

Photo of Emma Fowler only on the original!

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Biathlon: Army chef scrambles to the cause in bid for Olympics

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- Briton shooting for 2010 games
- World Cup events are first target

Emma Fowler can knock up scrambled eggs for 1,700 soldiers in a war zone, but that is not the only skill the 27-year-old has learnt during her 12 years in the Army.

In February, she became the first British woman to compete in the biathlon in a Winter Olympics and as this season gathers pace with two World Cup races in Austria this week, Fowler has her sights trained on the next Games, in Canada, in 2010. "I'm really a chef, but in 1997 I had a go in the Royal Logistics Corps Ski Championships," she said. "Someone from the women's cross-country ski team spotted me and it snowballed from there."

Biathlon, though, is more than skiing. Competitors have a .22 rifle strapped to their back and after each loop of the course they must fire five shots from 50 metres at targets the size of a golf ball, from standing and prone positions.

"That bit is harder than you might imagine because you have to steady your breathing to keep the rifle from wobbling," Fowler said. "Missing even one target brings a stiff penalty. If you don't shoot well, you're not in the reckoning."

In Italy, where the Olympic biathlon took place, Fowler's gun craft was disappointingly wayward. "I missed a lot of targets," she said. "I felt a bit down about it, but I know that what I learnt from that will stand me in good stead for the next Games."

First, though, come the World Cup adventures, which were originally scheduled to be staged in Slovakia but have been moved to Hochfilzen, Austria because of the mild weather. "There's no snow in Slovakia, which is hopeless for us," Fowler said. "But that's global warming for you."

Nonetheless, the thin air at all the venues is one thing that does not change. "We have to train several months of the year at high altitude, which makes biathlon a pretty unusual sport for British people to get into," she said. "There's very little funding and without the support of the Army I wouldn't have had a hope of reaching elite level."

Originally from the village of Cannington, near Taunton, in Somerset, Fowler believes that her dedication and training are paying off. “There isn’t much of a gap in biathlon between the top 60 places,” she said. “We can be separated by under two minutes. My goal is to consistently make the top 60 this season.”

Fowler, who finished 83rd in the final of the 15km individual event yesterday and who races in the 7.5km sprint tomorrow, believes that that kind of form would persuade her senior officers that she is worth backing for the next Winter Olympics. “By then I reckon I could be pushing towards the top 15,” she said.

If not, Fowler may be heading back to base to rejoin the 1 Logistic Support Regiment, probably in Germany. Or, perhaps, it will be Iraq, where she was stationed in 2003. “It wasn’t too bad because we were only assisting the more advanced regiments,” she said. “After a month of living on ration packs, the cooking tasted pretty good. We operated from what looked like a massive tent factory.”

Fowler was on breakfast duty. “The scrambled eggs went into giant pots, then we put them in containers that went out to the different regiments,” she said. “It was quite an operation in itself.”

The early morning shift left plenty of time for fitness work, and with a little imagination, Fowler spread the biathlon bug. “I heard that one of the regiments had some roller skis and poles,” she said. “That’s what biathletes use to train during the summer months, so I went over there, taught a few people and we ended up spending hours going round and round the airfield. It was good fun.”

It is best, she said, to keep moving in the sub-zero temperatures that are common on big race days. “We’ve done World Cups when it’s been -17C,” Fowler said. “You have to make sure there isn’t too much wax on the rifle, otherwise it will stick, and a good warm-up is key. That will keep your body heated up enough and, anyway, as you start feeling the pain from the exertion you forget about the cold.”

Ice burn on her face is what Fowler dislikes most, but that, she claims dismissively, will never be enough to stop her pursuit of the German, Russian, Norwegian and French women who dominate the world rankings. “I don’t care if I can’t open my mouth after a race because it’s so stiff and cold,” she said. “The challenge and sense of achievement — and pushing yourself to the limit — is everything.”