

SPECIAL: CANADA AT THE OLYMPICS

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Gold medal
hopeful
**PERDITA
FELICIEN**
is ready for
Athens



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10 m, and 80 points better than the gold medal-winning performance in Sydney. "I love to compete. It's such a great feeling when you put in a good performance," says Heymans, who speaks softly but radiates intensity. "It gives you a type of energy that spills over into the rest of your life."

Like most of her teammates, the 22-year-old has spent more than half her life working toward the goal of Olympic gold. Six hours a day at the pool, little time for anything outside of diving, just to secure a spot on the team, all the while knowing that one tiny error can be enough to scuttle your hopes. "In the end you deal with the work, the boredom, the pain, because it's something you love to do," she says. "It's my passion."

Hartley has also sacrificed for her chance in Athens. Last fall, the North Vancouver native put her studies at the University of Southern California on hold and moved to Montreal to train at Claude Robillard. She's away from family and friends, has spent most of the season on the road, and is working in her second language. In Sydney, where she finished 10th on the springboard, it was enough just to have made the team. This time, expectations—her own and those of others—are much higher. Hartley jokes about how viewers at home will be able to identify her: she'll be the one who looks miserable. "I'm pretty much a nervous wreck the whole competition," she says with a laugh. "I don't look happy, but that's what works for me."

Geller isn't sure all this pressure is a bad thing. The Canadian team has tried to insulate its athletes in the past, with mixed results. Now with the new emphasis on the podium, Geller thinks the glare of the spotlight might help his stars keep things in focus, and fulfill their potential. After all, despite protests to the contrary, the dream of watching the red maple leaf raised to the rafters is what has fuelled the hard work. "The first time I went to the Olympics, I was going there to see what it was like, live the experience, have a lot of fun," Despatie eventually admits. "This time I can't say I'm not expecting anything." He's far from alone. ■

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TRACK

BY JONATHON GATEHOUSE

THIS COUNTRY'S BEST track-and-field medal hope, the reigning world indoor and outdoor women's hurdles champion, a budding superstar on the European circuit, still doesn't own a car. So on a steamy Saturday morning, less than two weeks before the start of the Summer Games, and fresh off a flight from a meet in Sweden, Perdita Felicien has marshalled a group of vehicle-rich friends to help her and her roommate haul boxes of books, clothes, and

disassembled Ikea furniture into their new digs. They're all back at the old apartment waiting to leap into action while she's navigating yet another media obstacle on the road to Athens, a photo shoot on the track at her alma mater, the University of Illinois in Champaign.

Dividing a rare "off day" between moving on the cheap and dealing with pesky journalists doesn't sound like the ideal way to prepare for the race of your life, but Felicien's too busy laughing and revelling in her self-proclaimed "loquaciousness" to voice any complaints. Diva displays and fits of high-performance pique aren't part of this champion's make-up. "A lot of people have told me to stay the same Perdita, not to get caught up in this," she says. "I always try to remember that this can be taken away from me in a moment. The same way I just appeared on the scene, I can disappear."

Not likely. In a discipline where most athletes hit their prime in their late 20s (the perennial U.S. champion, hurdling icon Gail Devers, is 37), the 23-year-old Pickering, Ont., native shows the promise of a long and fruitful career. Since bursting onto the international stage at the world championships in Paris last August, Felicien, a two-time NCAA champion, has dispelled all flash-in-the-pan notions. In March, she captured the world indoor title in Hungary, and she won four of five races outdoors this season, including last Friday in Zurich in her last tune-up before Athens.

Ranked No. 1 in the world, she seems to be enjoying the pressure that comes with the view from atop the podium. While U.S. broadcasters and millions of fans will be pulling for Devers—this will be the two-time Olympic sprinting champion's fifth Games—Felicien is determined to deny her childhood idol a storybook ending. "When I line up in the blocks, my motivation is knowing

that all these women want to dethrone me, knowing that I took something from them last year that I probably had no right taking because no one knew of me," she says. "They'll be back to avenge themselves, so I can't think that the magic that was in Paris and Budapest will all of a sudden appear in Athens. I have to work for this, just like I did last year."

That sort of chutzpah could give Canadian fans a rare opportunity to celebrate at the main Olympic stadium in Maroussi, site of the track and field events. Following a disappointing Sydney Games in 2000, and an embarrassing no-medal performance as the hosts of the 2001 World Track and Field Championships in Edmonton, Athletics Canada has embraced the Canadian Olympic

Committee's tough new selection criteria. In what is being termed a "rebuilding Games," there will be just 26 Canadian track athletes competing in Athens. Alex Gardiner, the team's

head coach, rates Felicien and high-jumper Mark Boswell as medal favourites, with the men's 4 x 100-m relay team having an "outside shot." Others, like 800-m runner Diane Cummins, 1500-m runner Malindi Elmore, sprinter Nicolas Macrozonaris, and 5000-m specialist Emilie Mondor, could make their finals. Jeff Adams and Chantal Petitclerc, both past Paralympic medallists, could also add medals in their "demonstration" wheelchair events. "Our team will be smaller, but more experienced and focused," says Gardiner. "Our goal is to have 70 to 80 per cent of them finish in the top 12."

