

Israel 1 wants you

The Israeli bobsled team has already begun preparing for the future. "We hope that bobsledding will catch on in Israel, and that by the 2010 Olympics there will be a four-man team as well," says pilot Aaron Zeff.

To begin that process, the team is now looking for a fourth member, someone who will join now as an alternate, and will be able to eventually take over the reins and lead the next generation.

The three current members – Zeff, John Frank, and David Greaves – will travel to Israel in April to conduct a search for their newest member. Tryouts will be held at the Wingate Institute, Kfar Hamaccabiah, and the Canada Center in Metula on dates to be decided.

What does it take to be a bobsledder? "We are looking for talented and mature athletes who possess the physical attributes, determination and commitment required of an international bobsledder," Zeff explains.

Some of those physical attributes include being at least 1.77 meters tall and weighing at least 100 kg., being able to sprint 30 meters in under 4.0 seconds and 100 m. in under 11.5 seconds, a vertical leap of over 70 cm, and the ability to bench press 120+ kg. and power clean 100+ kg.

The goal for the newest recruit will be to meet all of the above speed and strength standards within six months of serious training. A background in track and field, rugby, judo, American football, weightlifting, or other power sports is helpful.

Once the next member is selected, he will be sent to FIBT (Federation Internationale de Bobsleigh et de Tobogganing) bob schools, where he will be trained in basic driving skills. These training sessions, held over a number of days at tracks around Europe and North America, focus on novice drivers and provide expert instruction for beginners.

In addition to participating in the monthly training runs and scheduled competitions, speed and conditioning training are required four days a week.

By the start of next season, Israel 1 hopes to have its fourth member racing at full speed and alternating with the current members at as many as seven races in Europe and North America. In addition, the team plans to race in the European and World Championships during the season.

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And, as they've been proving for the last year and a half in trial runs and worldwide competitions, these three men just might have the heart and brawn necessary to become legitimate Olympic contenders.

"We have always said this is more than just about the sport, although we are extremely committed and serious about the sport. Ultimately, representing Israel in a positive light and telling Jews around the world that we need to rally and support Israel is why we are doing this... and we will do it with great pride and humility," says Greaves.

AT FIRST glance, an Israeli bobsled team is reminiscent of the much-lampooned Jamaican bobsled team, which made history by competing at the 1988 Olympic Games in Calgary, Canada, and was later immortalized in the Walt Disney movie *Cool Runnings*. However, unlike the rather laid-back, Jamaican-style collection of characters who typified the *Cool Runnings* team, the Israeli team members are serious and competitive.

Aaron Zeff and Frank, two successful San Francisco-area residents, conjured up the idea while skiing the slopes of Lake Tahoe, California, in 2001. According to Zeff, they were discussing "how to show Israel in a different light" after the beating the country's public image had been taking in the international media. Brainstorming together, they happened upon the quirky notion: Why not create a bobsled team to represent Israel at the Olympics?

"We came up with the idea of snow, Israel, and speed," recalls Zeff.

They met with Ross Dominikovich, a New Zealander with nine years of racing under his belt, who had coached his country's squad to its first two appearances in the Olympics (at Nagano and Salt Lake City) and before that

Coach Dominikovich found he had a couple of naturals in the pair.

In the 34-year-old Zeff, a business executive who was formerly a fighter pilot in the US Air Force and flew F-4 Phantoms for eight years, Dominikovich saw the reflexes and mind-set to be a dominant bobsled pilot. In Frank, a 41-year-old former National Football League star, Dominikovich found the physical strength necessary to push the sled from a standstill and serve as its brakeman. Frank, 41, spent five seasons with the San Francisco 49ers, winning two Super Bowl Championship rings, before retiring at age 26 and going on to become a successful plastic surgeon.

Greaves came aboard as a last-minute replacement for Zeff after the latter suffered a serious back injury during one of the high-speed runs. Just as it seemed that the dream of forming a blue-and-white bobsled team would be short-lived, Zeff's brother-in-law hooked the team up with Greaves, 36, a Winnipeg businessman with Israeli-Canadian citizenship, even though his last athletic achievement was sprinting on his high-school track team. Greaves is quick to point out, however, that while he's not a top athlete like Frank, he has kept up with his running and competed in half marathons.

Taking up this winter sport can be a daunting task. The bobsled, a partially enclosed

vehicle which weighs approximately 80 kilograms for a two-man team – driver and brakeman – hurtles down a course of iced, steeply banked, twisting inclines, with only sled-like runners separating the men and their sled from the ice. The sport has been a part of the Winter Olympics since their inception in 1924; now the world's best teams fly down the course at speeds topping 100 kph.

Participation comes with risks. During a recent week of training, the team crashed three times.

"You should see the bumps and bruises," Zeff says ruefully. "John [Frank] and Dave [Greaves] had first- to second-degree burns on their right shoulder from crashing... The friction from the ice burned right through the clothing. Fortunately, it was training and they had their Kevlar vest on.

"I banged my head so hard I couldn't remember the date or year for two days. That's why our team motto is 'You can't put a price on a good bobsled training run!'"

AT FIRST the Israeli team's mission was simple – finish some races without getting too badly hurt while completing the necessary runs to join the world circuit.

The first step in qualifying for the Turin Olympics in 2006 is to secure spots at the World Cup and World Championships. Entry to those events is achieved by finishing five races on three different tracks, essentially laying out enough cash to prove that the team is serious and that the members are good enough not to incur disaster in front of a worldwide audience.

