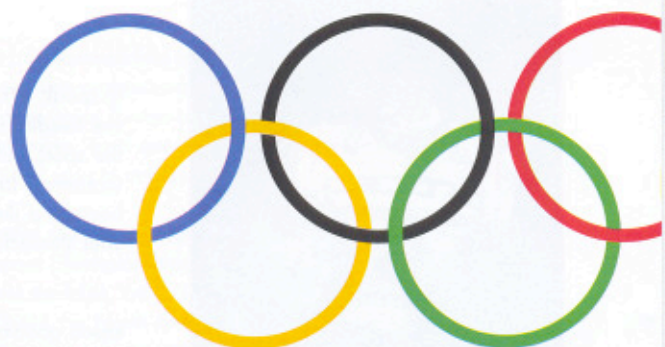


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BY JESSICA RIDENOUR



**The 2006 Winter Olympic Games are right around the corner. And although there are plenty of favorite veteran athletes to root for, here are some new faces worth watching—and cheering for.**

**This February while some of us will be curled up by the fire or shoveling the driveway, roughly 2,500 athletes from 85 countries will descend on the bustling northern Italian city of Torino (also known as Turin) and surrounding villages to speed down snow-covered mountains, glide along icy tracks, and somersault through crisp winter air at the 2006 Winter Olympic Games. In all 84 medals will be awarded to athletes who have likely dreamed of and prepared for this opportunity their entire lives.**

Many of us are familiar with the legends of Olympics past, like three-time medalist Picabo Street, triple gold medalist Bonnie Blair, and Tara Lipinski, the youngest gold medalist in history. Few of these household names will be returning this year; instead we're going to meet some newcomers who are destined to grab the world's attention with their awe-inspiring athletic prowess and relentless determination.

Meet four American rising stars who will be giving the old-timers' records a run for their money at the 2006 games. You never know—these ladies may be on their way to becoming household names themselves.

**Event:** Skeleton  
**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Orem, Utah



# noelle pikus-pace

**IN THE BEGINNING:** Noelle Pikus-Pace believes in taking things on headfirst, so to speak. When her high-school track coach urged her to try out for bobsledding in nearby Park City, she heeded his advice, instantly loving the icy rush. The following year she expected to compete in the sport, but her coach had other plans. Instead he strapped a helmet to her head and sent her screaming face-first down the frozen track. With her heart racing and adrenaline flowing, Noelle became a skeleton convert. "What could be more fun than going 80 miles an hour face forward on your stomach with your chin an inch off the freezing cold ice?" says the slider.

**WHY SHE RULES:** In just four years, Noelle has taken the skeleton world by storm. She's kissed good-bye her 2004 ranking of fourteenth place, becoming the number-one-ranked female in the world in 2005. She also has the impressive distinction of being the first American woman ever to hold the skeleton World Cup points title. With few others having achieved what she has, Noelle is the front-runner for taking the gold in the women's singles event. Friend and teammate Amanda Bird is certainly a fan.

"There are two characteristics a slider must possess if she is to be great," says Amanda. "First, focused aggression. Second, the ability to relax and dance upon the iced sheet of music. It's rare for an athlete to have both qualities, which is why Noelle is such a threat. You could blindfold Noelle, plop her onto any track in the world, and not only would she make it to the finish safely but she'd beat everyone else to take the gold."

**WHAT'S NEXT:** Torino isn't the end goal; it's just part of the adventure. Down the road the Utah Valley State College graduate sees herself earning a master's degree, coaching Division One track, and starting a family with her husband of four years, Janson. "I plan on being an all-American mom, bringing orange slices to my kids' soccer games and helping them achieve whatever their dreams may be," says the three-time World Cup champion. "Just like my mom did for me."

# hannah kearney

**IN THE BEGINNING:** On skis since the age of two, moguls skier Hannah Kearney trained with Ford Sayre's and Nick Preston's programs at Waterville Valley before deciding that "racing is boring" and that freestyle skiing was much more her thing. Coming from an athletic family, Hannah knew she'd end up going for the gold someday. "I didn't know why I wanted to go to the Olympics, but I've always wanted to go," says the former soccer and track champ.

**WHY SHE RULES:** The freestyle skier admits that she was terrified the first time she did a back flip, but that didn't stop her from winning two World Cup events in 2004 and taking home the gold at the 2005 FIS Freestyle World Ski Championships, making her the first U.S. woman champion since Ann Battelle won in 1999. Hannah ended the 2005 season ranked tenth in the overall World Cup standings and is the top U.S. woman in her event. "Hannah succeeds at every thing she does," says her former coach Nick Preston, who has worked with Hannah since her childhood. "She's going to be one of the fastest horses out there. She has what it takes."

