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FLYING KANGAROOS ARE UP, UP AND AWAY IN BEIDA LAKE

Bigger and better is the overall goal for the Freestyle Aerials team this weekend for the first World Cup in Beida Lake, China as the season gets underway with the opening event of seven competitions at six different venues spread out across Asia, Europe and North America.

Australia's team of Dave Morris, Danielle Scott, Laura Peel and Samantha Wells finished two weeks training in Ruka, Finland, which included hours jumping on snow daily, before heading to China for back-to-back competitions on December 17 and 18, 2016, at China's Beida Lake resort.

Danielle Scott, who finished with a series overall second place last season and third the previous season says she has, "one step to go".

"We've been making the jumps bigger and better. We're just going to work with doubles at the highest degree of difficulty, maxing out the scores," Danielle said.

"Beida Lake is the first event and I want nice, clean jumps every round."

With a start list that could number up to 35 women, going clean and making the final 12 will be a huge confidence booster for the Flying Kangaroos, none more so than 2015 World Champion, Laura Peel who is returning to competition after recovering from ankle surgery last season.

"Until Finland, it had been 620 days since I jumped on snow. It was a long rehab and the ankle handles snow better than the impact of the water jump," a happy Laura said from China yesterday.

"I've come back well. It was hard work getting back physically – now it's also about mentally getting in the swing of things. I'm excited about the weekend."

Asked about her goal for the weekend, the experienced World Champion was straight to the point; "Land facing forwards."

Last year was a breakthrough season for Newcastle's Samantha Wells, who made her first podium with a silver in Deer Valley, USA and as far as Sam is concerned, the only way is up.

"Last year I became more consistent but there were areas of my jumping that weren't receiving the scores. I spent the Australian winter working on the height and landing of my jumping. My form scores well, but I need more air," Samantha explained.

"Carrying the basic elements of a quality jump with an increasing degree of difficulty is what I'm after. For me, it's about focussing on executing the improvements that have been made."

Sochi 2014 Olympic Games silver medallist Dave Morris is as candid as ever when asked about his preparation going into Beida Lake.

“Not great. Worst preparation ever. Ruka started well then I suffered a torn quad muscle, which affected my knee resulting in nearly two weeks off. I haven’t done any triples at all,” he said.

A philosophical Morris said the injury is not overly serious but has suppressed his natural ‘go-for-it’ approach to every event.

“In my career, I’ve got away without any major injuries. It’s my turn I guess.

“I’d like to start the year off with a bang and do big tricks but realistically I have to get through these two events (in Beida Lake) with nice, safe doubles and build up through the season.”

“It’s a training event and we’ve solidified what I’ve got already. I can’t throw my body around,” the 32-year-old said.

There will be more coming, not least because Morris will not be satisfied until he goes for five twists in an event.

“From earlier this year, I started really practising doing five twists on the snow to potentially do it at an Olympics. Everyone in the Super Final had five except me.”

“We’ve trained five properly this year and I’d like that in my back pocket.”

Morris took a year off after Sochi and says, “I would not be happy with my career if I didn’t do five twists and three flips – or at least try it.”

The competition for the podium will be stiff as the Chinese look to reassert their team having dipped from the high placements in the 2010-14 period to only one man in the top ten last season and one woman in the top five.

The top stories of last season were an Eastern European surge on the men’s side, and the second-straight US crystal globe on the ladies’. The Russian team is also one to watch out for.

Oleksandr Abramenko, a decade-long tour veteran found a newfound consistency to capture the first-ever Freestyle crystal globe of any kind for Ukraine, whilst American Ashley Caldwell improved from second-best in 2014/15 to win last season’s crystal globe - the second in a row for the young USA ladies team.

With seven podiums in 10 events over the past two seasons and a penchant for performing the most difficult jumps, Caldwell is the one to chase, but not without competition from Danielle Scott, who has been pipped by the American on the podium the past two years.

While less explosive than Caldwell, Scott’s clean technique and consistency puts her in a position to podium at nearly every event she enters. In the five seasons on the World Cup, Scott has only finished outside of the top-10 seven times.

From Beida Lake, the Aerials World Cup hits its US swing, first at historic Lake Placid just after the holidays and then on to the classic showdown in Deer Valley in early February.

As with all of the events under the FIS Freestyle Skiing umbrella (except for big air), the season truly ends for the top aerials athletes in the world at the 2017 Freestyle World Ski Championships in Sierra Nevada, Spain, in March.

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