

OLYMPICS: Skeleton Plunges Face-First Back Into the Winter Games

By RICK BRAGG New York Times

SALT LAKE CITY, Feb. 17 — Picture riding the lid of a turkey roaster pan down a roller coaster rail after an ice storm.

Picture it at almost 80 miles an hour, with wicked turns, at G-forces so powerful that you cannot raise your helmet from the ice, which glitters just an inch away.

Now picture making that ride face first.

"I was screaming inside my helmet," said Chris Soule, as he described the first time he tried the ominous-sounding sport of skeleton. It returns to these Olympic Winter Games after a 54-year ban.

Soule, the 2002 World Cup gold medalist from Trumbull, Conn., says it is not as dangerous as it looks, sliding down a twisting, turning course belly down on a tiny sled, his helmeted head leading the way.

That may be, but whenever he tells the Olympic athletes in other sports what he is there for, they say much the same thing: "Oh. You guys are crazy."

Perhaps it is appropriate that international competitions for this event, perhaps the most perilous of all here, now begin with a moment of silence.

There is no affectation here, no baggy pants and thrash music like the snowboarders have, no ice skater's sequins and storied history, no cinematic skiing glory, acted out by a rugged Robert Redford, as in the downhill.

This is just fast and mean and a little bit insane, and if you mess up, if you are clumsy and brush the wall, there is pain and often blood. Soule used to wrap parts of his body in duct tape—the ice on the walls tended to eat his sweater off his arm.

Now, after petitioning Olympic officials to reinstate the sport—which gets its name because frames of earlier sleds resembled a skeleton—he and the rest of the world's most daring sliders will get a running start, hurl themselves and their sleds down a chute of hard ice and show the world what it means to ride the bones. The men's and women's competitions are scheduled for Wednesday.

"I haven't told my mother yet," said Lincoln DeWitt, one of Soule's Olympic teammates, when asked what his family thought of his competition here, which has been banned not once but twice from the Games.

It is a sport ruled, and abused, by gravity.

Read like a writer... what does Rick Bragg do as a writer? Name the craft moves he makes.... Something you might use in your writing?

Reading like a writer is the most consistently effective tool I use to help students understand the craft of writing. It is a game-changer in teaching writing.

Invites reader to visualize (picture this...picture this)—talks directly to the reader
Numerous, short paragraphs, even one sentence paragraphs.

Uses repetition (no baggy pants, no sequins...repeats a description of what is going on)
You want to read more, pay attention to this—if you didn't get it, I'm going to repeat it

His continuous use of vocabulary that evokes terror (ominous, screamed, dangerous, pain and often blood, perilous) which reinforces the danger

When he had people speak—what they say—short and sweet and evokes danger
Dialogue has to move the story forward, learn something from it...

Compares this sport to other dangerous sports—snowboarding, skiing, (intentional)
Imagery and formatting of the story took you on the ride with him

Moment of silence—a bit of tension—shaping the piece by how they ride down the hill.
He doesn't say 'you could die here' but you understand it.

Imagined a camera with 'picture this' but 3rd paragraph is zoomed in like you're on the sled

Slanted towards danger—no facts about how many people have died—so why slanted?
So people will watch the competition.

Begins with turkey roaster pan and ends with mom, so circles back to family—
emotional. You're in the Olympics and you haven't told your mother SHOWS.

The simplicity of the skeleton—simple language—although ominous.

Boothbay is ~~not like~~ unlike so many of the big conferences I attend each year. ~~It is not~~
There is no rushing from room to room between sessions, scrambling to get a seat,
balancing your notebook on your lap while you strain to listen to the speaker and see the
screen. Boothbay is not a race.

Boothbay is not a series of unrelated sessions, jolting my thinking from one big idea to
the next with barely a breath between. At big conferences my notebook becomes a
mosaic of parts that I struggle to pull together on rereading. Boothbay is, instead, several
threads of thinking woven together over several days. Boothbay pulls ~~parts~~ these threads
together and ~~invites~~ inviting each participant to create their own cloth.

Boothbay is not a convention hall with winding lines out the bathroom doors and at the
coffee kiosks. Boothbay is peace and layers of deep thinking. Boothbay centers me.

Boothbay is not asking me only to listen, but here I am asked to think, write, talk, and be
with colleagues.

‘MAKE IT BETTER’ MEANS....

Stretching out a sentence on purpose--
Set up parallels, and then short sentences, then a long sentence.
It’s this, not this, but this...

First quick writing is too much, I cut it down to the bare bones and most powerful phrase

Verbs—changed some of them so they really said what I wanted to say—changed verbs
of being to something unexpected

Looking at one word at a time

Clarifying of particular words—not just verbs, every word is with intent

Hard to make it positive when using ‘it is not’—had to think about what I like about the
place and make it peaceful by what it is not

Positive

How is this author writing in a way you could use in your own writing?

- repetition- Picture this... Picture this... Now picture...

(intensity builds with each repetition)

- **describing something by what it is not—**

“There is no affectation here, no baggy pants and thrash music like the snowboarders have, no ice skater’s sequins and storied history,... this is fast and mean and a little bit insane,...”

- verbs—slide, brush (the wall), eat (the sweater off), hurl, ban, rule, abuse,...
- irony- not as dangerous as it looks, sliding down a twisting, turning course belly down on a tiny sled... (says not, but shows it is...)
- short paragraphs—sentences have more impact if you let them stand alone “breathing in between” (Barry Lane)
- lead- pops us right into the scene

He was an Irish tenor, a yarn spinner, a songwriter, a father of four, a crack golfer and a first-class drunk.

Then he'd be looking to bust something, maybe a lamp, maybe somebody's nose; my mom's, once.