

The cloud passed, and the Jamaicans could refocus on the competition. They still had a good feeling about their chances in Lillehammer, especially after coming in 6th place twice during training runs. Though the training runs were not all-out races, the informal times nonetheless served as an indicator of readiness. Sam was particularly excited and worked non-stop to make sure every technical piece was in order. Wayne, by then, had overcome most of his hamstring injury thanks to team doctor Dr. John Sandell, a chiropractor and acupuncturist Chris knew well from his days at the University of Idaho. The hamstring injury, which should have taken two weeks to heal, healed in just a few days.

On the morning of race day, Tal went to the top of the course, walked down the track, and mentally rehearsed sliding through every curve and straightaway. He took out a stopwatch and timed his imaginary run, clocking himself at 52.51 seconds. As a final preparation, he walked into the nearby Norwegian woods to be alone and meditate.

The team took the sled on a truck to the top of the track and placed it along the *fermé* (closed zone) outside the start house in the position they would race. FIBT inspectors took the runner temperatures and looked over the sled for infractions as everyone held their breath. They passed.

As each team ahead raced down the track, the Jamaicans moved their sled closer to the start area until they got the signal to slide it into place against the start blocks. Tal, Chris, Wayne, and Winston jumped up and down, hollering yelps and slapping each other until the 60-second buzzer sounded. Tal switched back into his meditative state and imagined the movements he would feel speeding down the chute. This time, he kept the demons at bay. He had no sickness or injury to worry about, no concerns about the coach, and no doubts about his ability.

Each man stood behind his push bar, fully engaged. Tal brought down his goggles and slapped his head, calling out, "One, two, three." Employing Coach Sam's push technique with hips

forward, the team pushed with more power than ever, clocking 5.02 seconds over the 50-meter start zone, one of the fastest times in the Olympic competition. After everyone hopped in the sled and tucked in perfectly, Tal drove exactly the way he had visualized and finished in a time of 52.50 seconds. Just 1/100ths of a second off from what he had clocked earlier in his mind. That run put the Jamaicans in 18th place after the first heat. With that initial success, team confidence surged. Track manager Trond, an unabashed Jamaica bobsled fan, made regular loudspeaker announcements lauding their performance.

In the second heat, the Jamaicans got off to another superb Fly-Zone start with a time of 5.06 seconds and an almost as good finish time of 52.56 seconds, leaving them in 18th place for the first day of competition. The Germany II team, driven by Harald Czudaj, took the lead, followed by Switzerland's Gustav Weder and the Germany I team, driven by Wolfgang Hoppe. Czudaj's own demons from 1992, when his race entry was held up due to espionage accusations, had left him alone too. The new American Bo-Dyn Night Train sleds driven by Brian Shimer and Randy Will barely hung on 10th and 11th place, just under a second behind Czudaj. A medal was still within reach, though it was almost certainly not gold.

That evening, back at the Olympic Village, an enthusiastic Coach Sam called a team meeting. In the course of his pep talk, he told a story about a Canadian team pushing a car up the hill in Calgary just before the race that resulted in them clocking the best sled push time ever recorded over the start zone. Unwilling to let the success of the day speak for itself, the coach said he wanted everyone to push the van up the hill just before the race the next day to give them an even better start push time. The bizarre request, even by Coach Sam's unorthodox coaching standards, took the team by surprise. No one said anything. They just let it hang in the air until Coach Sam went off to bed. Chris spoke first, saying, "There will be no pushing of any van tomorrow."

The sun shined brightly the next morning as the 30 teams lined up their sleds in the starting order. When FIBT officials approached to measure the temperature of the runners, each team turned their sleds over. Concerned about how warm the sun's rays might be despite the cold air, the Jamaicans and several other teams took no chances and put up umbrellas to shade the runners.

When the FIBT officials came over to press their gauge against the runners of the USA Team I sled driven by Shiner, the reading showed the runners exceeded the 4°C limit, and the team was disqualified on the spot. Since the Jamaicans had a later start time and were, therefore, further down the queue of sleds, they had time to quickly check their own runners to make sure they stayed within the allowance. They could not afford a second DQ, which would effectively end Jamaican bobsledding. Luckily, the temperature for the runners met the legal standard, and they kept the umbrellas over them until the officials came by to measure. Once more, everyone held their breath, this time a little longer than the day before. They passed.

The heartbreaking DQ of the American sled not only ended Shiner's Lillehammer Olympics due to a critical technicality but also scaled back the Olympic trial for the new Bo-Dyn sleds. No other team in bobsled Olympic history had been disqualified for going over the runner temperature variance limit. Some in the American camp complained that maybe the French FIBT official took the temperature improperly or maybe even wanted to knock the Americans out, but there was no evidence to support these suspicions. It can be argued that the official should have just let the Americans put their sled back on the ice and then re-measured the temperature. It seemed plain that the Americans had not taken into account the sun affecting the runners in severely cold weather. If nothing else, the DQ showed that things can go terribly wrong for the most highly experienced and capable sledders.

As the Jamaicans moved closer to the start, Sepp, the team's godfather, came over to brush the ice off their shoe spikes, a gesture

of reassurance and to let them know he had confidence in them. Coach Sam, still beaming from the day before, asked if the team had pushed the van up the hill. The team told him they had no time that morning, but maybe next year.

