

Going for gold in Vancouver

FINALLY! The Vancouver Winter Olympics are here. A dream for every athlete and a feast for all sports fanatics, including myself.

This is what most athletes work for. Countless hours of training, hundreds of competitions, months spent away from home. Blood, sweat and tears, injuries and comebacks. It's all there.

Finns have a special place in their hearts for the Olympics. We hosted the Summer Olympics in Helsinki in 1952, and we love the Winter Olympics because they tend to bring us a bunch of medals.

In Vancouver, the Finnish team's official goal is 12 medals.

I say we'll get more, and here's why.



Pekka Mustonen

Our flagship will be women's cross-country skiing. Aino-Kaisa Saarinen, Virpi Kuitunen, Pirjo Muranen, Riitta-Liisa Roponen and Riikka Sarasoja will rake in half a dozen of medals in individual events and relay.

Don't count out the men of cross-country either. Matti Heikkinen has been in good form all year. Sami Jauhojärvi, Ville Nousiainen, Matias Strandvall and Kalle Lassila have also

Finland will get more than 12 medals in the Winter Olympics.

shown glimpses of excellence. Expect at least two individual medals and some good news from the relays.

Finland has always been strong in the Nordic combined, i.e. ski-jumping combined with cross-country skiing. Hannu Manninen has made an incredible comeback from his year off. After devoting some time to his studies, he is still winning races. Last year's World Cup winner, Anssi Koivuranta, can beat everyone on a good day. And don't forget Janne Rynnänen and Jaakko Tallus either. These guys will go for gold in the relay.

We are also a ski-jumping superpower. Austria is the odds-on favourite this year, but the Finnish team shouldn't be discounted. Janne Ahonen's comeback has electrified the jumping scene. His sensational second place in the traditional Four Hills competition makes Ahonen a gold contend-

er. On a good day Harri Olli is a medal contender as well. The Finnish team will bring home at least two medals.

Ice hockey is pretty much our national sport. I watched in agony as Sweden beat us in the finals in Torino in 2006. We won't see a repeat of that. Add on a medal in women's ice hockey, and the puck-hungry nation will be partying.

Take away the puck, change the shape of the skates, dress the men in unitards and you have two more medal contenders: Mika Poutala and Pekka Koskela. These guys have some seriously powerful thighs that can bring us two additional medals.

I am also hopeful about our alpine stars, despite the absence of "retired" slalom guru Kalle Palander. Tanja Poutiainen is certainly going for gold. Sanni Leinonen and Markus Sandell are strong. The snowboarders are definitely in top form. Watch for Peetu Piironen, Markku Koski, Antti Autti, Risto Mattila, Janne Korpi and Markus Malin.

In addition to these contenders I also predict that we might snatch a medal or two in the following disciplines: figure skating (Laura Lepistö, Kiira Korpi, Susanna Pöykiö, Ari-Pekka Nurmenkari), biathlon (Kaisa Mäkäräinen), freestyle (Tapio Luusua, Mikko Ronkainen) and freestyle ski cross (Samu Ruoppa, Jouni Pellinen, Juha Haukkala).

In conclusion, my guess is that Finland will get more than 12 medals in Vancouver. Call me an optimist, but if everything works out in our favour, Finland will come home with five gold medals, five silver medals and five bronze medals. You heard it here first! ■■■

Alexander Stubb is Finland's minister of foreign affairs and a sports fanatic. He'll be watching the Games in Vancouver.