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NEWS

Local offers lugers some fast cash

by GLENN COOK

Saint City News

A local entrepreneur is hoping a big incentive will help put the Canadian luge team on the Fast Track to gold in Vancouver.

Darren Weeks is the founder and CEO of the Fast Track Group, which includes Fast Track to Cash Flow, Fight AIDS Save Taxes and Fast Track Capital, and is based out of Campbell Business Park. Fast Track Capital is the title sponsor of the Canadian luge team, and Weeks has promised to put up \$1 million for any luger who wins a gold medal at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver.

"As an entrepreneur, I make quick decisions, and I just thought, let's do it. ... I just thought, let's put our money where our mouth is," Weeks said.

Tim Farstad, executive director of the Canadian Luge Association, said, when he heard about the million-dollar offer, he was extremely happy.

"I thought, obviously they are really enjoying the partnership with us, and the fact he's willing to offer that up really made me think he likes working with us," he said.

He added that the publicity generated by the offer has been invaluable in creating a bigger profile for luge in Canada almost overnight.

"We're not the biggest sport in the world," Farstad said. "If that type of thing can spin into something else, too, that would be great."

Should a luger capture gold, the \$1 million would be split between the athlete and the Canadian Luge Association. If multiple athletes win gold, they'll have to divide their share.

Fast Track is also offering \$50,000 for each silver and bronze medal, and the offer also stands for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia.

Canada's best medal hopes in the sport may be Calgarians Alex Gough, 22, who finished fourth at last year's world championships, and Sam Edney, 25,



PHOTO BY JONATHAN HAYWARD, CANADIAN PRESS

Luge athletes like Sam Edney (above) will have extra incentive to go for gold in Vancouver after local businessman Darren Weeks pledged \$1 million if Canada can capture top spot.

who placed fifth at a World Cup event earlier this season.

Fast Track became the title sponsor of the national luge team last year, and Weeks said it was a great fit from a marketing standpoint.

"In approximately February [2009], there was a national campaign, and they announced that the team was for sale. They actually put 'For Sale' signs on their helmets," he said. "When I saw that, I was a little bit embarrassed as a Canadian. ... I thought, the luge team, to me, is a bit of an underdog, and when I talk to people across Canada about

financial literacy, 99 per cent of Canadians, if not more, they're underdogs. I kind of thought, those are the two people I'm rooting for as underdogs."

But Weeks admitted he didn't know much about the sport when he got involved.

"Not a clue," he said. "I didn't know the difference between luge and skeleton or whatever else they do."

Farstad said that the athletes on the Canadian luge team are excited about the offer.

"They're 100 per cent focused on doing well at the Games; they didn't need any incentive to do their best," he said. "It's there, but they already have the cake to go for. This is kind of the icing on the cake."

But he didn't think the offer would go too far and become a distraction to the athletes.

"They're not going to try extra hard now or do something wrong because [they think], 'Oh, now maybe I can win this money; maybe I can do better than I would have done,'" Farstad said. "They're a pretty focused group. They're already in the Olympic situation, and they're pretty focused on doing the best they can."

Weeks concurred, saying he believes the athletes are capable of tuning out things like this and focusing on the task at hand.

"They don't do it for the money anyway," he said. "They do it for years because they love the sport and they want to achieve the best results possible. I don't think it's going to negatively affect them."

The Canadian Olympic Committee pays athletes bonuses for Olympic medals, including \$20,000 for gold, \$15,000 for silver and \$10,000 for bronze.

Luge events run at the Whistler Sliding Centre from Feb. 13 to 17.



Darren Weeks

Fast Track Group CEO