

Watch the lip and steer like an Olympian

Bobsled school in Utah straps in amateurs, too

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PARK CITY, Utah — A lot ran through my mind as I was about to plunge the equivalent of 15 stories on an icy track at high-way-rated speeds. I had mostly second thoughts about what had seemed like a fun idea, mixed with intense visualization on how to steer a 300-pound metal sled down a labyrinth of half-pipe turns in a way that wouldn't result in serious bodily harm, or worse.

Sitting in the cockpit, I braced my knees against the side of the sled, pressed down hard on the stationary foot pegs, and re-adjusted the bulky, full-face motorcycle helmet.

"How fast will we go," I asked Pat Brown, my instructor at the Bobsled Driving School at Utah Olympic Park outside Park City.

"You'll be going slow — about 55 miles per hour," he said, as he squatted next to our sled.

That may have sounded slow to someone like Brown, a former member of the US bobsled team who went on to coach the Jamaican bobsled team (think "Cool Runnings") in the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, the first US women's bobsled team in 1998, and this year's Korean team at the Vancouver Olympic games. But for someone like me, a first-time bobsledder, 55 sounded downright scary.

I gripped the D-shaped steering rings that were attached to the bobsled's front runners by rope and said, "OK, I'm ready."

"No jerky movements," said Brown, who is now head coach of the park's Bobsled and Skeleton Development Program. "The less steering you do, the better you'll do."

Hunkered behind me, in the "brakeman" position of our two-person sled, sat Robert Purviance, another novice who had come from Los Angeles to give bobsledding a shot. If he liked it, he planned to try out for the national bobsled team.

"Let's do it," said Purviance. "Sled in track. Sled in track from the Junior Start," a voice called out over the loudspeaker.

"Just remember to relax and breathe," said Brown, as he gently pushed us off the start line. There was no turning back.

We rounded the first curve and our sled picked up speed, quickly accelerating until the track was zipping past us almost faster than my eyes could focus. With little time to think, I made split-second decisions as we rattled down 10 increasingly powerful turns. I pulled on one D-ring or the other to steer the sled onto the face of each curve, tipping us sideways so that our shoulders pointed toward the ground and the sky. There was no time to think about how unnatural that felt. The sled banged against the icy walls and skidded as I oversteered, and the force of the curves yanked us down the course and pushed us from side to side.

Look ahead and stay calm, I reminded myself.

We climbed too high in one curve and mistakenly dipped down in the middle of another, but I managed to keep the sled upright. We careened around a seemingly endless Curve 14 and then rapidly decelerated as the sled mounted an incline to the finish. Purviance pulled hard on the brake handles, forcing a metal strip with big teeth to bite into the ice and ending a wildly insane but fun ride. Our sledding time flashed up on the scoreboard: 54.60 miles per hour.

Having survived my first run, I understood what kept some people in the sport: the pure thrill of the experience and the desire to improve.

The Bobsled Driving School typically runs each fall, drawing athletes such as Purviance who are keen on taking up the sport and people like me who are curious about bobsledding, and interested in the challenge and thrill of giving it a try. An extra date was added in March this year to accommodate a group of adaptive athletes from Park City's National Ability Center. I attended this course.

To participate, all riders must join the United States Bobsled and Skeleton Federation (USBSF), which involves paying \$55, signing a three-page waiver, and providing a form from one's



Pat Brown (in white), the head instructor at the Bobsled Driving School at Utah Olympic Park, and his staff guide a sled into the Junior Start. Below, he helps riders get prepared in a sled.



Utah Olympic Park
3419 Olympic Parkway
Park City
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Driving schools run this year
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Price: \$600 per person.

doctor giving a clean bill of health. The school, open to anyone 16 and older, includes five afternoons of on-track instruction and a chance to get in about four practice runs per day. Riders who pass the course receive a certificate.

Four of us were signed up. Our first day started with a track walk: We strapped metal cleats called creepers onto our shoes and followed Brown up the track, from the finish line to the Junior Start at Curve 6, and back down. Along the way, Brown explained technique and gave us tips on how to navigate each half-pipe turn.

"How you exit one curve determines how you enter the next one," he said. "Today, just get one runner on the curve, and don't let the sled climb too high."

I studied each curve, trying to imagine the line our sled should take.

"You have plenty of time to correct yourself if you do something wrong early," said Brown. "But as you come into Curve 10, it's time to pay attention and get serious."

He then pointed out "the lip," a wooden safety barrier running along the top of most curves to

us about double-pressure curves, when there is more pressure pulling the sled up toward the lip at the beginning and end of a curve, and a dip of pressure in the middle. "Don't let it drop too much in the middle," he said. "You want a smooth line. You don't want to be waving up and down."

The overload of information made me nervous, since there was no way to practice even one curve before taking on all 10.

"The hardest thing is for me to tell you how to steer," said Brown. "You just have to give it a try and see if you like it."

The next day, Purviance and I completed four runs, all averaging about 54 miles per hour. With me at the helm, we bumped just once on an otherwise perfect run (for a beginner), skidded into a curve and climbed too high on another run, and then ended the day with a very sloppy performance full of skids, wall slams, and swerving maneuvers.

"That was like your very first run yesterday," said Purviance, when we had come to a stop. "We hit almost every wall. It was like a freaking bumper car!"

I found concentrating so hard mentally exhausting and had let my focus lapse on that final run.

By the fourth day, riders typi-

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The park offers courses in bobsled and skeleton each fall. Or visitors can ride in a four-person sled with a professional pilot.

cally progress up to the Women's Start, three curves higher on the track. If all goes smoothly and Brown feels people are ready, they move up to the Men's Start at the top of the track on day five. From here, riders drop 390 feet vertical feet from beginning to end, and reach speeds of up to 70. The run from the Men's Start is so fast and intense that the sled is lowered past the first curve using a winch to prevent it from picking up too much speed on the way down.

Since it was March, the snow was too deep to access the Women's Start. Our only option was to move to the very top, which would be like learning to walk one day and doing a marathon the next. Crazy.

"It's a whole different game

from the top," said Brown. "When things go wrong, they really go wrong."

After much soul-searching, I decided to stick with the Junior Start and practice honing my skills. I wouldn't receive my certificate, but I was certain I would be back.

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