Hannah trusts that her ability to make quick, tight turns will help her edge out the Torino competition. "I grew up on the East Coast, so I can thank the ice for making me such a good technical skier," she laughs.

**THE ROAD TO TORINO:** Who says training is a bore? Hannah, who likes to knit and hang out with friends when she's not on the slopes, trains for her big jumps on a trampoline and skis down a watery plastic ramp—complete with wetsuit and life jacket—at the Lake Placid jumping complex. She also keeps a close eye on other skiers to stay abreast of the latest moves. "I watch the boys in my sport because then I see where the sport can go and it gives me something to strive for," she says.

**Event:** Moguls  
**Age:** 19  
**Hometown:** Norwich, Vermont



**Event:** Halfpipe  
**Age:** 18  
**Hometown:** Belmont, Vermont

## hannah teter



**IN THE BEGINNING:** Sometimes fate is too strong a force to argue with. With four older brothers, two of whom are now also professional snowboarders, it was only a matter of time before Hannah strapped on a hand-me-down Burton board and joined them on a homemade halfpipe in the backyard of their Vermont home. "Ever since I was a little girl, I was always into and excited about what my brothers were doing," says Hannah.

**WHY SHE RULES:** The titles she's racked up in a few short years are mind-bending: 2005 Vans Cup champion, World Snowboard Championships, and Winter X Games SuperPipe bronze medalist, '05 Breckenridge Grand Prix gold medalist, '04 U.S. Snowboard Grand Prix champ, and '04 X Games champ, to name just a few. In 2004 the North American Snowsports Journalists Association named the bubbly blonde Competitor of the Year—the first time the honor has gone to a snowboarder.

Hannah leads the pack with her aggressive, explosive riding style and slow-motion hang time, making her one of the top female halfpipe riders in the world today—if not *the* top. You'll want to add *frontside 900*, *alley-oop*, *McTwist*, and *melon grab* to your vocabulary because once Hannah does her thing in Torino it's all anyone will be talking about.

Despite her many successes, Hannah likes to keep it real. "I try my hardest to be in touch and focused on my progression and the capabilities that come along with it. I learn, I take in, I appreciate, and I move on and up," says the multimetalist. "Going forward is the way I roll, and gold is a nice color that can come along with that."

**WHAT'S NEXT:** "The Olympics is the next step in the pool of dreams that I wish to come true," says the phenom, who enjoys skateboarding, swimming, and journaling in her free time. This December she'll be featured in the Universal Pictures docudrama *First Descent*. The film takes Hannah and four other riders to the big-mountain terrain of Alaska, where they share their personal stories and viewpoints about the rise of snowboarding.

## brenna margol

**IN THE BEGINNING:** Shooting 70 miles per hour down an iced chute on a tiny sled may sound daunting for some, but it's all in a day's work for Brenna Margol. The Michigander, who enjoyed sledding on the snowy hills of her hometown as a child, was introduced to luge at a USA Verizon Slider Search more than a decade ago. She's now in her fourteenth year of the sport and has competed in six world championships.

**WHY SHE RULES:** Ranked eighteenth in the world, Brenna recently took fourth place at the 2005 Verizon U.S. National Championships and boasts a silver and a bronze medal from the Junior World Championships. Strength coach Dan Smith, who has worked with Brenna for eight years, is impressed with how far the Drexel University Dean's Lister has come. "She is now one of the best starters on the World Cup circuit," he says, "and is one of the most powerful women we have ever had on the Senior National Luge Team. She's come a long way through hard work and determination."

The difficulty of luge lies in the fact that it's one of the few Olympic sports timed to a thousandth of a second. "You can't even snap your fingers that fast," says Brenna. "The hardest part is finding those thousandths of a second, those hundredths. It's all about perfection." She's hoping to reach perfection in the women's singles event in Torino come February.

**GOOD SPORT:** When teammate Ashley Hayden won the bronze at the Verizon North American Championships, Brenna was nothing but inspired. "I wasn't jealous at all because I knew that if she could do it, then for sure I can. So that was hope for me in the future," says the Salt Lake City alternate.

**Event:** Luge  
**Age:** 24  
**Hometown:** Sawyer, Michigan

