

Olympics on the line today for mogul maestros

Tom Kelly, USSA

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS – There was a nervous air at the top of Voo Doo on Tuesday as some of the best moguls skiers in the world came to the start to try their stuff on the bump run that could determine the fate of the U.S. Olympic Team 24 hours later. It will be winner-take-all battle Wednesday afternoon with a single Olympic berth on the line.

Skiers had a two-hour block Tuesday to take practice runs, working on their air packages and getting used to the massive bumps.

“It’s a skier’s course,” said Coach Todd Schirman. “The bumps are big and beefy, and the transitions [to the jumps] really quick.”

The Olympic Trials will determine one team member per discipline and gender. The remainder of the Team, up to four in each event, will be announced January 26 after the remaining five World Cup events.

It was a nervous, pensive scene at the top of Voo Doo Tuesday. Just down from the top on skier’s right, Michelle Roark (Denver) focused and visualized before finally hitting the top air. World Champion Patrick Deneen (Cle Elum, WA) was in his own zone, thinking about what he needed to do to guarantee his spot on the 2010 Olympic Team. Despite a win and a third in her back pocket already, World Cup champion Hannah Kearney (Norwich, VT) was her typical intense self as she mapped out her run.

Skier after skier came to the top, checked in with coaches on the radio, and ripped runs down the massive bump run.

When the competition kicks off on Wednesday, all eyes will be on Bryon Wilson (Butte, MT), a relative unknown who was a late entry into the opening World Cups in Finland where he scored two second place finishes. While Wilson is the clear leader after the opening World Cup weekend, he would love to confirm his spot on Voo Doo.

“The course is rippin’ today,” said Wilson. The bumps are good, the jumps are good and we’ll see what happens tomorrow.”

What does the top-ranked American on the World Cup think it will take to win: “Go fast, go big and just lay down a smokin’ run.”

Wilson is just one member of a well-stacked men’s moguls team with a dozen others ready to take the spot. Among the notables is Deneen, who took the worlds title last year in Japan but was shutout in the Finnish opener. Add to the mix 2005 World Champ Nate Roberts (Park City, UT), returning from an injury and striking the podium in Finland and ready to challenge for a first Olympic spot. And that’s just the beginning. And don’t count out the likes of Michael Morse (Duxbury, MA), Sho Kashima (S. Lake Tahoe, CA), David Babic (Washington, VT) and more.

It isn’t any easier on the women’s side, where Kearney has been the clear front-runner. But a host of others are waiting in the wings to take the spot including Roark, 2002 silver medalist Shannon Bahrke (S. Lake Tahoe, CA) local favorite Emiko Torito (Denver), veteran Shelly Robertson (Reno, NV) and Steamboat’s own Eliza Outtrim who is off to a good start.

Historically, the Olympic Trials have produced winners from among the favorites. But this year’s field is so packed with talent that it’s truly anyone’s ballgame. If a dark horse emerges and wins, it could change the complexion of Olympic qualifying in the remaining five World Cups, including January stops at Deer Valley Resort in Park City, UT and Lake Placid,

NY.

Moguls kicks off with the introductory showcase of athletes at 12:45pm, followed by first run at 1pm. and second run at 2pm. Awards in Goldola Square begin at 3:30pm. followed by Big Head Todd and the Monsters.