

Jamaican bobsled is back with a women's team — driving a rental

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PYEONGCHANG



Jazmine Fenlator-Victorian and Carrie Russell of Jamaica pose after the women's bobsled World Cup race in Innsbruck.

The Jamaican women's bobsled team is driving a rental at the 2018 Winter Olympics.

After it discovered that its Japanese-built ride wasn't up to international competition specs, the team was forced to rent a Latvian-made sled from a German bobsled club.

"The equipment was not viable for us in order for us to qualify for these Olympics," said Jazmine Fenlator-Victorian, the team's pilot. "So in the middle of the season we had to kind of make an emergency change to have competitive equipment."

Just another obstacle overcome by Jamaica's first women bobsledders, who'll take to the winding iced concrete track in Pyeongchang some 30 years after a men's team from the Caribbean island captured the world's imagination by racing at the Winter Games in Calgary.

Their exploits inspired the 1993 Walt Disney movie "Cool Runnings," which in turn helped attract a generation of youth from all backgrounds and countries to the sport — including several of the African American members of the U.S. women's bobsled team.

Fenlator-Victorian and teammates Carrie Russell and Audra Segree recognize the feel-good island rhythm and rhyme legacy that their male predecessors brought to the Olympics.

They nicknamed their bobsled "Mr. Cool Bolt," a homage to "Cool Runnings" and retired Jamaican track legend Usain Bolt. But the Jamaican women are also intent on showing the world that they're stone-cold competitors and not a cute female "Cool Runnings 3."

"We're trying to change that narrative," she said. "We know that we're one of the best on the hill and we hope that we can optimize our potential when it counts in Pyeongchang."

Getting here wasn't easy. Like their male counterparts, the Jamaican women's team has had to deal with financial hurdles. The team doesn't have deep-pocket sponsors like rival nations.

"Jamaica, if it was any other sport, we'd see far more support from the corporate in our country," said Russell, a world-class sprinter who transitioned to bobsled in the 2016-17 season. "It forced the (Jamaica Bobsleigh and Skeleton) federation to invest in us out of pocket."

Damien King, an economist at Jamaica's University of the West Indies, added more ice water last week to Jamaica's quest for winter sport superiority, calling its Olympic bobsled participation "ridiculous."

"It does not emerge from local capacity, activity, or behaviour (not to mention geography!), and so does not REPRESENT Jamaica," King wrote in a tweet last week. "It is and will always be just tokenism."

Fenlator-Victorian endured criticism from some people in the United States after she quit the U.S. women's bobsled team in 2015 after 11 seasons to join Jamaica's effort.

The New Jersey native, who has dual citizenship, competed in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and finished in 11th place in a two-person bobsled with U.S. track and field star Lolo Jones.

"When I went back home to Jamaica to represent them, I got a lot of hate mail from different people for being a traitor and representing another country," she said. "I'm not representing my father's country, I'm representing my country. And to me, that's very important."

The "haterade" that Fenlator-Victorian received only crystallized her reasons for switching teams and nations.

"This is for our nation, this is for little girls and boys, this is for the black community," she said. "This is something that can change labels and racism, and for us, that's huge."

Russell said Fenlator-Victorian's addition to the Jamaica's women's bobsled program has had a huge impact, bringing hands-on bobsled experience that she and Segree, another convert from track and field, lacked.

Russell said the bobsled program's men would try to explain things but the help would sometimes come off more as a "you do what I say situation."

"It was more of a one-man show, not a collective group," Russell said. "When Jazmine decided to come and be part of the program, the female group itself became far more organized. She had the patience and the time to teach us the basics. She was far more detailed."

And far more competitive. The team had been on the road since October, competing and rigorously training to minimize mistakes in Pyeongchang.

"This is just a stepping stone to where we really want to be," Fenlator-Victorian told her teammates. "Because come Pyeongchang, we going to have all our stuff together and we're going to be unstoppable."

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YOUTUBE VIDEO:

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=MNR7GOWXADQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNR7GOWXADQ)

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