

Bumpy Ride

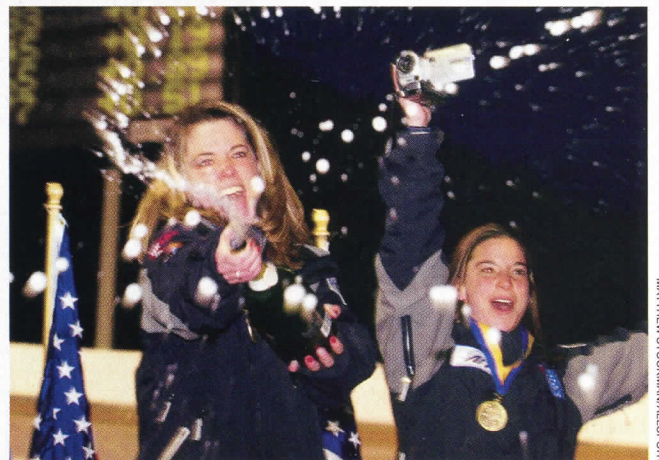
Personnel squabbles—and a personal tragedy—can't slow bobsledder Jean Racine

"I feel confident again," says Racine (getting a big boost from new partner Gea Johnson in Edmonton in January).

Bobsledder Jean Racine can block out distractions with the best of them. When she hops into her 450-lb. sled and hurtles at 85 mph down a track of ice, "I don't let other things get in my head," says Racine, 23. "I just think about the curve in front of me. It's a challenge to stay that focused, but that's the goal."

The challenge has proved particularly formidable for Racine, who suffered two dramatic setbacks on the road to Salt Lake City, where she will compete in the first Olympics to include a female bobsledding event. Last May Racine—then the sport's top-ranked bobsled driver—lost her mother, Cathy, to scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disease. Cathy, 47, had even opted for a last-ditch kidney transplant in a desperate bid to live and perhaps see her daughter race in Salt Lake.

Then, just seven weeks ago, Racine, who steers the bobsled, dropped her longtime brakeman Jen Davidson, 29, and replaced her with Gea Johnson, 34, a promising



"I wanted Jen to be the best brakeman," says Racine (right, with Davidson after a World Cup win last Feb. 17). "But she wasn't."

MATTHEW STOCKMAN/ALSPORT



newcomer who Racine felt gave her a better chance to win. The switch, however, has led to her estrangement from Davidson, who filed a grievance with the federation that oversees U.S. bobsledders demanding a race-off to get back on the squad. (Davidson has declined to comment.) "I feel confident about the decision, but I am definitely hurting," says Racine. "I feel like I have lost my best friend."

Yet through it all Racine maintained her trademark mental toughness, which she will need to beat the favored German team. "She is one of the best drivers I've ever seen," says her Olympic coach, Tuffy Latour. "I very rarely see her make a mistake."

The only athlete in what she calls "a family of brainiacs," Racine was 13 when her mother urged her children to try the luge. "She saw an ad saying, 'Your kid could be the next Olympic hopeful,' and she signed us up," says Racine, raised in Waterford, Mich., by Cathy, a homemaker, and David, 52, a General Motors supervisor. (She has two sisters—Christine, 21, an architectural student, and Jessica, 13—and a brother, Roger, 25, an epidemiologist.) The others showed little talent, but as a high school freshman Racine earned an invitation from the U.S. Olympic Committee to practice in Lake Placid, N.Y. Her first time down a bobsled track, she recalls, "I couldn't keep the smile off my face."

Racine dropped out of Oakland University in Rochester, Mich., after a semester to focus on her sport and eventually switched to two-person bobsledding for the camaraderie. In 1996, she met Davidson at Lake Placid, and the two became fast friends, winning a slew of titles, including the World Cup in 2000 and 2001. Together they campaigned to get women's bobsledding into the Olympics and learned on Oct. 2, 1999, that their dream had come true. Afterward, they had matching gold bands engraved with the words, "We did it."

But earlier this year, her mother's illness sidetracked Racine. "Jean took care of both of us," says Cathy Racine's sister Linda Hastings, 46, who donated a



Cathy Racine (with her daughter in '00) "really relied on Jean," says Jean's aunt.

kidney. "She let her training slide a bit." But Cathy's death only intensified Racine's drive. "She didn't let it bring her down," says Justin Orr, 27, her boyfriend and a fellow bobsledder. "She said, 'I need to pick myself up and go for the gold.'"

Still, last fall, the team's times worsened, and they finished 11th at a World Cup race. After watching Johnson win a contest at Lake Placid for pushing off—the crucial, initial burst of speed—Racine switched partners. Davidson "didn't see it coming," says Racine with sadness. "It all came down to, 'Am I going to

take the best brakeman or am I going to take my best friend?'" John Morgan, a former bobsledder and now an Olympic analyst, says Racine "would not have made it to the Olympics with Davidson. This is not a sorority function. It's about finding the best athlete."

Enter Gea Johnson. The oldest of five children in a Mormon family, she was raised primarily in Fremont, Calif. Her mother, then a teacher, and father, a foot surgeon, divorced when Gea was 12. A former NCAA heptathlon champion, Johnson was a competitive weightlifter until six months ago, when a nerve injury in her leg indirectly led her to bobsledding: Her physical therapist suggested she'd be good at the sport. "I didn't even know what a bobsled looked like," confesses Johnson, who learned quickly with the help of noted bobsled coach and former Olympian Ian Danney. "She has an amazing genetic gift," says Danney, 32. "And she's driven to win." Johnson and Racine finished second at their first competition together, a World Cup race Dec. 16.

However they fare at the Olympics, Racine says she plans to spend more time with her sister Jessica, who was diagnosed with lupus seven years ago. Going back to college to get a business degree is another priority. And she would like to patch things up with Jen Davidson. "I tried to talk to her once and she wouldn't have it," says Racine. "I would do almost anything to remain friends with her."

• Alex Tresniowski
• Rebecca Paley in New York City and Johnny Dodd in Los Angeles



"We have a strong chance of winning gold," says Johnson, who with Racine placed second in a World Cup race in Calgary Dec. 16.