

Keep Skeleton In the Closet

There's no strategy, no passing anybody. No getting air, no doing flips, no Dick Button. Nothing. Just get on the slab of metal and point it downhill.

People do dumb things. Ride grocery carts on I-95. Pet porcupines. I once saw a guy in Vancouver light his beard on fire for \$2.

But at least they never made a Winter Olympic sport out of those.

You can't say that for skeleton, which is not just the dumbest Winter Olympic event ever invented, but it also might be the dumbest sport ever invented.

And I'm including lawn darts.

In skeleton, people dress in rubber suits, lie on a glorified lunch tray and slide down a hill.

That's it. There's no strategy, no passing anybody. No getting air, no doing flips, no Dick Button. Nothing. Get on the slab of metal and point it downhill.

And yet for the next month NBC is going to make this sport seem like it's the equivalent of saving cafeterias full of kidnapped third-graders. Bob Costas is going to sit there with a straight face and tell you, "In this next report we'll tell you how one skeletoner bravely slides despite a pretty big strawberry on her elbow!"

But that's not the stupidest thing. The stupidest thing is that all across America, people will actually care! They'll stand around the company coffee pot going, "Man, did you see that ol' boy win skeleton? Made you proud to be an American, dinnit?"

No! This sport is about as Olympian as dwarf tossing! It just happened to find an unlocked back door into the Games. Most of its competitors didn't even take up the stupid sport until last Thursday. For instance, there's 2004 national champ Eric Bernotas. He discovered skeleton in 2001 when he and his former girlfriend took a spur-of-the-moment detour to the Lake Placid track while they were on their way to Vermont.

Wilford Brimley could've been on the team if he'd have thought of it.

Do you know how many people skeleton in the United States--at any level, including beginners? "I'd say about 100," says U.S. Olympic skeleton spokesman Tom LaDue. "Maybe 200."

Whoooo-eee! Skeleton Fever: Catch it!

What's next? Pizza-box sliding? Synchronized frostbite?

How did they even get skeleton back in the Olympics, after it was rightly dumped in 1948? It was rediscovered by thrill-seekers in the early 1980s, and pretty soon they were pushing for it to be in the Olympics again. And since the Winter Olympics are stretched thinner than Joan Rivers's neck--there are enough real sports for seven days, but the Games go 17--the IOC bought it. Probably because it's such a cheap sport to run.

"You use the same venue as the bobsled, same stands, same cameras, everything's already there," says Jim Shea Jr., a onetime bobsledder who was part of the movement to get the sport reinstated for the Salt Lake City Games in 2002.

And do you know who was the best male skeletoner in the USA back in 2002? That's right, Jim Shea Jr.! And do you know how he'd gotten to be the best male skeletoner? He was working as a bartender, "saw some jackass doing it," he admits, and thought he'd try it. The only trick is to hang on when you hit 80 miles per hour. You need a strong grip and weak brains.

Next thing you know, Shea's reading the athletic oath at the Opening Ceremonies in front of four billion people! Holding the torch! Visiting Bush at the White House! I mean, it was almost like people thought he was a serious athlete!

Anyway, this bunch of lucky stiffs somehow got invited to the debutante ball, and now they're bathing in the punch bowl. So far, the U.S. skeleton team has ... 1) suspended its coach, Tim Nardiello, because two female skeletonesses have accused him of sexual misconduct; 2) seen one of its best (cough-cough) athletes, Noelle Pikus-Pace, break her leg after falling from a platform near the bobsled track that got hit by--guess what?--a bobsled; and 3) watched one skeletoner, Zach Lund, test positive for a substance which can be used to mask performance enhancing drugs.

And your first reaction is, Dude, you're sliding on a frickin' cake pan! How much performance enhancing do you need? But then you find out that Lund claims the drug was from a baldness treatment he was taking. Poor guy. In one story people found out two embarrassing things about him: 1) He's balding; 2) he skeletons.

So I've decided I'm going to invent my own sport--using a venue that already exists--and win myself a gold medal.

"Man, did you see that ol' boy win the Zamboni jump? Made you proud to be an American, dinnit?"