

## **Report of the FIL Development Program 2018-2019 Season**

The 2018-2019 post Olympic season brought the beginning of a new quadrennium to the sport of luge and to the FIL Development Program. It also brought with it several changes, not the least of which was the departure of long time FIL Development Manager Ioan Apostle, who guided the Development Program since 2002 upon the departure of Gunther Lemmerer. His leadership has been felt by countless athletes and nations through the years both as a skilled administrator and coach. His presence and influence will be missed within the Development department and we wish him the best of luck as he moves on to coach his home nation of Romania.

The FIL Development program is quite wide in scope and addresses the needs of both general class and youth/junior athletes. In an attempt to address the many needs requested by the NFs through the support application process and yet still remain within budget, programs such as the Luge School, Patenschaft, track vouchers, FIL General Class and FIL Junior & Youth, support for race suits/shoes/gloves and the purchase of sleds, transportation and travel allocations, support for coaches and individual programs requested by NFs, all have been part of the 2018-2019 Development Program.

What follows is a review of some of the larger support initiatives administered by the Development Program:

### **FIL Luge School**

Traditionally the first scheduled program of the season, the Luge School is geared toward absolute beginner or very inexperienced sliders. It gives this population of athletes the opportunity to gain important on-ice experience in preparation for future youth/junior competitions. Athletes accepted to this camp are generally from smaller nations with few athletes, limited resources, no track of their own and limited equipment. It is fully funded by the FIL and is seen as an important step in helping to create the athletes of tomorrow. The School took place in Sigulda from Oct 14-20 and 35 athletes from 12 nations participated, including BIH, BUL, CRO, CZE, GEO, MDA, POL, ROU, SRB, SVK, TPE and UKR, ranging in age from 13-15. The week long school was filled to capacity and conducted by coaches Petr Kinzel, Bogdan Macovei and Tomas Kinzel. Activities included theory and practice of luge, curve dynamics, proper position, preparation and maintenance of equipment, video review and of course daily sliding on the track. With the track in Sigulda fully booked during this week, it meant the luge school had training scheduled everyday only in the evening hours. This allowed for regular physical training sessions with the athletes during the daytime. In addition, the athletes were able to perform start training practice on the refrigerated start ramp adjacent to the track 3 times during the week. For the brand new athletes, these start practice sessions were an important introduction to learning the basics of a proper luge start. While the week was productive and built a solid foundation on which the participants can build for the future, it was felt that more track was needed during the school and that will be a goal for the future.

### **FIL Teams**

A corner stone of the entire FIL Development Program are the two FIL Teams, Group 1 and Group 2. Each group consists of several nations, each of whom may only have one or two athletes each. Because the participating nations are relatively small and may not necessarily have the resources to travel and compete independently, the FIL provides coaches, equipment and transportation. They travel as an autonomous group to both training and races and each FIL Group services a specific population of athlete. Group 1 targets athletes in the general class and consists of both athletes with just one or two years of experience to athletes who are veterans of the WC circuit. Group 2 consists of youth and junior athletes, some in their first year and others who have been sliding for several years. Like Group 1, Group 2 travels together to both training weeks and on the (youth/junior) World Cup circuit.

## Group 2

FIL Group 2 was led by head coach Petr Kinzel along with assistant coaches Bogdan Macovei and Tomas Kinzel. The 2018-2019 season began with a full 5 weeks of training offered at Oberhof, Sigulda, Igls, Koenigssee and Altenberg. Twenty nine athletes from 8 nations including BIH, BUL, CRO, CZE, MDA, SLO, SRB and TPE participated in some or all of the pre-race season training as did several coaches who came to work with their athletes. All the usual activities were part of the daily schedule including physical activities, sled maintenance, video review and start practices whenever possible.

