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Photo: Per Bernal



GEA JOHNSON **HEATS UP** WOMEN'S BOBSLEIGHING

By Hal Peat

Gea Johnson's life in sport has literally outpaced at least one definition in the dictionary. As a bobsleighter on the American team at the first-time appearance of a women's bobsleigh event at 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah, she was referred to as the "brakeman" of her team. Today, the term is still "female brakeman" rather than "brakewoman". But the unusual term is not the only twist this American athlete has encountered during her journey in elite amateur athletics. In fact, the past 25 years have seen her leap from university track and field into the world of bobsleigh racing – while meeting up with almost as much adversity as achievement along the way. In spite of it all, she remains determined to make her own decisive final mark in the new arena of Olympic women's bobsleigh.

The journey from track to ice

As a student at Arizona State University, between 1986 and 1991, Gea Johnson was ranked in the top six of the NCAA (National Collegiate

Athletic Association). Her sport was the heptathlon, a seven event track-and-field discipline she excelled in until knee problems and surgeries finally ended her competitive career in 2000. During the period 1989-1993, she was ranked second in the States, behind the legendary Jackie Joyner-Kersey. While at university, she also used her speed and strength skills to enter the fast-growing women's fitness competition circuit, going on to win the first ever Ms. National Fitness Championships in 1986.

What caught Gea's eye in the late 90s as a more long-term discipline was serious Olympic weight lifting. "My prior strength training is what really exposed me to Olympic weight lifting and gave me the lifting bug," she explains. "Additionally, being well conditioned and participating in explosive sports gave me a great background of base from which to build on. On the other hand, you have to break some bad habits technically which you pick up from being taught the power versions of the Olympic lifts from the well-meaning but ill-informed track community."

After only five months of training in Olympic lifting, Gea went on to win seven titles between 1997 and 1999, including a gold medal in international competition. She continues to the present day to rely on some Olympic lifting in her current strength training regimen: "I still do a lot of cleans, power cleans, clean pulls and snatch pulls, but my shoulder won't let me snatch and jerk," she describes. "I round out the training with plenty of back and front squats as well as reverse hyper extensions and glute/ham raises and step-ups."

Just how did someone who grew up in the heat and terrain of the American southwestern desert conceive of using any of her skills for an icebound sport? It was actually while recuperating from a major knee injury incurred in heptathlon in 2000 that she came across this entirely new direction. "I had some friends who had been talking to me about bobsleigh for a couple of years, because they're Canadian, and I didn't even really care about it. I'm certainly not a cold weather person, I don't like snow, and I love Arizona and the warm weather!" she recalls. But what she heard did lead her to investigate further on her own; she discovered that other top women from her own sport had already entered bobsleigh competition with impressive results. "I said, 'What the heck? I'm going to see what this is all about.' And one thing led to another, and I was introduced to my coach, Ian Danney, and it was just one of those things in life that fell into place," she says. "Before I knew it, I was training for it, and I hadn't even seen a bobsleigh until October, two months before the Olympic trials."

Pain and perseverance in a breakthrough Winter Olympics

Not only was the bobsleigh an entirely new sport for Gea, it was also a new event for female athletes at the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter

Olympics. In the short span of the two months preceding the Winter Games, Gea was able to focus sufficient time and training to earn a position on the US Olympic women's bobsleigh team with number one ranked driver, Jean Racine. She achieved this by first setting a track record with Racine (of 48.92 seconds) at the US Olympic Trials, along with garnering a silver and three bronze medals at the 2002 World Cup in Königssee and Calgary. "I don't want to make it seem so easy that anybody could just go and do it, it's very arduous and very archaic in some ways, it's a very tough sport," she is quick to point out. "You have to be very strong, very fast, and it takes a certain type of athlete that can hit a bobsleigh. I was one of those athletes and it was a good fit."

Indeed, qualifying for and then excelling in national and international level bobsleigh racing requires an unusual package of athletic strengths. In a two-person bobsleigh team, the driver provides navigation but it is the brakeman who exists to provide propulsion and initial acceleration during the critical initial seconds of a run. This requires both enormous strength from the brakeman in terms of pull-push ability and explosive strength. With her lengthy background in track and field, along with the recent years of Olympic lifting experience, Gea found she could adapt within such a narrow time frame to the demands of world-class bobsleigh as the "female brakeman". She appeared to be on course towards her first Olympics at Salt Lake City when catastrophe struck in the form of a hamstring injury so extreme that her rear thigh muscle had become virtually detached from the bone. Determined to not allow this latest physical setback completely eliminate her, she and partner Racine went on to take a fifth place finish. She still felt vindicated under the circumstances: "That was

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bittersweet for me because we were the gold medal favourites, the pain was indescribable. It was 30 or 40 metres of an icicle or a butcher knife stabbing in my butt, ripping down my leg with every step I took. I have no idea how I even ran or got on the sleigh or anything! But being an Olympian is something that every amateur athlete aspires to, and watching the opening ceremonies, competing for your country, was one of the greatest athletic accomplishments of my life. So for that I'm extremely thankful, but I'm not yet done!"

