

From [www.chroniclejournal.com](http://www.chroniclejournal.com)

## Local Sports

### Scaling back

By Brody Mark

Wednesday, November 19, 2008

The Thunder Bay National Team Development Centre (NTDC) van is a little less packed these days. Higher standards cast down from Cross Country Canada has downsized the team from last year's group of nine to just five this year. Time will tell if it means the team will grow closer due to its smaller population.

"Last year we had a pretty good team and we all gelled pretty cohesively," said Jesse Winter, one of just two returnees from last year's team along with Michael Somppi. "There's benefits to having a big team, there's benefits to having a small team."

Joining Winters and Somppi are two locals in Luke Viljakainen and Christina Groulx. Toronto's Harry Seaton rounds out the five-man crew.

Somppi is just in his second season with the team, Winters his fourth. Because of the time put in wearing the uniform, the two have been pegged as leaders.

"Not so much a leader, but leading by example is what I expect out of those guys," said head coach Eric Bailey after just arriving from a training session in Nipigon. "When I explain that to them, then they know they're being watched so it kind of ups their game. . . because they know the newbies are watching."

The jump from a club team to NTDC is a big one. And one both Viljakainen (Big Thunder) and Groulx (Big Thunder and Lappe) have made. Making the commitment has meant some sacrifices.

"You can't do a lot of school, that's changed," said Viljakainen, 19. "Basically my whole lifestyle. Every decision you make is about skiing."

That said, he's fine with his selection.

"You can do school whenever you want," added the geology student at Lakehead University. "You can only do this now."

Along with the job-like mentality that comes along with being a member of the team, Bailey says new members also deal with a little bit of a reality check.

"They always say the biggest difference is being surrounded by other athletes," said Bailey.

"Generally, when they come from their clubs, they were the top dogs. They were at the top of the totem pole and when they come here, they're at the bottom of the totem pole."

That's where Winter and Somppi step in. Winter says what he tries to impart on the newcomers is



balance. Using school or another hobby as a getaway from time to time isn't a bad thing.

"We are 24-hour athletes now, this is what we do," Winter said. "But if you only do that, you can burn out."

As for goals, the team has plenty of them. The major ones include earning a spot at the world junior championships and world under-23 championships, both set for France in late January and early February.

Winter badly wants another shot at the under-23 championship. In his first appearance at the event last year, a sub-par performance came as a result of mononeucleosis diagnosed immediately following the trip.

"While I was there, I knew something wasn't quite right," he said. "I wasn't racing very well and it was kind of a relief to find out what it was. This year I'm going back and I have bit of an axe to grind."

The five-man NTDC squad will open their season Dec. 5-7 in a North American (NorAm) Cup event held in Sovereign Lake, B.C.

Copyright © Wednesday, November 19, 2008 All material contained herein is copyrighted by  
The Chronicle Journal, a division of Continental Newspapers Canada Ltd.  
All Rights Reserved.