The youth/JWC calendar began with a double JWC in Park City, USA, however flight and travel delays caused by bad weather conditions severely impacted equipment and luggage arrival. It also delayed the FIL coaches arrival by a day. As a result, some athletes missed the first 3 critical on-track training sessions. This of course had a detrimental effect on performance as this was the first time on the Park City track for all FIL group athletes. Unfortunately there wasn't enough time available for these athletes to make up the missed runs, so many participated in the in the two Park City races after receiving only minimal training. Still, 13 athletes from 4 nations (BIH, BUL, CZE and TPE) participated in Park City, showing great tenacity and resilience. The only other pre-Christmas race was also in North America in Calgary, which saw Group 2 participation by BIH, BUL and CZE.

After the New Year, 4 more races remained on the FIL schedule, all in Europe (St. Moritz, Igls, Winterberg and Oberhof). This included ITWs in St. Moritz (in preparation for the 2020 YOG) and in Igls prior to the WJM. Deserving particular mention, athletes from AUS and NZL joined Group 2 for the second half of the race season with the AUS athletes participating in 3 races and NZL in all 4 events.

The ITW and JWC in St. Moritz merits comment due to its status as host of next year's YOG. Because of the large number of participants, a limited number of runs were available to all athletes. This was partially due to the lack of suitable lighting for evening sliding. But despite the large number of athletes, limited training and efforts to learn a brand new track, all Group 2 athletes were able to complete the race. The track was extremely well prepared and in total, 31 athletes from 9 nations in Group 2 took part in St. Moritz.

The efforts of all three Group 2 coaches should be recognized for their tireless efforts working with such a large group of athletes. In almost every respect the Group 2 program is a resounding success and much of it is thanks to the coaching staff. In total, Group 2 athletes took 3359 runs throughout the season.

## Group 1

FIL Group 1 was led by Head Coach Robert Taleanu with Assistant Coach Yuriy Hayduk. As is traditionally the case after an Olympic year, the number of athletes participating with Group 1 is significantly smaller than with Group 2. This year saw 10 athletes from 7 different nations taking part (AUS, BIH, BUL, GBR, NED, SLO and TPE).

The Group 1 season calendar began with 5 scheduled ITW weeks, Altenberg, Oberhof, Igls, Koenigssee and Sigulda. Regretfully, participation in the Altenberg ITW by Group 1 had to be cancelled due to lack of participation. All other weeks had attendance of anywhere between 3-5 athletes.

The World Cup race season got underway with 4 races schedule before the Christmas break, including a North American swing (Igls, Whistler, Calgary and Lake Placid). As is usually the case, the Igls WC saw the largest turnout from Group 1 with a total of 10 athletes competing.

After New Years, an additional 6 WC races were scheduled in Koenigssee, Sigulda, Winterberg, Altenberg, Oberhof and Sochi. Special recognition should go to Ziga Birus of SLO who took part in every race week as part of Group 1 as well as every ITW with the exception of one. Alex Ferlazzo of AUS also participated in all events

with Group 1 prior to departing to slide independently in the second half of the season. In total, the 10 athletes of Group 1 took a total of 860 runs for the season with 6 different athletes each qualifying for at least one WC.

### **Patenschaft Program**

The FIL Patenschaft program is a means by which athletes from a smaller “weaker” nation can partner with a larger “stronger” nation and receive coaching and other benefits from the larger nation. The FIL provides financial support to the host nation for expenses incurred throughout the season. This is believed to be a very positive program that hopefully benefits both participating nations. The nations who taking part in the Patenschaft Program in 2018-19 include: AUT/SWE (1), GER/POL (9), GER/SUI (3), USA/ARG (1), USA/SVK (7).

### **Vouchers**

The voucher program is a popular form of FIL support that benefits every member nation who participates in training during a season. Valued at €25, the vouchers can be used at any track toward training costs. At most tracks, the cost of one luge run is €25 euros so there is a one to one ratio. At some tracks however, the per run cost is higher and extra vouchers can be used to make up the additional cost difference. For the 2018-19 season, a total of 15,000 vouchers were distributed to NFs totaling an allocation of equivalent to €375,000. Vouchers are distributed to nations based on a number of factors such as need, participation and team size.