The Israelis prepared to take part in the America's Cup races, each of which was run at a former Olympic site – Calgary, home of the 1988 Games; Salt Lake City, Utah, site of the 2002 Games; and Lake Placid, New York, where the 1980 Games took place. Last month, the team completed its initial task with a strong run at the Olympic track in Lake Placid, which qualified them for this week's FIBT World Championships in Königssee, Germany.

It was during the America's Cup races that team members really began to sense the excitement of representing Israel.

"Our competing is as much about the sport as it is an opportunity to reach out to the communities that we train and compete in. We have had the good fortune of meeting with the Jewish communities in those cities," Greaves relates.

"On a Shabbat in Salt Lake City, we were invited to a local shul, Kol Ami, and were each honored with an *aliya*. I am sure the journey we are on will be full of wonderful moments like that.

"We would come across Jews from other bobsled nations, particularly from Russia, some who defected from the former Soviet Union 25-plus years ago," Greaves recalls. "They approached us with a surprised 'Shalom' and could not believe that they were really seeing ISR on our jackets as we walked by. They said to us, 'What you are doing makes us so proud.' Words can't describe what that meant to us."

Earning the right to experience moments like these by representing Israel hasn't come cheaply.

According to Zeff, the team needs a minimum of \$100,000 per season for basic operating expenses. They have spent

another \$75,000 from friends and family.

Since a new bobsled costs about \$40,000, Israel 1 races in a used sled procured at about a third the price.

However, despite the financial difficulties, the team has not requested a budget allowance from the Israel Olympic Committee.

"We have not nor will we ask the Israeli government, the IOC, or the Elite Sports Federation for any funding. We understand that money is tight. All we have asked from the IOC is the privilege of representing Israel and wearing the Magen David with pride as we compete over the next three years," says Greaves.

The team will begin actively seeking sponsors soon, but "we wanted to wait until we had some tangible track results. We hope to keep improving our standing from event to event. I think we're starting to feel that we have a compelling story to tell."



Beyond raising funds for their own efforts, the team also aims to promote the sport in Israel.

"We hope to raise enough awareness and sponsorship money over the next few years to provide for a bobsledding scholarship in Israel, as well as to build a warm-weather practice track, hopefully in Metula [in conjunction with the Canada Center].

"This is just in the discussion stage, but we truly do want to build a legacy for Israeli kids," says Zeff.

AT THE end of this season, the Israeli bobsled team will have completed two years of the three-year gestation period required before being allowed to formally approach the IOC for approval.

The team will need to negotiate with the IOC to be officially sanctioned, since they will be unable to meet several of the standard recognition requirements. Though the team is internationally recognized by the FIBT and represents all of the Israelis competing in the sport today, there are several technicalities that will need to be smoothed out before Israel 1 is cleared for Turin: that there is currently only one team instead of

each; that there are no training grounds in Israel itself; and that there is no Israeli championship competition in the sport.

In the meantime, Ephraim Zinger, the secretary-general of Israel's Olympic committee, says the IOC has been receiving regular progress reports from the Israel Bobsled Federation.

The trio has surprised many just by establishing the team.

"People look at us and say, 'How do you have a bobsled team? There isn't even snow,'" recounts Greaves. "I point out that there are only 12 bobsled tracks in the entire world today, and of the between 50 to 60 nations that compete in this sport, many of them do not have snow or ice nor do they live near a track... So, why shouldn't Israel have a competitive program too? And why shouldn't it be one of the best at it?"

Adding to the complexity of the Israeli team is that fact that its members – all of whom have made aliya and hold Israeli citizenship – still reside in North America.

"Making aliya was always something in each of our minds. Bobsled brought the three of us together and bobsled helped facilitate and speed up the process. Nothing gives us more pride now than to be able to say that we are Israeli citizens – we carry our ID cards wherever we go," says Greaves.

With Zeff and Frank in California's Bay area and Greaves in Winnipeg, getting together to train is another logistical hurdle.

"We're able to get together once a month either for practice or competition. Each race offers three days of track time [with at least two runs per day] so that by the time race day comes, you have had at least six runs on the track.

"Apart from that, we have personal strength and speed coaches in our respective cities that work to keep us on track. Our trainers and coach communicate so that we are all on the same page."

The main training base is in Calgary, for several reasons. The facilities are the most advanced in the world, including a special push-start room that they rent.

Additionally, "we have an excellent working relationship with the Canadian squads, and have even been assisted by their coaching staff and athletes. Our coach, Ross [Dominikovich] has also helped coach many of the Canadian athletes in the past, so we have a super working relationship with them," explains Greaves.

The slippery track to Turin clearly won't be an easy one, but the team is working to overcome the many logistical and financial hurdles. The increasing popularity of the sport, however, presents yet another obstacle. As a result of the celebrity status achieved by the Jamaican squad, a number of snowless countries have recently formed bobsled teams. The bobsledding governing body, realizing it needed to set more stringent standards to guarantee that only quality competitors reach the Olympics, limited the number of spots for Turin to the top 28 teams, as opposed to the 45 who competed in 2002 at Salt Lake City.

Not surprisingly, the Israeli team is not deterred by this obstacle either.

"Zionism has never been an easy story... if the first pioneers were daunted and had turned away, where would we be today? They are our inspiration, as is every Jew living in Israel today. We want – no, we will – do this for them," says Greaves.

"It's nice that we are getting so much media attention. But while we keep our focus on training, we hope that more of the spotlight will go to the real heroes – the people of Israel who live strong, determined lives every single day," concludes Zeff.