed into bronze by just 0.17 seconds. But as long as I finished ahead of Tim, I was happy as the two of us had a bet on – whoever was slower had to have a Mohawk haircut. I hadn't laughed so much for ages when later Russ, as barber, got the uncontrollable giggles and was shaving Tim's barnet with his eyes shut. From our strong start, we secured a British 1-2-3 in the Super G, and went one better in the GS with a British 1-2-3-4.

Our total team haul from the trip included 16 medals from Kimberley and 17 from the next leg in Sun Peaks. And as a team, we were quickly learning the importance of race prep and waxing – when you're being pipped to a medal by 0.3 of a second, final preparations make all the difference. The Canadians seemed pretty upset, but they'd better get used to it for Vancouver 2010, if this season's performance is anything to go by.

This season Team GB made it into the top 10 rankings for the first time. To help raise valuable funds to get us to the World Cup in Korea, we've produced a calendar. It's available from [www.natives.co.uk](http://www.natives.co.uk) if you want to help support us.