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their third Olympics and will headline a team that carries the U.S.'s highest medal hopes in decades.

"I do think we're much better prepared than we ever have been before," Freeman said yesterday. "I think we've got one of the strongest teams probably since the '70s going in. So, I feel really excited about going in."

Pete Vordenberg, head coach of the U.S. team, concurred.

"Four years ago in Torino, I made myself a promise that I'd never go to the Olympics with a team that wasn't prepared and ready for success," he said. "And I think that we have achieved that goal. We're going to the Olympics with a team that is very well prepared and we are ready for success."

Freeman could be a big part of that success. He finished last season with a fourth-place finish in the 15-kilometer classic at the World Championships. And through the first period of this World Cup season, Freeman has come tantalizingly close to gracing the podium. He began the season with a 22nd-place finish in a 15K freestyle in Norway, then took fourth place in a 15K classic in Finland and a seventh place in a 15K freestyle in Switzerland. Then earlier this month he claimed his 13th national title.

In between those races, however, it wasn't all smooth tracks.

About a year ago, at a World Cup race at the Olympic cross-country ski-

ing venue at Whistler, Freeman suffered a recurrence of compartment syndrome, a condition he had surgery for in 2001. The muscles in his lower legs had outgrown their casings, causing him excruciating pain during the race. He gutted out the rest of the season, then had surgery again in March.

"The recovery took a long time, but it was also in a time of the year that I could rest," Freeman said. "I kind of made it a goal to be ready to join the ski team again in New Zealand for our July camp, and I met that goal and I felt great by the time I got there. And things have just been getting better and better since."

Freeman, a Type 1 diabetic, suffered another temporary setback in December, when he had to drop out of a World Cup 30K in mid-race when his blood sugar dropped dangerously low after he tried a different insulin dosing strategy. So at Nationals this month, he stopped during the 30K race to test his glucose. Stopping may have cost him the national title (he finished second), but the information he gleaned from the less-aggressive insulin strategy has put him on the right course for Vancouver.

There, he'll compete in distance events (15K, 30K, and 50K), with the hope of becoming the first U.S. cross-country skier since Bill Koch in 1976 to earn an Olympic medal.

He'll be joined on the Olympic team by Koos, along with James Southam and Vermont's Andy Newell, both two-time Olympians. Randall leads the women's squad, along with first-timers Morgan Arritola, Caitlin Compton, and Vermont's Liz Stephen.

In Freeman's first Olympic Games in 2002 in Salt Lake City, Utah, he was part of the fifth-place relay team, the top American finish ever in an Olympic relay. He also placed 15th in the 20K pursuit, 22nd in the 15K classic, and 41st in the freestyle sprint. In the 2006 Games in Torino, Italy, Freeman placed 22nd in the 15K classic and 61st in the 50K freestyle.

"My own preparation has been kind of built around being well rested and just staying on top of my health – that being the No. 1 priority – not trying to overdo it," Freeman said. "And so far it's worked out really well."

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Kris Freeman Hasn't Let Diabetes Stop Him

A Concord Monitor Editorial
By Concord Monitor staff

From the January 8 Concord Monitor

For most people, cross-country skiing is a way to enjoy the outdoors in winter while getting a bit of exercise. You can join them on trails at White Farm, the Forest Society lands, Carter Hill Orchard, and Beaver Meadow Golf Course or break a new trail in solitude where vistas beckon. But for Concord native and Andover resident Kris Freeman, cross-country skiing is a world-class sport, a way of life, and proof that diabetes doesn't have to end an athlete's career.

Freeman, 29, is one of the most amazing athletes most people have never heard of. He may be the best top-ranked athlete in the world with a serious illness. Unlike Lance Armstrong, who recovered fully after nearly dying from testicular cancer, Freeman's disease, Type 1 diabetes, is chronic.

Freeman wears an insulin pump that allows him to adjust his dosage to meet his body's needs. Those needs change drastically before and during a race.

On [January 6], in the men's 30-kilometer cross-country race at the US National Championships in Anchorage, Alaska, Freeman placed second. He almost certainly would have won, had he not had to stop late in the race to check his insulin level. Earlier in the week, Freeman claimed the championship in the 15K race. It was his 13th national championship.

On February 12, when the 2010 Winter Olympics open in Vancouver, Freeman will be there. Some race fans think he could be the first member of the US team to win an Olympic medal in Nordic skiing since Bill Koch became the first American to do so when he took a silver in 1976.

Freeman documents his attempts to compete despite his disease on his

blog at FasterSkier.com. Here is an excerpt from his December 2 post:

"Race nerves have a dramatic effect on blood sugar. As anxiety rises during race preparation, a small amount of adrenaline is released in the body which triggers the liver to dump sugar into the bloodstream. This is the fight or flight response...."

"As a diabetic I have to balance the fight or flight response on my own. I get nervous before a race and release sugar just like everyone else. Unfortunately my regulatory system is broken, and I have to give myself the appropriate amount of insulin."

"This is where things get tricky. How nervous I am affects how much sugar I release into my body: More nerves equals more glucose. The difficult part is there is no real way to monitor how nervous I am."

If Freeman fails to adjust his insulin level correctly, his blood sugar will become either dangerously high or so low that, in athlete's parlance, he "bonks" and succumbs to sudden severe fatigue.

Thanks to intense training, diet, will power, knowledge, and an indomitable spirit, Freeman manages to be a top competitor despite his disease. His story, which will no doubt be told often during the broadcast of the Olympics, is an inspiration, and not just to diabetics.

More than a decade ago, a small group of friends who were members of the Andover Outing Club decided that they would strive to become Olympians.

Four of them, Jed Hinkley, Carl Van Loan, Justin Freeman, and Kris Freeman made it as cross-country skiers, ski jumpers, or both. Freeman, who learned he had diabetes just before the 2002 Olympics, will compete in his third Olympics next month. Win or lose, his appearance will give hope to everyone with an obstacle in the path to achieving their dreams.

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