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WINTER OLYMPICS SUPPLEMENT

Free to Fly

CrossFit athlete A.J. Kemppainen will take to the air as freeskiing is contested for the first time at the Olympics.

By Chris Cooper

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Matthew Stockman/Getty Images

*A.J. Kemppainen competes in a World Cup halfpipe event in Park City, Utah, in 2009.
In 2014, halfpipe and slopestyle skiing events will be contested at the Olympics for the first time.*

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A skier at 5. Twin-tip skis at 12. Sponsors at 15. Pro card at 17. CrossFit at 23. The Olympics at 24.

Freeskier A.J. Kemppainen grew up on skis. Raised in the ski-resort town of Ruka, Finland, Kemppainen has done most of his skiing under the dark sky in the wintertime. When he moved to Helsinki last summer, he found CrossFit Basement. He said CrossFit training helped prepare him physically and mentally, and he continues to do stretching and mobility work while competing.

This will be freeskiing's debut at the Winter Olympics, and Kemppainen will be front and center. Ranked among the top contenders for a medal, Kemppainen won a World Cup event in August in New Zealand. Now he's headed for Sochi, Russia.

"It's a dream come true to go there in my own sport," he said. "I'm very excited. It's so cool. I'm always watching moguls and snowboarding in the Olympics."

In addition to new events for biathletes and figure skaters, among others, the Sochi Olympics will boast two new events for freestyle skiers: slopestyle and halfpipe. Both events are extremely popular in the X Games and similar competitions, and they were added to the Sochi menu following the success of slopestyle and halfpipe snowboarding at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada.

Both competitions are judged events focusing on big air and tricks performed with "twin-tip" skis that allow the athlete to travel facing forward or backward. The slopestyle course at Sochi will be 635 m long, with rails and kickers (jumps) arranged over five descending levels. The Sochi halfpipe will feature 22-ft. walls, the largest ever in Olympic competition.

The repetitive jumping, landing and rotation in all planes is extremely taxing in both events. After bracing for takeoff, jumping as high as possible and performing complicated aerial acrobatics, athletes experience forces at landing that can be as great as those in a triple-body-weight back squat. And skiers have only seconds between tricks.

Kemppainen's CrossFit workouts have helped most with his endurance, he said.



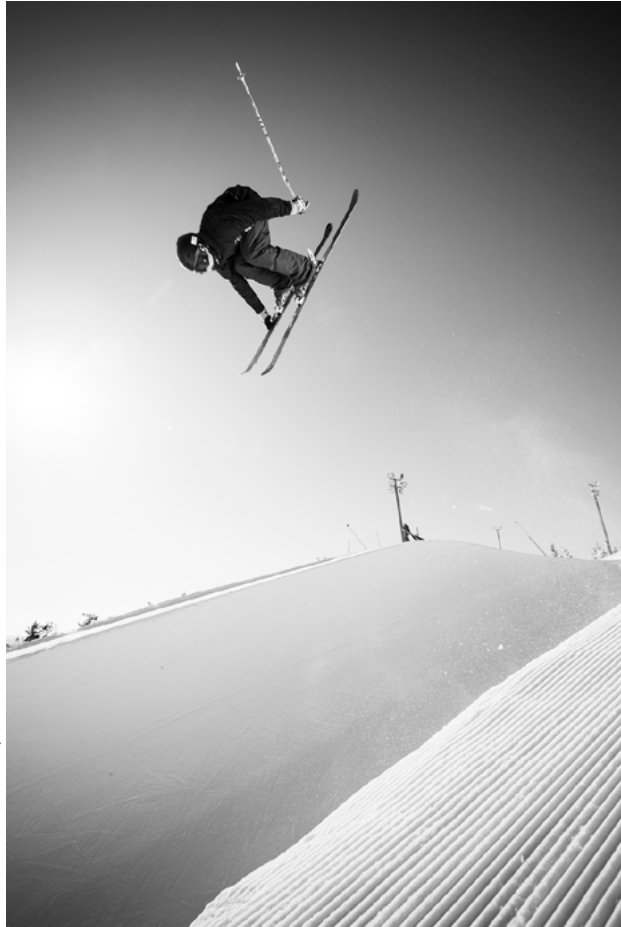
Ville-Petteri Mänttä/ville-petteri.com

Big tricks require a great deal of strength, power, agility and balance, making CrossFit an ideal training program for freestyle athletes.

"My basic endurance is better, and also I feel like the recovery time is a lot faster after skiing now," he said. "When you think of the mental side, in CrossFit you have to really push yourself, and it's sort of the same thing when you go skiing. When you have to try a trick for the first time and you're scared, it's not just physical."

Faster recovery time will help Kemppainen at the Olympics, where qualifying and final rounds occur with less rest than at World Cup events.

"Our competitions go usually two days: one for qualifying, one for final. In the Olympics, everything happens in the same day, so you have to have good endurance for that. I believe CrossFit will help me in that. I can ski the full day," he said.



Ville-Petteri Määttä/ville-petteri.com



In Sochi, Russia, Kemppainen will be take to the skies via a monster 22-ft. halfpipe.

As the world gathers around televisions to watch the world's best athletes, Kemppainen will enjoy the added support of the CrossFit community.

"Freeskiing and CrossFit are also sort of the same in that aspect: it's a very tight community. It's very important that you work out with your friends, but you go freeskiing usually with your friends, and that's the most important thing in both sports: a good group of people who push each other."

Kemppainen is set to compete on Feb. 18 in the halfpipe event. The finals will take place about three hours after the qualifying round. Exact times and a full schedule for the Olympic freeskiing competition can be found on the [Sochi Olympics website](#).



About the Author

Chris Cooper is a writer for CrossFit. He owns [CrossFit Catalyst](#) in Sault Ste. Marie, Canada.