

Erin Jackson is Racing Toward the Podium

January 28, 2022

Image not found or type unknown



Team Toyota athlete [Erin Jackson](#) learned how to speed skate on ice when she was 25 years old. Four months later, the speed skater qualified for the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018. Now, with four years of training under her belt, she's ready to compete for a spot on the podium.

“Coming into this year, I’m in a completely different place than I was in 2018,” Jackson says. “At this point four years ago, I had been in Salt Lake for a month. I wasn’t really thinking about the Olympics, and now I’m coming in hoping for medal contention.”

Jackson, who grew up in Ocala, Florida, started roller skating when she was a kid, racing up and down her family’s driveway and going to the roller rink after school. She learned how to inline skate when she was 10 years old, going on to win 12 world championship medals and 47 national championships. After college, Jackson made the transition to speedskating on ice and competed in the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018, where she placed 24th.

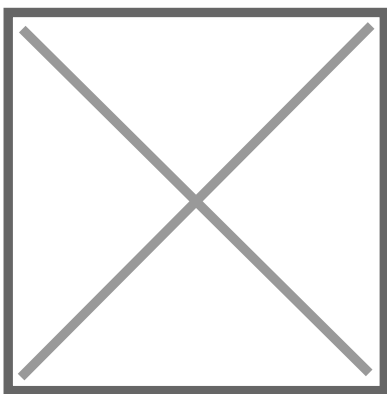
“Last Games, I didn’t have any expectations, and I didn’t put any pressure on myself,” she says. “When I get to a race, it’s like there’s nothing else I can do at that point. The training that I’ve put in is going to show on the ice, and there’s nothing that being extra nervous in that moment can do for me.”

Heading into Beijing 2022, Jackson is spending every spare moment on the ice and hoping to secure a few confidence-building ISU Speed Skating World Cup wins. She’s maintaining the same calm attitude as before but putting just enough pressure on herself to keep her eye on the prize: a chance to compete in the Olympic Winter Games.

“I’m looking forward to just everything that comes with the Games — just being in this place with all the other athletes who have all trained really hard to be there. It’s the pinnacle of all of our sports.”

A New Challenge

Inline skating isn’t an official Olympic sport, so to continue their athletic careers, highly competitive inline skaters, like Jackson, eventually make the jump from skating with wheels to skating with blades. Though Jackson loved skating, she considered herself a student first and always put her schoolwork before athletics. When her teammates in Ocala started to make the switch to the ice, Jackson decided to wait until after she graduated from the University of Florida College of Engineering with a Bachelor of Science degree in Materials Science & Engineering with a specialty in ceramic materials.



After graduation, Jackson debated whether to continue her athletic career. She loved competing and inline skating, but she really didn’t like being cold, something that speedskaters had all come to live with in the sport. So, when a recruiter from US Speedskating reached out, he asked her to give it a try a couple of times before he convinced her to come in for a test skate.

“I eventually took him up on the offer to at least try it,” she says. “I figured if I never try it, I’ll never know if I would have been good at it.”

Even though Jackson had been skating for most of her life, the transition to the ice wasn’t as easy as she imagined. The Olympian spent a lot of time working on her skating position and her stride to get as much power as possible when pushing off the ice.

“Coming from inline, I had a lot of habits I had to break,” she says. “I think the similarities can work for you but also against you. I had been skating one way my whole life, so breaking that muscle memory can be hard.”

According to Jackson, racing is the big differentiator between inline skating and long track speedskating. With inline, strategy plays a bigger role because athletes race head-to-head, often competing as a team. In long track, racers compete individually in their respective lanes, so it’s more of a time trial. Technique is everything, and it’s something Jackson feels like she is just starting to master four years later.

“It was frustrating just being new at something that is so close to what I was doing before but yet, still so different,” she says. “In the beginning, it’s like I was the slowest person on the team, and I just wanted to not be the slowest person. I just wanted to be better at it.”

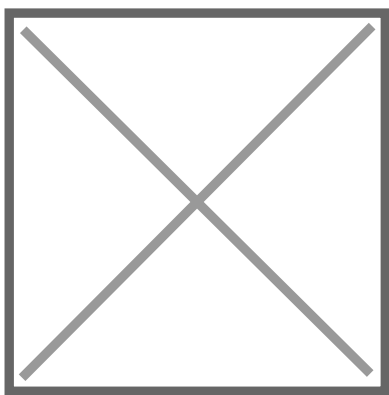
The transition has been tough, but Jackson says that’s what makes it fun. She adds that it wouldn’t be a new challenge if it wasn’t a little frustrating. While her team is comprised of mostly former inline skaters, the majority had made the transition to speedskating in the past five years, making Jackson the newest to convert. Luckily, the US Speedskating team trains together almost every day, so she could rely on her teammates to help her learn.

“I’m with these people every day,” she says. “It’s such an awesome community. We get along really well and support each other, even those of us who are actively racing against each other. We’re still all helping each other out, and we want to see all of us get better.”

A Career of Firsts

Jackson had only been training in Salt Lake City for three months before going to the 2018 Long Track Olympic Trials in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, so she didn’t really think she had a shot at qualifying for Team USA. According to the Olympian, the altitude in Salt Lake City makes it the fastest ice in the world. So, if a skater doesn’t get a qualifying time in Salt Lake City, they’re not going to get it anywhere else. Jackson was an exception: In the month leading up to Trials, she was dropping one second off her time each week.

“Going into the Trials, there was no way I could go to the Olympics,” she says. “I didn’t have a qualifying time or anything. I didn’t even tell my dad that I was going. It was a checkpoint race for me to kind of see how I was doing, so it was a really big surprise.”



After locking in her spot on Team USA, Jackson became the first black woman to compete for the U.S. Olympic long track speedskating team. Though the athlete was excited about the historic moment, she also found herself disappointed that there weren't others before her.

"It was something that hadn't really come to mind when I made the team until I saw the headlines about it," she says. "I wish there had been a lot of people before me and this wasn't this big historic thing. But it's interesting, and I hope to be someone who can spur a kind of change."

Jackson believes that representation is important and tries to be a good role model, both in sports and in academics. She hopes that people will see her compete and think about trying speedskating or other winter sports.

"I hope to be a great role model," she says. "It helps so much to see someone like you doing something. I also just hope to see more people of color in winter sports because it can feel like there aren't a whole lot."

After PyeongChang 2018, Jackson worked with a foundation that provides scholarships to women of color to help them get started in skiing and snowboarding in Washington state. The experience made Jackson think about starting a similar program to get more people involved in speedskating.

"Winter sports can be so expensive," she says. "The equipment is expensive, plus the ice fees. I think if more people knew about long track or any type of speedskating and had the opportunity to do it, I think they'd love it. I just want to see more people finding success in something fun."