

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

By **RICK BRAGG**, winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing, FEB. 18, 2002

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.

"I asked, 'How do you steer it?' " said Jim Shea Jr., another teammate, who is a medal favorite and a third-generation Olympian, as he thought back to his first ride on the skeleton in 1995. "Somebody said, 'Shut up and go down.' I asked again. And he said, 'Shut up and go down.' "

There is a lot more to it than that, as Shea, who is from Hartford, would learn. The G-forces pin the rider on the tiny sled like a bug on a cork, and even a glance to the left or right, up or down, can minutely shift a rider's neck and shoulder muscles and alter direction and even speed.

It actually forces the rider's head down, down to the ice. Some riders steer with a toe, or with a gentle pressure of their knees.

"It's pretty precise," said the 29-year-old Soule, which is like saying that snake charmers and lion tamers need to be a little bit careful. "A lot more precise than just whipping down a hill."

This is no hill. The track, in Utah Olympic Park, is about 4,380 feet long, drops 340 feet and has 15 turns, on which the best sliders will reach speeds of 80 m.p.h.

It is the same track used for bobsled and luge, but in a bobsled, the slider gets to ride inside something about the size of a canoe, and in the luge, at least the rider gets to go down the course feet first.

The skeleton sled is just big enough for the rider's torso -- the rider's head, which is encased in a helmet with a wraparound face guard, sticks out more than a foot from the edge of the sled.

It is steel and fiberglass, about 3 feet long and 16 inches wide and can weigh anywhere from 70 to 115 pounds, depending, in part, on the size of the rider. It slides on two steel runners, which narrow -- or sharpen -- from front to back.

A Latvian rider was killed during a run in October, when, going 36 m.p.h., he crashed headfirst into an errant sled. That is why the sliders begin competitions with a moment of silence.

"I could handle the speed," said Soule, thinking back to his first skeleton ride, 10 years ago in Lake Placid, N.Y. It was the fact that his face was so close to the ice -- sometimes the riders' helmets bounce or scrape the ice or bounce against the walls -- that had him screaming.

It might not be so bad if not for the name of the sport. That it was named for the sled is in itself a relief to many first-time riders, who thought it had something to do with the condition of the riders once they reached the bottom of the hill.

"I broke my nose twice learning, and my rib once," said Luis Carrasco, who will represent Mexico in the skeleton. "I didn't stay low on the curves."

That may be why most of the people who do it are adventure lovers. Soule, for instance, is a cliff diver, rock climber and stuntman.

Almost everyone who does it, he said, are the grown-up versions of the boys and girls who used to ride cardboard boxes down hills, belly down and face first, because that was where the fun was.

In the Olympic Village, athletes in other events ask about getting tickets and treat the skeleton athletes with a certain amount of respect, if not awe.

"Maybe they have childhood memories of going over the hill headfirst," Soule said.

It is said to be the oldest sledding sport in the world, invented in the 1880's in St. Moritz, Switzerland, but it has twice been banned as too extreme for the Olympics. It was an Olympic sport in St. Moritz in 1928 but was dropped from ensuing Olympics because it was considered too perilous. It was resurrected, again in St. Moritz, in the 1948 Winter Games, and again dropped.

Petitions by skeleton riders in other international competitions -- especially in the United States -- persuaded Olympic officials to reinstate the sport.

There are only two tracks suitable for skeleton in the United States -- here and in Lake Placid -- and unlike figure skaters and snowboarders, the athletes do not find deep-pocket sponsors knocking at the door. The athletes' bodies entirely cover the sled, so slapping a decal on it is futile.

Plus, the sleds often look as if they have been in a war, blasted by welding torches, crudely padded with foam or duct tape. As the athletes flash past the spectators, they look as if they are on nothing at all, just sliding on their bellies, arms at their sides, feet slightly apart.

At one news conference, a reporter asked Shea why he had called the sport the "Champagne of Thrills." He said that was not what he said. "Actually, I call bobsled the 'Champagne of Thrills,' " he said. "Skeleton is the 'Moonshine of Thrills.' "

Many of the competitors work part-time and full-time jobs so that they can live near the tracks. Tristan Gale of Ruidoso, N.M., works at a Home Depot. "Skeleton doesn't pay as much as figure skating," she said. "Normal people can do this. You don't need to own anything to do this."

Normal people might be able to afford it -- the sleds are homemade -- but they do not want to.

The United States Olympian Lea Anne Parsley is a firefighter from Granville, Ohio, who wants to be a smoke jumper. Obviously, she is a brave woman. She climbed onto a skeleton sled in 1998 for the first time.

"Good thing I hadn't seen it before," she said. She would not have gone through with it.

Gale sums up the experience this way: "There's nothing like this in real life."

Dewitt remembers his first run, in 1997. He remembers approaching a curve and thinking, "I have no concept of the physics that are about to be involved."