That determination to keep moving ahead has now seen her through several surgeries to repair the major damage to the hamstring muscle. She has used the two years that followed the Salt Lake Winter Olympics to undergo a prolonged process of rehabilitation and therapy, along with gradually resuming her full program of training. This has meant getting back to optimum conditioning first on the home terrain she has known most of her athletic life: "Most of the training is actually dry land training, as far as just preparing and getting in shape. My coach moved here from Edmonton, Canada, and he has a facility in Scottsdale, and we do all our lifting and running here." Using the nearby first-class track facilities at the local college, she and Ian Danney have trained regularly in Arizona's arid climate that sees blistering summer triple digit temperatures, but extreme conditions are what she is long accustomed to. "I probably won't go to practise on the ice until September, and since I learned to push a bobsleigh at the Olympic park in Calgary and my coach is Canadian, I'll go back there then and we'll do the work I need to prepare on ice."

Fusing speed and strength with a renewed determination

Even with the lengthy career and skills that have made her strong in explosive strength and speed, is it feasible at the age of 36 for Gea to attempt to regroup for another upcoming period of international bobsleigh competition? She is convinced the hardest part is now behind her, although recuperation and a new cycle of training have certainly not been simple or predictable for her and her coach. As she admits: "In my particular situation, everything is sort of not normal and it will change because we're delving into uncharted territory, so to speak. So with the men's team, for example, a lot of the guys go up to Calgary and live and train for months at a time, then maybe go home for a while and later reconvene back there. I'm sure I'll stay in Canada for a couple of weeks, maybe come home and train some more, then go back. I'll just do whatever I need to do to make sure that I am hitting the sleigh well and pushing it very fast, so if I can stay for a while, I will. I would definitely not even think of doing a run or showing up without having trained in Calgary for some period of time on ice. You can be super fast and super strong, but it's extremely technical to learn how to hit a sleigh. It's another part of the training that's very important, but again all the prep work is pretty much dry land training, and you can do that anywhere."

Gea's regimen while she remains in her own desert environment has been busy even months away from any trial events. "My track work is primarily sprint training 20- to 80-metre distances with intensities between 85% and 100%," she says. "I also do different forms of

bounding exercises for a total of about 100 contacts per session. My weight training has been tailored around my shoulder injury and we spend four sessions per week in the weight room, 2-3 on the track, and 1-2 working on specific push technique. So I do approximately 7-9 sessions per week. The weight room sessions rarely exceed one hour and 15 minutes and the track sessions are usually about two hours." Push training, as Gea explains, is: "Learning the technique of starting the sleigh in motion as quickly and efficiently as possible while staying in positions which allow you to accelerate the sleigh through the entire push. Then there is the adjustment to running over speed downhill and smoothly loading into the sleigh. All of the aforementioned training will be done with the actual sleigh on ice. We simulate a lot of that now but you can't truly do it unless you are on an icy slope with a sleigh."

While other athletes may find the prospect of bobsleigh training more demanding and harrowing than their performance skills could ever meet, Gea seems to have emerged on the other side of injury with even greater determination. "Having had a severe injury and overcoming something like what I've been faced with, training would almost be easy at this point," she concludes. "It pretty much doubles everything because you have to factor physical therapy into every single thing that you do. But I'm not complaining, I love what I do and just hope that I'm healthy and I can compete and step on that line and see what I can do. I think I can accomplish some amazing things, but I need to be healthy."

Given the distance she has already travelled – from the heights of track and field to agonizing accomplishment at her first Olympian appearance and beyond – Gea Johnson's continued race for bobsleigh gold in Turin in 2006 seems well on track.

For more about Gea Johnson, visit her website at: www.geajohnson.com

BOWSLEIGH RACING – FAST FACTS



Training

Building explosive power, stamina and strength are all essential strengths for the aspiring bobsleigh athlete.

Improving on these can take place on the track and in the gym, training at a bobsleigh facility is virtually a must as the conclusive phase of training.

Core athletic skills

A strong performance on initial tests is important, but the ability to push a sleigh on ice is what decides selection to a team. Both speed and strength in equal combination are the desired athletic package.

The British Bobsleigh Association's website outlines its testing requirements: regional level talent days lead to invites to squad training days; push start testing completes the procedure at the National Bobsleigh Facility at Bath University. Minimum results required for sprint, lifting and jumping are:

U.K. National Standards	Men	Women
30m sprint	3.90 secs	4.25 secs
Vertical Jump	0.70m	0.50m
Power Clean (1 rep max)	110kg	70kg

Athletes need to meet at least two of these three national standards to qualify for consideration at talent ID days and national level events. International standards make these requirements even tighter; performance in a single sleigh push is also assessed at this testing level.

Organizations

The international sports body is the Federation Internationale de Bobsleigh et de Tobaganning. Visit www.bobsleigh.com for the calendar of world-class events, sport rules, and the sport's history.

British Bobsleigh Association – the UK's governing body for the sport. Visit www.british-bobsleigh.com to find out more about British event coverage, entry requirements and an application for amateur competition.