

The Contender

For Jean Racine,
the journey to
Salt Lake City
was worth
more than gold



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Bobsled and Skeleton Federation

By Joanne C. Gerstner

Jean Racine sees herself everywhere.

A Kellogg's Crispix cereal box has her smiling face peering back at shoppers in supermarket cereal aisles. A quick click of the TV remote shows her in a VISA credit card commercial on one channel, and then chatting with Matt Lauer on NBC's "Today Show" on another.

Flip through the February 2002 issue of *Glamour* magazine and you'll find Racine featured. Read the October 2001 issue of *GQ* magazine and you'll discover Racine playing supermodel, dressed in designer clothes with teased hair to match.

Last November, she joined champion sprinter Maurice Greene at the White House to present President George W. Bush with a special USA Olympic sports jacket.

Being famous is a little bit unsettling for this OU freshman. Racine wants you to know her as more than a pretty face. In fact, she wants the world to remember her as one of the first women to win an Olympic bobsledding gold medal at the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

"That's what this is all about," says Racine, 23, referring to the attention, "being No. 1 in Salt Lake. Everything I have been doing for the past four years has been



aimed toward February 2002. It's nice to get the support of sponsors to help me out financially. It's been a blessing. But nobody's going to care about me on March 1, 2002, if I've done nothing in Salt Lake."

Racine has made news more often than even she wanted to before the Olympics, thanks to a very publicized breakup with teammate and close friend Jen Davidson just before the Olympic trials in December.

The pair was strong, with two World Cup championships and 12 other individual race wins. But troubles in the fall of 2001 had led to fourth place or lower finishes.

Davidson struggled with a leg injury that hampered her pushing ability. Racine had to make a tough decision: replace Davidson and find a new partner before the trials or hope her friend would heal in time.

She agonized over everything and came to a sad and serious conclusion: this was her best shot at winning an Olympic medal and Davidson's injured knee likely would hold them back. Racine dropped Davidson and found a new brakeman in Gea Johnson.

The new team clicked quickly, easily qualifying for the Olympic team and setting a new track record at the Park City, Utah, Olympic venue. And they won a silver medal in the final World Cup event before the Olympics, defeating most of the competition they'll face in Salt Lake.

Davidson didn't take the news well and sued Racine. A judge ruled on Jan. 29 in Racine's favor, saying she followed all proper U.S. Bobsled Federation guidelines in making her decision.

"Given the same circumstances, I don't know how I could have dealt with it any differently," Racine says. "Jen and I were teammates for three and a half years. I don't want to take that back or regret it. It's unfortunate that she couldn't deal with the professional side of the sport."

Growing fame

It's not much consolation for Racine, but controversy is probably the surest sign that she is becoming as well known as her sport.

Women's bobsledding (also called bobsleigh) has come into prominence and acceptance in the past few years and earned Olympic medal status in 1999.

It's every bit as dangerous as the men's version. The two-woman teams push their sled for the first few meters, jump in, and then take a ride down the twisting, icy, half-tunnel track to speeds reaching more than 80 mph.

Accidents on the track lead to serious injuries,

even death, but Racine remains unafraid.

"It's a matter of yes, I know I could be really hurt out there but I still love doing it," Racine says. "I've been lucky — bruises and a few scares, but never anything where I was so shaken up that I wouldn't go back. The speed is a rush. It's a thrill to have that speed, to control it, to make something out of it. I can't explain it better than that, it's just like a special zone of being in that moment."

Racine, standing 5-foot-4 and 135 pounds, is the driver. She makes split-second tactical decisions, which can win or lose races. A former member of the junior national luge team, Racine came to bobsledding knowing the feel and proper line needed to negotiate tight, banked walls.

Johnson's speed and power propels the sled at the start, with her main duties over in mere seconds.

Racine got into the sport at 17, making the switch from luge after watching bobsled teams in action at the Lake Placid Olympic track. She called 800-BOBSLED, got information on the national team, tried out and the rest is history.

But being the world's best in bobsled comes at a price.

Racine has been forced to move away from her native Waterford and put her business studies at OU on hold for a year or two to properly train.

She lives, temporarily, in Park City, Utah, to have easy access to virtually unlimited training runs at the official bobsled park. The team also competes extensively throughout Europe, taking her farther from home.

Their off-track training is grueling and time consuming, with hours of running sprints, weight lifting and working on developing their explosive-ness for a strong push start.

"Going to school is easier than my training, less exhausting," Racine says, laughing. "I really enjoyed going to school at Oakland, I miss it. I like learning things and challenging myself. But there was no way I could train the way I needed to and be ready for Salt Lake and still be in Rochester studying. There are no Olympic-caliber bobsled tracks anywhere near Oakland. And I think the professors would have killed me for missing as much class as I probably would have had to cut this winter before the Olympics.

"It's OK though. I know I'm going to come back to school. This is just the priority right now."

Staying tough

Racine's life was filled with drama even before she made the tough decision about Davidson in December. She spent most of 2001 grieving for her biggest fan and truest confidante — her mother Cathy — who died May 14, 2001, from scleroderma, a rare connective tissue disorder. Racine watched her mom deteriorate progressively as she battled the disorder for years.

Racine's maternal grandmother, Helene, died February 2001 from lupus.

"You ask God what is going to come next," Racine says. "At times, you just wonder if your heart can take more sadness. But somehow you go on. You have to keep the hope."

The family had high hopes in March 2001 for Cathy, as she received a kidney transplanted from her sister, Linda. Cathy told Racine that she would recover in time to see her compete in the Olympics. But complications ensued and Cathy was unable to recover. She had sparked the start of Racine's Olympic odyssey 10 years ago.

"She somehow scraped together \$500 to send me to this luge camp I

had heard about," Racine recalls. "Not many moms would let their kids spend \$500 on something as crazy as luge. She did. And never had any hesitation about it. I always dreamed about being in the Olympics. But in every dream, I shared my success with my mom.

"I miss her. Just when I am at my lowest though, I feel her somewhere in my heart. I have to hold on to that."

Racine's sister, Christine, says the rest of the family will serve as her support network.

"Jean won't have to look far to find us," Christine says. "We'll be the ones screaming our heads off by the track. Mom's going to be with us, too. We're all behind Jean no matter what happens."

Cashing in

Times have gotten better financially for Racine, even though, at press time, she hadn't yet completed her Olympic dream.

Racine and Davidson's successful partnership had led to an estimated \$500,000 in endorsements from Kellogg's, General Motors, Xerox, Northwestern Mutual Insurance and GNC sports performance stores. The pair did print and TV commercials,

along with personal appearances for the companies. They even had their own Web site. But the breakup changed everything.

Their six TV commercials were yanked, the smiling posters of Racine and Davidson beside their sled came down and companies tried to figure out what to do.

"It's like a divorce," says agent Evan Morgenstein, who handles Racine's and Davidson's affairs. "It's a difficult thing, but we're going to get through it."

Female bobsledders normally don't live well off the sport. It's costly to buy and maintain elite sleds and to travel all over Europe for the races.

If everything goes right in Salt Lake, Racine could win gold and make up to another million dollars in endorsements. And of course, live for years off the fame that comes with an Olympic gold medal.

Racine thinks all the pain she's been through the past year will pay off.

"No pain, no gain, right? I feel at peace and confident," she says. "What's going to happen will happen in Salt Lake. I definitely have a good feeling. I'm confident and I think this is my time." ■

Joanne C. Gerstner CAS '93 covers the Olympics for The Detroit News.



Photo by Harry How/Getty Images