### **Transportation**

Understanding the cost of travel and transportation, the FIL provides additional support to some nations toward transportation costs to ensure their participation in competitions and training.

In addition, each federation participating in overseas World Cup events receives an allocation toward flight support. As a special request by some nations, additional flight support is awarded as well.

### **Equipment and material purchase**

The FIL understands the need for up to date, quality equipment and as such, provides nations with support to obtain the necessary equipment to ensure safe and reliable participation in WC events. Suit/shoe/glove sets are made available to developing teams as are in many cases funding for the purchase of sleds to help strengthen these nations domestically.

### **Coaches**

The greatest support the FIL provides in terms of coaching is the use by developing nations of the FIL coaches. The FIL funds 100% of the cost for 3 coaches at the junior level and 2 at the general class level for use by nations that do not have the resources to fund their own coaching staff. Additionally, on limited occasions the FIL will also help fund the cost of a coach for an individual nation. For 2018-2019 these nations have included BIH, CZE, GBR, KAZ, SUI and SWE.

### **Race Support**

Perhaps one of the most significant forms of support provided by the FIL to all nations is the race accommodation support. The FIL provides €500 for each athlete at a WC event for up to 4 athletes per nation. This is a significant way for NFs to offset their weekly costs and will continue to be a part of the FIL support program.

### **Conclusion**

The FIL has made significant efforts to try and alleviate the increasing costs borne by NF's to have their athletes participate in the sport of luge. Though it is financial impossible to address all the needs of every nation, there are many programs in place to help relieve the burden of travel, training, equipment and accommodations for developing nations. Costs will continue to be a main topic of concern moving forward.

It was very encouraging this past season to see such robust participation in FIL Group 2. At times the sheer number of athletes was almost overwhelming to the coaching staff and to the tracks themselves. In the future we must be very careful that the numbers don't get so large that athletes are not receiving the attention they need and deserve from the coaches. This is both from a performance and safety perspective. It also inspires faith in a positive future of the sport to see such a diversity of nations taking part at the junior levels. This will continue to be encouraged and we must strive to strengthen the developing nations who have just one or two athletes and at the same time continue to bring new nations into the international luge family. Indeed participation at the junior level is very positive and these athletes must be properly nurtured and supported in order to ensure longevity in their luge careers. The numbers we are seeing now at the junior level must now be parlayed into increased numbers in the general class.

Group 1 continues to be a critical avenue towards helping developing nations compete at the WC level. However the problem of diminishing numbers must be solved. Part of the reduced numbers seen this year can be attributed to the trend seen historically when numbers drop following an Olympic season. But numbers are not the only solution, we will continue to provide Group 1 athletes with the training opportunities that will help them become better athletes. But athletes must take advantage of those opportunities. No longer will it be acceptable for athletes to begin their season at the first race. All FIL Team athletes will be required to attend a minimum of at least 2 scheduled training weeks prior to the first race. And any athlete that attends a training week that is funded by the FIL must also then participate in the WC race scheduled at that track during that season. These and other policy changes regarding the day to day functioning of the FIL Teams will be implemented next season to help improve the overall quality and quantity of every athlete's training.

Another concept to consider in the future is separate junior and general class training weeks on the calendar. Often ITW weeks are booked up by so many teams that only a minimal amount of runs are available. This may be acceptable to more experienced, elite athletes who may not need many runs, but for youth and juniors, run volume is critical to their improvement.

Deadlines for registration or notification of participation will be in place next season making NFs more responsible for providing information in a timely manner. We also hope to see the return of TUR to luge as they were forced to withdraw at the last minute last season due to internal political issues in their country. Lastly, the FIL Development program will continue to focus on where the needs lie, and that is with the "developing" nations that are the backbone of the sport and truly need the support for their own survival and the overall global success of the FIL.