

Rahlves 13th in Italy skiercross

By Tom Kelly, USSA

INNICHEN/SAN CANDIDO, Italy – Casey Puckett (Aspen, CO) kicked off the ski cross World Cup season in a big way Monday, taking third to mark the fourth skiercross podium of his career in northern Italy. Daron Rahlves (Sugar Bowl, CA) was 13th and newcomer Caitlin Ciccone (Littleton, NH) 28th in her finals debut.

Overall, it was a sensational day for Puckett and showed how much his hard work over the summer – both in conditioning and working on starts – could pay off this season. After qualifying third despite several mistakes, he battled his way to win his first three heats to make it to finals.

“Any time you’re on the podium you have to be happy,” said Puckett. “But I’m hungry for my first World Cup win.”

“Every time Casey qualifies fast he’s confident,” said U.S. Head Ski Cross Coach Tyler Shepherd. “And he has a lot of confidence coming through now.”

In his first heat (round of 32), Puckett won the start and had a clean course ahead of him. He made just one mistake – going long off a jump – but was able to hang on for the win.

“The course here is easy without a lot of terrain or passing points,” said Shepherd. “So the start is critical and skiing a mistake-free run.”

In the quarter-finals (round of 16), he again won the start but the field was packed tighter. Puckett won the holeshot and stayed ahead for another win, boosting him into the semis.

Puckett’s teammate Rahlves looked to have the semi-finals made

with a strategic mid-course pass, but was passed back going into the finish and didn't move on. Rahlves finished 13th.

"There's no reason he shouldn't have been in the semis," said Shepherd. "What would have been great is he would have then skied the heat with Casey and they could have worked together to make the finals. But watch for Daron tomorrow. He's cleaned up a few things with his line and I would expect him to qualify higher and be a factor."

While Schmid rode a clean course to the win, Puckett battled French skier Xavier Kuhn all the way. Puckett nearly got by the Frenchman on the second turn, but had to adjust his line so they didn't cross tips.

"There's really no passing possibilities on this course," said Shepherd, "so Casey was just hoping for a little mistake to find the window in the finals."

In addition to strong performances by the workhorses Puckett and Rahlves, Shepherd was thrilled with the women's finish, which saw former U.S. Alpine Ski Team racer Ciccone crack into the finals for the first time, finishing 28th.

"This was a great confidence builder for Caitlin," said Shepherd. "While she's been racing for a while, today was the first time she ever qualified into heats to race against other skiers. She was nervous and went out in the opening round of finals. But she also gained some experience and confidence which she can take into tomorrow."

Shepherd has been actively recruiting women to the newest Olympic sport. Ciccone, along with fellow skier Langely McNeal (Ketchum, ID), who was 44th, are on the World Cup looking for Olympic quota spots.

The skiers are back in action Tuesday with another World Cup in the northern Italian resort.

Innichen/San Candido, Italy, Dec. 21, skicross

Men

1. Michael Schmid, Switzerland
2. Xavier Kuhn, France
3. Casey Puckett, Aspen, CO
4. Audunm Groenvold, Norway
5. Tomas Kraus, Czech Republic
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13. Daron Rahlves, Sugar Bowl, CA
52. Justin Johnson, Park City, UT
53. Jean Christophe Rudigoz, Sun Valley, ID
81. Scott Horn, Truckee, CA

Women

1. Anna Holmlund, Sweden
2. Ashleigh McIvor, Canada
3. Ophelie David, France
4. Sophie Fjellvang-Soelling, Denmark
5. Emilie Serain, Switzerland
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28. Caitlin Ciccone, Littleton, NH
44. Langely McNeal, Ketchum, ID