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AUSTRALIAN XC SKIERS FOCUS ON NORDIC SKI WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

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With the 2021 FIS Nordic Ski World Championships only over a month away, Snow Australia caught up with Cross-country skiing National Team athlete Mark Pollock to hear about the team's preparations for the pinnacle event of the year and the lessons learned from the World Cup events held earlier in the season.

Pollock is one of the four Australian Cross-country skiers currently competing overseas - the others being Seve de Campo, Katerina Paul and two-time Olympian Philip Bellingham.

Pollock said that despite the challenges of getting to their first World Cup in Davos (Switzerland) only a week before the event, the team managed to achieve some good results in the sprint and distance events.

"Seve and I knew that we would be sacrificing performance slightly, due to jet-lag and altitude adaptation - both took a little bit of time to get over. Nonetheless, we were both reasonably happy with our results in both the Sprint and the 15km. Personally, the 15km was easily my best distance World Cup result to date, which was encouraging."

After Davos, the Australian Men's team moved on to Dresden (Germany), while Katerina Paul decided to sit out the following World Cup events and continue to train to find a better form. The City Sprint weekend in the German city is always an interesting event. The 650-metre long sprint course is not particularly steep, but quite demanding, with a short uphill and an undulating terrain.

"Personally, I find it hard to perform on that short, super flat and fast sprint. I was a bit disappointed with my race there, but it was an improvement on last season, so it definitely could have been worse," Pollock said.

"The Sunday race was the Team Sprint, which was raced by Phil and Seve. It was super exciting to see the boys race so well and I think the general feeling in the team after this race was one of optimism for the season. The boys locked in a solid result, only a few seconds outside of World Cup points."

In fact, Phil Bellingham and Seve de Campo teamed up for Australia's best World Cup Team Sprint since 2018. The duo finished 18th out of 26 teams after Bellingham edged out Germany to take 9th place in their semi-final.

The next stop on the World Cup tour was Val Mustair (Switzerland), for the opening stage of the Tour de Ski. This was a new experience for Pollock, who had never raced the Cross-country multi-stage event before.

"It was a great racing experience and whilst I personally had a few mishaps with skis and ski selection, I was happy with the way I raced. All three of us had our best race for the weekend in the 15km Skate Pursuit on Sunday. That allowed the team to leave again with a positive attitude and look forward to the rest of the season."

Mark and the rest of his Australian teammates will try to use the upcoming World Cup events in Falun (29 January) and Ulricehamn (6 February), as a final tune-up for the World Championships.

"After those races, the focus will be solely on World Championships in Oberstdorf, which the three of us (de Campo and Bellingham) will be at," Pollock said.

"This season has been completely different to any of the others I have done. Actually not much has changed in terms of day-to-day living, as we keep to ourselves and focus on training anyway. But the logistics and getting to the races have been way more complicated, expensive and less reliable, with events cancelled at short notice and quarantine rules in different European countries changing weekly. So plans have had to adapt accordingly."

The challenges of dealing with a COVID-19 World Cup season have also introduced some new and innovative ways to train and analyse performance, especially given that the Australian Cross-country team doesn't travel with a coach this winter.

"That has required some training methodology adaptation," confirmed Pollock. "We are using technique video analysis and there is also more onus placed on us in terms of how we choose to adapt the prescribed training sessions based on how we are feeling each day."

The 2021 FIS Nordic Ski World Championships will be held in Oberstdorf (Germany), from 23 February to 7 March 2021.

GALLERY

