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New sports at the Olympic Games

Three spectacular disciplines will make their Olympic debut at Sochi: the ski halfpipe and ski and snowboard slopestyle. Swiss athlete Virginie Faivre, world champion in the ski halfpipe, stands a good chance to win a medal.

By Alain Wey

What's new at the Sochi Olympic Games in February 2014? A raft of new snow sport disciplines, including the ski halfpipe and ski and snowboard slopestyle. The course involves a series of jumps over various obstacles and rails. A jury evaluates the tricks for their difficulty and style. These additions are sure to get the adrenaline pumping and make the spectacle even more exciting than usual, especially since Switzerland has regularly won gold when a new discipline has made its debut at the Olympic Games: in Nagano in 1998, snowboarder Gian Simmen won in the halfpipe and Dominic Andres' men's team was triumphant in the curling; in Turin in 2006, Tanja Frieden took gold in snowboard cross, and in Vancouver in 2010, Michael Schmid was victorious in ski cross. It remains to be seen how our athletes will fare in the new spectacular sports.

Impetus from the Winter X Games

The American Winter X Games undoubtedly leads the way in snow sports, smashing Audimat records every year. So it is no surprise that the most popular disciplines at the American event are usually soon after admitted to the Olympic Games. Following on

from the snowboarders, skiers found themselves at home on the halfpipe slopes. "Until 2010, there was no Swiss team or official training," says Christoph Perreten, head of freestyle skiing at Swiss-Ski. "The ski halfpipe was officially integrated into Swiss-Ski in May 2011."

Skier Virginie Faivre, from Vaud, is the linchpin of the Swiss team. World champion and winner of the World Cup in 2009 and 2013, she also won the World Cup stage in the Sochi Olympic halfpipe in February 2013. The Olympic team is also likely to include Mirjam Jäger from Zurich, who came fifth in the World Cup in 2013, and Nina Ragettli from Grisons, who was sixth in the New Zealand stage last August. For the men, Nils Lauper from Berne, Frederick Ilia from Grisons and Jannic Lerjen from Valais could potentially qualify for selection by Swiss-Olympic. "We will know who has been selected for the Games in January 2014," says Christoph Perreten. It is possible to send four athletes for each discipline and genre, but no more than 26 all told.

And there are five Olympic disciplines in freestyle skiing: mogul skiing, aerial skiing, ski cross, halfpipe and slopestyle. The goal for halfpipe skiers is to reach the final,

where 12 athletes battle it out. "From that point on, anything is possible," adds Perreten. The Swiss-Ski expert also has his eye on two young stars, Joel Gisler (aged 19) and Fabian Meyer (aged 20), both from St. Gallen.

As for ski slopestyle, it has followed a similar path to the ski halfpipe within

"I love the Sochi halfpipe!"



Twice world champion and winner of the World Cup (in 2009 and 2013), Virginie Faivre, aged 31, is one of the favourites for a medal in the ski halfpipe at Sochi. She has been skiing since the age of two, and has been participating in halfpipe and slopestyle competitions since 2003. Since 2009, she has been focusing solely on the halfpipe.

Tell us about the famous Sochi halfpipe.

I love it! The first time I skied it, I had a big smile on my face. It's steep and that suits me well. As I have a small build, I achieve more amplitude in this type of halfpipe.



Virginie Faivre, the world champion in halfpipe, skiing, in action

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Foto: donated

You must have to be slightly crazy and reckless to launch yourself into a halfpipe...

I'm often asked how I ended up participating in this sport, which demands so much of you. You start out slowly, and gradually you build up more and more fluidity, height and amplitude. I had a very good technique in alpine skiing, which was an advantage. Nowadays, halfpipes are huge – six to seven metres in height. Before launching yourself into big tricks, you have to get used to the curve and get your bearings. A fall is very painful and it's best not to think about it.

You seemed to hit a slump between 2009 and 2013. What happened?

I still got onto the podiums, but I was injured several times: a cracked tibia, concussion, a fractured shoulder blade, broken ribs,

etc. An injury quickly throws you off course. You have to regain confidence to get back to the level you were at previously.

So you haven't had any new injuries since the 2012-2013 season?

If only! I had a serious head injury in March 2012. I had to have physiotherapy, I suffered from vertigo and I was unable to ski. I had to learn again how to turn and jump. It was a bonus to be able to start this season, but I had problems with my head until the end of last winter. I almost missed the World Championships in March because I fell on my head again a week earlier. I was going to give up but in the end decided to give it a try. When I was standing on the first step of the podium and heard the Swiss national anthem, it was all worth it. You forget the pain when you have moments of happiness like that.

www.virginiefaivre.com

Winter X Games, where he secured silver by completing his best jump while injured. "If he manages to recover from his injury and builds on the good start he had to the season, he has the potential to win a medal," believes Perreten. Laurent de Martin from Valais, Fabian Bösch from Obwalden and Jonas Hunziker from Berne are also on the national team. For the women, Eveline Bhend from Berne is the only athlete on the national team. She was forced to take some time out in the second half of last season due to an injury. Christoph Perreten sees her in the top five all the same: "She could win a medal." Christoph Perreten is also following the careers of Camillia Berra from Valais and the very young Giulia Tanno from Grisons (born in 1998), who is starting her first World Cup season. And who are Switzerland's rivals in Sochi? "In the halfpipe and slopestyle, the United States are the frontrunners," says Perreten. The Canadians and French are strong in the halfpipe and the Norwegians are good at slopestyle. New Zealand and Australia also have good athletes in both disciplines.

Jumps, tricks and snowboard

Following in the footsteps of Alpine snowboarding, halfpipe and snowboard cross, it is now slopestyle's turn to make its Olympic debut. "We have had a snowboard slopestyle team since the decision was taken in 2011 to make it an Olympic discipline," says Franco Giovanoli, head of snowboarding at Swiss-Ski. "In the women's competition, the best Swiss athlete is clearly Sina Candrian from Grisons who won silver in

Stoneham (Canada) in January 2013. She has a chance to win a medal." There is also Isabel Derungs from Zurich, who has improved a lot over the past two years. They will definitely be in Sochi provided they are not injured.

Franco Giovanoli believes that the best Swiss male athlete is Pat Burgener from Valais. "Unfortunately, he was injured last season and couldn't participate in most stages of the World Cup, so he still needs to achieve a good result if Swiss-Olympic are to select him." Giovanoli also sees Jan Scherrer from Grisons as a potential qualifier. If the halfpipe heavyweights do not participate in the slopestyle competition in Sochi, it's for the simple reason that it takes place before the halfpipe. For Christian Haller or Iouri Podladchikov, an injury in the slopestyle would prevent them from taking part in the halfpipe competition. "It's just not worth the risk," says Giovanoli. There are still two competitions that could lead to Pat Burgener and Jan Scherrer being selected: Copper Mountain in December and Northstar in January. "The slopestyle team is still being put together, so we don't have as many athletes as in the halfpipe." Be that as it may, we are in for an amazing display: the athletes will risk everything and will treat us to just as many crazy acrobatic and vertiginous tricks on the jumps as in the halfpipe.

ALAIN WEY is an editor at "Swiss Review"