Team Jamaica pushed an impressive start in the third heat and posted another brilliant time of 52.39 seconds. That put them in a stunning 10th place for the heat and 15th place overall when the times for the three heats were aggregated. Per FIBT regulations, the starting order would be reversed for the top 15, which meant the Jamaicans would go first in the fourth and final heat. They could not have wished for a better outcome because of the first sled's advantage of sliding on cleaner, faster ice. It also meant that the Jamaicans had to hustle quickly to get their sled back to the top to be ready to go.

Even in the hectic scramble, Tal took the time to find his isolated spot in the woods to meditate. As he stood in the crunchy snow among the pine trees, a calm came over him that took the pressure off. He was not alone, however. As chance would have it, gold medal favorite Weder had also wandered into the woods to be alone and collect his thoughts. They locked eyes but said nothing. In that stare, however, Weder conveyed to Tal unmistakable respect. In years to come, whenever Tal found that he was doubting himself, he would replay the intense two seconds when Weder's eyes bore into his. Unlike Tal that morning, Weder was not in a good space. After three runs, Weder was 11/100ths of a second behind his German rival, Czudaj. He had already calculated that, at that level of competition, the time would be too much to make up in the final heat starting in 10 minutes.

Back at the track, CBS Olympic commentators John Morgan and Sean McDonough sensed the moment as the Jamaicans moved their sled to the starting block and played a clip of the crash in Calgary in 1988. Sean noted, "It was six years since Dudley Stokes and the Jamaicans burst onto the scene in Calgary." Back then they

were a likable sideshow. Some feared for their lives the way they were driving.”

John followed with his own comment: “Yeah, he [Tal] had no clue about driving the big four-man sled, and this crash there [in Calgary] I thought ended his career.”

Once more, Tal stood at the top of the track and peered down the frozen chute, glistening in the bright sun. As before, crowds cheered loudly and rang their cowbells for the four Jamaican bobsledders. Since *Cool Runnings* had been released four months earlier, people watching felt an even closer affinity to them. But this was no *Cool Runnings* team. Jamaicans were no longer the underdogs. A far more confident team readied themselves to race. Nothing was going to spoil the last run. In that moment, Norwegian ice water pumped through Jamaican veins.

At the buzzer, Tal, Chris, Wayne, and Winston pushed with keen awareness that redemption waited at the bottom in less than 60 seconds, if they could hold it together one more time. They built up speed over the first 15 meters before breaking the start timer beam and then kept accelerating across the 50-meter start zone. As they tucked into the sled one by one, the sounds of the crowd fell away. In the silence of their cocoon, save for the muffled rattling, they barreled down the track.

Present in the moment without thoughts and only vaguely aware of the shapes of each approaching curve, Tal peered ahead to where he needed to be. Feeling as much as seeing, he let the sled find the perfect lines, barely tweaking the steering ropes. When the Jamaicans crossed the finish line, John, the booming voice of Olympic bobsledding, belted out over the mic, “Dudley Stokes has finally figured out how to drive a sled!”

After the bobsled finally came to a stop in the braking area, Tal jumped out triumphantly. He finally let go of the pent-up emotions he had held inside for six years since Calgary and banged his hand on the top of the sled over and over in jubilation. This was Tal’s finest run, the one he had earned through pain and struggle. The

team clocked the 10th fastest time in the fourth heat as well—52.51 seconds. Their aggregate time of 3:29.96 minutes for all four heats earned them 14th place, just 1/100ths of a second ahead of the second American team, driven by Randy Will. They also beat vaunted sledders from France, Sweden, Japan, Latvia, Italy, and Russia for the biggest upset in bobsled history. FIBT officials rushed over to shake their hands and congratulate them, saying, “You are the future of bobsledding.” At last, the Jamaicans scotched the persistent notion that had dogged them since 1988—that they were a joke and didn’t deserve to be there.

Back home in Jamaica, most of the population watched the race on TV early in the morning and quickly grasped the significance of their accomplishment. People poured out into the streets, shouting with joy and honking their horns for hours. Their boys had defied steep odds and prevailed over some of the best teams in the world, including the Americans. *The Gleaner* ran a big front-page story lauding the team—a far different tone from the sports writer’s scoffing tone in 1988, when the team was heading to Calgary. Every Jamaican felt a sense of pride.

Czudaj’s Germany Team II held on to win the gold, while Weder’s Switzerland Team I took silver. Weder had managed to gain on Czudaj by 6/100ths of a second when all the times were combined, but it was not enough, as he had predicted. The Germany Team I, driven by Hoppe, stood on the podium with a bronze. Upon returning home to New York, the driver of Team USA, Randy Will, had to endure painful taunts of “Hey, you got beat by the Jamaicans.”

The team from Bosnia-Herzegovina finished in last place, but they certainly represented the Olympic spirit of inclusiveness. Racing two years after gaining independence following Yugoslavia’s disintegration and while a brutal ethnic war still raged back home, the four-man team consisted of two Bosnian Muslims, an ethnic Croat, and an ethnic Serb. They used a sled donated by the Dutch. But it was the Jamaicans who captured the spotlight, not by

crashing but by taking their place in the pantheon of bobsledding's elite.