

HOTTEST THING ON ICE JAMAICANS SERIOUS ABOUT BOBSLEDDING

Author(s):

JODY MEACHAM, Mercury News Staff Writer

Date: February 13, 1988

Section: Sports

CALGARY – Don't confuse the Jamaican bobsled team with those other Caribbean bobsledders entered in the Winter Olympics, the ones from Netherlands Antilles and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

These guys mean business. They're not in Canada to play around.

They're not going to win a medal, either.

"All our athletes are natives of Jamaica," said George Fitch, the American businessman who organized the team last September. "We have no (team members) that live in Lake Placid, N.Y., or Denver or have been training in Norway."

What the Jamaicans do have are three army officers, a college student and an electrician/reggae singer to compete in the two- and four-man events on the ice chute at Canada Olympic Park. They have a used American two-man sled and an old four-man bob they bought after arriving in Calgary. It replaces one they crashed in practice in Lake Placid.

But the sledders say Jamaican bobsledding has a better future than an iceberg in Montego Bay. Everyone on the team believes Calgary is simply a tune-up for the 1992 Olympics in Albertville, France, where they will be shooting for a top-10 finish.

"We are somewhat disturbed that the reason (for the team's public attention) is an underlying feeling that we are not serious athletes," said Capt. Dudley Stokes, driver of both the two- and four-man sleds and a helicopter pilot in the Jamaican Defense Force.

Howard Siler, a member of the U.S. Bobsled Federation helping the Jamaicans, said the team hopes "to win the bottom half of the field, the Mexicans, the have-not nations" in Calgary. They ranked 31st of 47 teams in the international standings coming to the Olympics.

(The Mexican national team has one-upped the Three Amigos of Denver Broncos fame. The Brothers Tames Perea – Luis, Jorge, Roberto and Jose Eduardo Jr. – have dubbed themselves the *Cuatro Amigos*. The Mexican team members actually live in Dallas, where they first began training in a wooden sled by pushing it up and down dead-end streets. They race here in a sled borrowed from the Canadian team.)

The Jamaican team is the hottest thing on ice, according to the slogan on its T-shirts, which are the hottest-selling Olympic souvenirs in Calgary. Team members have sold them in Lake Placid, where they made their first bobsled runs in November; in Austria, where they made their debut on the World Cup bobsled tour; and in Calgary, where they did extensive training this winter. The money buys their meals on the road.

A party at a Calgary restaurant Thursday night raised about \$10,000 toward the team's \$100,000 budget, about half of which came out of Fitch's pocket. The team also has a sponsorship from a Jamaican rum distillery.

Fitch had worked with a U.S. government aid program in the Caribbean and now is a private consultant in the region. He had seen Jamaican push-cart racing, in which two riders steer a rickety wooden cart down roads through the island's Blue Mountains, and got the idea Jamaicans might make dandy bobsledders.

Through posters and a campaign mounted by Jamaican Defense Force Col. Ken Barnes, a sports enthusiast, 35 bobsled hopefuls were tested in Jamaica's National Stadium last fall. The tests, consisting of sprints, shot putting, jumping and weightlifting, are the same ones used by the U.S. bobsled team, which offered coaching and technical assistance. The sledders who were chosen all exceeded the minimum fitness requirements for the U.S. team.

But there's still a lot of skepticism about just how serious Jamaican bobsledding can be once the Olympic-generated enthusiasm fades in 1989.

"Jamaicans always stick with whatever they start," said Caswell Allen, a pusher who is a mechanical engineering student at the University of the West Indies in Kingston. "If we thought that (the effort was a one-year deal), we wouldn't have been here."

Copyright (c) 1988 San Jose Mercury News