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## **BIG WINTER WEEKEND FOR AUSTRALIAN PYEONGCHANG HOPEFULS**

Forget about the warm weather and summer for the Aussies looking to qualify for the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics. It's all snow and ice in a power-packed few days as World Cups and Grand Prix Final events dominate the icy European sports calendar this weekend.

Kicking off on Thursday night in France are Ski Cross athletes Sami-Kennedy-Sim and Anton Grimus at Val Thorrens who are looking to qualify in the season's first World Cup in a re-vamped competition schedule that has six World Cups in 15 days.

Still in France are Australia's new wonder pair skating team, Harley Windsor and Ekaterina Alexandrovskaya, who will compete in the ISU Junior Grand Prix Final in Marseille early tomorrow morning (2.25AM AEDT).

The 20-year-old indigenous skater from Sydney's western suburbs and his Russian-born 16-year-old partner shocked the figure skating world with their surprise gold medal at the Junior Grand Prix in Tallinn, Estonia, qualifying 7th best in the world and scoring a berth in the prestigious final six world when a Russian team withdrew due to injury.

Australia's Short Track team are in action in Shanghai, the third World Cup this season.

Deanna Lockett came away with a top ten ranking in the 1500m in Salt Lake City in November and says she is, "working to match my strength with my racing skills. I feel like I'm taking small steps forward but I need to focus on my racing in the lead up to the next event."

In the Men's Short Track – the tight-knit group of Pierre Boda, Andy Jung and Alex Bryant are looking to capitalise on their past top 20 performances.

The ice has more to offer with newly-crowned National Figure Skating Champions Brendan Kerry and Kailani Craine competing in the final ISU Challenger event in Zagreb, Croatia.

Craine is topping up her competitions this season having already bagged a silver medal in Warsaw and bronze in Latvia last month. She faces stiff competition with the return of 2014 Sochi bronze medallist and 2012 World Champion Carolina Kostner and 2016 US Champion Gracie Gold.

Kerry, who landed a magnificent quad salchow jump in last week's nationals has been on the invite-only Grand Prix circuit but needs competition ranking points ahead of the World Championships next March.

The technically gifted skater knows he needs his quad jumps but there's always two sides to a figure skater.

"I've worked a lot on the component side of my skating, as well as my spins and steps. It's headed in the right direction," Kerry said after the National Championships last week.

Long track speed skater Daniel Greig is fresh from a silver medal in the 500m B Division in Astana, Kazakhstan last weekend, lifting his ranking and qualifying for the A Division. Greig headed straight back to his Netherlands base to prepare for the A Division showdown with the world's best in Heerenveen early Saturday morning (3.15Am AEDT).

The always entertaining Moguls World Cups are a physical and technical contest like no other. The OWIA Moguls team have been ensconced in Ruka, Finland, ahead of their assault on their first World Cup just after midnight Sunday (AEDT).

First to hit the bumps in the qualifying rounds is Britt Cox, Australia's first female World Cup medallist in mogul skiing.

World moguls men's number two Matt Graham, who had a breakthrough with his first career victory last season, and teammate Brodie Summers make it to the starting blocks around 2AM on Sunday morning. All three skiers will be looking to make it to the final 16 and top 6 from 6.30am on Sunday morning.

Australia's biathlon hopefuls will be on course in Ridnaun, Italy, for the IBU Cup 2 with Youth Olympic Games athlete Darcie Morton and brother Damon combining for the single mixed relay on Thursday evening. The duo will then back up for the sprint event on Friday with Daniel Walker joining them.

In a positive sign for the growth of biathlon in Australia, seven up-and-coming youngsters will take to the snow in Lenzerheide, Switzerland for the Junior IBU Cup 1.

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