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NATURAL TRACK LUGE

Q: What is natural track luge?

A: Natural track luge, or naturbahn as it is known in German, is a sister sport to artificial track luge, which is the luge sport contested in the Winter Olympic Games. Natural track consists of luge racing on a flat, curved course, usually winding through a forested or wooded area. While not an Olympic sport, natural track does have its own international circuit that consists of World Championship, World Cup, national and regional races. It can be said that natural track is the original form of the sport dating back hundreds of years. It is currently utilized as a stepping stone to the Olympic luge program offering "on -ice" experience to novice athletes as well as a competitive National Team.

Q: How does natural track differ from artificial track, or Olympic luge?

A: While the two sports are very similar, they also differ in many ways:

Tracks

A natural track luger guides a sled through unbanked curves down a flat, twisting natural ice track. Conversely, artificial track luge uses high tech, artificially refrigerated courses with high banked curves that sometimes put the athlete in a perpendicular position to the ground. In the summer, the only part of a natural track luge course that would be seen are the vertical wooden walls on the outside of some curves and an earth path winding down a mountain. Artificial tracks look exactly as they do in the winter, just without the ice surface. They are made completely out of concrete and can be very imposing structures. Natural tracks tend to have a large number of curves, as many as 29 or more, putting an emphasis on driving ability while artificial tracks usually have 14-19 curves.

Sleds

Natural and artificial track sleds, though somewhat similar in outward appearance, are actually quite different. A natural track sled can not be used on an artificial track and vice versa.

Natural track sleds tend to be more flexible, or steerable, than artificial track sleds since they do not have banked curves to help them negotiate the track. For the same reason, they also have extremely sharp runner edges in order to carve through turns while artificial track athletes strive to have their runners as dull as possible (to reduce friction) while still having enough edge to maintain control.

Since the surface of a natural track course can be a combination of ice and snow, the runner surface on a natural track sled is similar to that of a ski. It has a plastic middle section with sharp steel edges on the outsides of the runner. The steel edges are advantageous for driving through tight curves while the plastic middle section makes them fast on snow covered straightaways.

Natural track sleds also have two other major differences: a steering rein and seat horn/side plates. The rein is used for extra steering power while the seat horn/side plates help keep the athlete secure in the sled during extreme steering. Speeds in natural track can hit as high as 60 mph while in artificial track they are normally 70-90 mph.

Q: Is a natural track sled steered the same way as an artificial track sled?

A: Yes and no. The basic mechanics of steering the sleds are similar but how this is achieved is different. On natural track sleds, the athlete can steer the sled several different ways: steering rein, leg pressure on the front of the runners, leaning to the side and dragging a hand outside the sled, and sitting up and digging race shoes equipped with spikes into the ground. Artificial track sleds are steered by putting pressure on the front of the runner with the inside of the ankle/lower calf, putting downward pressure on the back of the sled with the shoulders, pulling or pushing on the handles of the sled or rolling the head.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the two is that in artificial track the athlete tries to keep a flat aerodynamic position all the time while in natural track, changing position by alternating sitting up, laying back and leaning are an integral part of steering the sled.

Q: Is there a natural luge course in the US?

A: USA Luge's natural track program is based at Lucy Hill in Negaunee, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It is the only certified natural ice track in the United States receiving international FIL certification in March of 1992.

The Lucy Hill track, site of many national and international competitions, is 812.8 meters long with 29 curves and is one of only five lighted natural track courses in the world.

In Muskegon, Michigan there is also a luge track used primarily by the local Muskegon Luge Club. Though technically classified as an "artificial" track, because it has banked curves, the track is not currently refrigerated and is used for training and local competitions. It is approximately 400 meters long and is not certified for international competitions. Refrigeration may be in its future.

Q: Will natural track luge become an Olympic sport?

A: In November of 2002, the International Olympic Committee decided not to include natural track luge in the program for the 2006 Olympic Games in Torino, Italy, so for now at least, natural track will not have Olympic status but will continue with annual World Cup and World Championship competitions.

Q: Where does natural track fit into the USA Luge sports program?

A: Natural track is an integral part of the USA Luge Recruitment and Development Program.

Natural Track is used to introduce new aspiring athletes to luge who will eventually move on to artificial track. Many athletes just getting started in the sport, primarily those recruited through the USA Luge Slider Search, receive their first sliding experience on the Lucy Hill track in Negaunee, Michigan. The most promising athletes are then referred to artificial track programs for further training and evaluation by USA Luge coaches. Some go on to be named to an artificial track team.