Felicien, who didn't make it out of her heat in Sydney, realizes she will be carrying Canada's track hopes in Athens, and is saying all the right things about such expectations not being a burden. "Some people never win medals in their lives—some people never make the Olympic team," she says. "I know

Felicien's motivation is 'knowing that all those women want to dethrone me'

that I have only so many more chances to win Olympic gold. It would be nice to get it out of the way now, but that's not the focus." Yet her intense preparations—a final training camp in Italy, a late arrival in Athens, a recent decision to cancel plans to have her mother come cheer her on—belie any "just happy to be here" rhetoric.

She's candid about her love-hate relationship with her sport. When Felicien first started running track in high school, she loathed the hurdles, and resisted her coach's attempts to divert her from sprinting. Compact and powerful—just 5 foot 4, but with bulging thighs and improbably tiny feet—her style is to skim the barriers, rather than vault them, always flirting with disaster. "Even now, I'm still intimidated. I line up and I think, how am I going to get through this? How am I going to do this?" she says. "Human instinct is to bail out, to stop because you are going to crash and burn, but it's the power of the mind that forces you to keep going. And the whole risk aspect is what attracts me to it."

That mental toughness, proven over the last year, is now about to be tested like never before. On the night of the Olympic final, Aug. 24, Felicien, who turned pro last fall after her world championship win, will be racing for herself, her country and her economic future. There are already endorsement deals with Nike and Cheerios, with other corporate benefactors waiting in the wings.

Standing on the track in Champaign, cows from the agriculture school lowing in the background, Felicien breaks into a wide smile as she envisions the final. "I'm so close to my destiny," she says. That night could change everything, even her future transportation. "If I win, I can get a nice new car," she says. "If I lose, I might have to downgrade to a used one." ■

FIVE-RING FACTS

A model of the roof over the 75,000-seat main stadium was subjected to wind-tunnel tests at the University of Western Ontario. Designed to remain stable in an earthquake up to 8 on the Richter scale, it withstood winds up to 120 km/h.

IT'S A MUGGY summer morning in London, Ont. Rain threatens, the wind has picked up, and a flotilla of sailboats has added its wake to the chop on Fanshawe Lake, summer home of Canada's national women's rowing team. Veteran coach Al Morrow couldn't be happier. "Work the tailwind here, this could be Athens conditions," he bellows from his coach's boat to the eight

women powering across the lake under the guidance of coxswain Sarah Pape of Toronto. Instantly, the pace of their razor-thin boat kicks up a notch. Morrow cranks the throttle of his tiny outboard wide open but still he falls behind as the women's boat slices across the lake. "Yeah, they're going for it," he says, happy about that, too. "I can't keep up to it."

Whether the women's eight has enough horsepower to leave its Olympic competitors in its wake is another matter. Several of the seven boats Canada has qualified for Athens are solid medal contenders. The men's eight and four—both reigning world champions—are considered the boats to beat in their classes, though the wilful wind and waves of the Athens course will have much to say on that score. The women are sending a strong pair, a strong double and an eight that Morrow concedes is a "middle power."

Two of the best rowers were plucked from the eight in May to build a heavyweight pair. Buffy Williams, 27, of St. Catharines, Ont., battled a rib injury this spring but she's a port-side powerhouse and a complement to Darcy Marquardt, 25, of Richmond, B.C., the top-ranked rower on the starboard side. Williams was part of the women's eight that won bronze at the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney. "As a crew, we were an emotional basket case," she says, recalling the stress of the only rowing medal performance at the Sydney Games. She took a year off, vowing only half in jest never to put herself through that again. She came back. "I realized how much I missed it," she says. "The competitive outlet, the day-in-day-out training." Even the nerves before a big race. The two women worked quickly to build a bond. It's Marquardt's role to call the tactics, and they've developed a series of "focus words" she can call out to adjust mid-race strategy or refine technique. Words like "leg" or "shoulder"

or "linear" will stress the push of the legs, the finish of a stroke or straighten the path of their oars through the water.

The women's lightweight double of Fiona Milne, 32, of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., and Mara Jones, 30, of Aurora, Ont., was also selected in May. Remarkably, after just a month together, they pulled off an upset win in June at the final World Cup race in Lucerne, Switzerland, against some of the toughest competition they'll face in Athens.

Jones and Milne were the two best boat movers in their lightweight class to emerge from long months of training and competition. The training can be a brutal experience, countless hours spent pounding down lakeside footpaths, pumping iron and pulling on ergometers—rowing machines that record every watt of energy burned. It's on the water, though, where the sport finally yields its rewards. It's in the acceleration after every stroke, and in the sound of the water running under the boat, says Jones. Her partner agrees. "I really love it, the feel of the boat," says Milne. "It's very technical and it's really hard to get it right. We're always striving for that perfect stroke."

It's the job of their coach, Laryssa Biesenthal, to turn two strong individuals into a team. There isn't much time. "A lot of the doubles they are racing against have been together for two years at least," says Biesenthal, facing her first Olympics as coach after winning bronzes at two consecutive Games as a rower. The World Cup win was "a pleasant surprise," she says. She's more heartened by the team's potential to up their game by Athens. The sport is now so advanced that she can analyze a stroke-by-stroke record of the winning Lucerne race, graphing both the strokes per minute and the resulting boat speed. "There are still a lot of areas where they can improve," Biesenthal says.

The Canadian rowing program has gone

Marquardt (left) and Williams: weather leaves them 'in the hands of the gods'