

Skiers have cause for optimism

by TED CLARKE
Citizen staff

Alix Wells left the rabbit ears at home but there was no way for her to hide the fact.

She's the jackrabbit of the Prince George Alpine Ski Racers (PGASR) team.

The 13-year-old Wells earned that reputation last year when she placed fifth as the highest-ranked Canadian at a Whistler Cup GS race at Blackcomb. Her result was unexpected, yes, but not totally out of left field considering the work she puts into her favourite winter pastime.

Wells skied mostly in the Okanagan zone last season to get more competition in zone races and it paid off in a string of first-place results as the top K1 (11- and 12-year-old) skier in the province.

"Alix was the best performer for Canada on one day for the girls at Whistler Cup in the K1 age and that included girls from all over the world, so that was a great performance," said PGASR Michael Stratton. "She's hoping to make it back there as a first-year K2 and not necessarily enjoy the same success but definitely set herself up for another good year."

Wells is one of seven returning Prince George team members, with three newcomers having joined the fray. Her 17-year-old brother Connor has moved up to the J2 class, and her K2 peers — Annie Reimer, 13, and Hannah Zmudzinski, 14, are also back. Zmudzinski qualified for her first provincial championship last year and Stratton says she has all the tools to become a medal threat this season. Reimer had a breakout season in her second year of K1 competition, finishing eighth in the province in GS at Cypress Bowl.

"That boosted my confidence," said Reimer. "It helps when you're trying to keep up with Alix."

Other team returnees are J1 skier Kirsten Reimer, 15; second-year K2 Hannah Zmudzinski, 14; second-year K1 Mikayla Gairns, 12; and K1 skier Riley Martin, 11. Joining the alpine team this year from the Nancy Greene ranks are Evian Mullen, 11 (K1); Brianna Kirby, 13 (K2) and Aaron Van Delft, 13 (K2).

During the season, Prince George skiers spend an average three or four days every two weeks away from school. That means homework assignments have to be done between training time and races. So far, that hasn't been a problem.

"It's amazing, but pretty much every one of my kids is on the honour roll," said Stratton. "The parents work with the teachers and schools as much as possible and if we find they're falling behind in a subject they might stay home and not come to a race. School is the most important thing."

Connor Wells is in his Grade 12 year at Kelly Road and will limit himself to races within the north zone. He plans to compete with Zmudzinski on the provincial school circuit, shooting for medals at the high school provincials at Whistler. Kirsten Reimer won't be racing as often as a J1 skier but hopes to use that opportunity to take a coaching course at Powder King.

"I think being a ski coach would be fun, you get to travel the world and go skiing," she said.

The near-podium Whistler Cup result and top-10 provincial finishes were encouraging signs for the Prince George team and Stratton says his skiers are committed to the work it will take to be contenders on the provincial and national scene.

Stratton, 27, a former junior national racer from Toronto is back for his second season in Prince George, having just returned from an off-season coaching the New Zealand junior national team. He saw plenty of snow days during the Southern Hemisphere winter but also spent a few weeks in the Cook Islands before flying to Prince George to begin his six-month term.



Citizen photo by David Mah

The Prince George Alpine Ski Racers team gathered at the Northern Sport Centre on Sunday for the first group dryland training with coach Mike Stratton.

torcycle he was driving was hit by a impaired driver, leaving Stratton with a seven-stitch cut on his kneecap. Although he's still walking with a limp, he said he'll be back on skis next week at Apex for a five-day B.C. Alpine K2 camp.

The plan is to use Purden Mountain Resort as a base for training, depending on early-season ski conditions. The Prince George team will travel at least every other weekend this season to Silver Star, (Vernon), Sun Peaks (Kamloops), Apex (Penticton) or Big White (Kelowna) to get some early competition leading up to provincial and national championships.

"Last year was kind of a resurgence for Prince George and the North, and this year we're looking to continue to improve on that," said Stratton. "Our numbers have grown and we're definitely moving forward and look to add to our podium success of last year."

"Prince George is definitely a dominant force in the north zone and we're starting to show on the provincial scale we have some pretty good talent here. I'm looking forward to seeing how Michaela, Annie and Hannah close the gap on Alix and how they push each other."