

www.nytimes.com/2002/02/18/sports/olympics-skeleton-skeleton-plunges-face-first-back-into-the-winter-games.html

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14 There is a lot more to it than that, as Shea, who is from Hartford, would learn. The G-forces pin the rider on the tiny sled like a bug on a cork, and even a glance to the left

or right, up or down, can minutely shift a rider's neck and shoulder muscles and alter direction and even speed.

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22 "I could handle the speed," said Soule, thinking back to his first skeleton ride, 10 years ago in Lake Placid, N.Y. It was the fact that his face was so close to the ice—sometimes the riders' helmets bounce or scrape the ice or bounce against the walls—that had him screaming.

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25 That may be why most of the people who do it are adventure lovers. Soule, for instance, is a cliff diver, rock climber and stuntman.

26 Almost everyone who does it, he said, are the grown-up versions of the boys and girls who used to ride cardboard boxes down hills, belly down and face first, because that was where the fun was.

27 In the Olympic Village, athletes in other events ask about getting tickets and treat the skeleton athletes with a certain amount of respect, if not awe.

28 "Maybe they have childhood memories of going over the hill headfirst," Soule said.

29 It is said to be the oldest sledding sport in the world, invented in the 1880's in St. Moritz, Switzerland, but it has twice been banned as too extreme for the Olympics. It was an Olympic sport in St. Moritz in 1928 but was dropped from ensuing Olympics because it was considered too perilous. It was resurrected, again in St. Moritz, in the 1948 Winter Games, and again dropped.

30 Petitions by skeleton riders in other international competitions—especially in the United States—persuaded Olympic officials to reinstate the sport.

31 There are only two tracks suitable for skeleton in the United States—here and in Lake Placid—and unlike figure skaters and snowboarders, the athletes do not find deep-pocket sponsors knocking at the door. The athletes' bodies entirely cover the sled, so slapping a decal on it is futile.

32 Plus, the sleds often look as if they have been in a war, blasted by welding torches, crudely padded with foam or duct tape. As the athletes flash past the spectators, they look as if they are on nothing at all, just sliding on their bellies, arms at their sides, feet slightly apart.

33 At one news conference, a reporter asked Shea why he had called the sport the "Champagne of Thrills." He said that was not what he said. "Actually, I call bobsled the 'Champagne of Thrills,'" he said. "Skeleton is the 'Moonshine of Thrills.'"

34 Many of the competitors work part-time and full-time jobs so that they can live near the tracks. Tristan Gale of Ruidoso, N.M., works at a Home Depot. "Skeleton doesn't pay as much as figure skating," she said. "Normal people can do this. You don't need to own anything to do this."

35 Normal people might be able to afford it—the sleds are homemade—but they do not want to.

36 The United States Olympian Lea Anne Parsley is a firefighter from Granville, Ohio, who wants to be a smoke jumper. Obviously, she is a brave woman. She climbed onto a skeleton sled in 1998 for the first time.

37 "Good thing I hadn't seen it before," she said. She would not have gone through with it.

38 Gale sums up the experience this way:

39 "There's nothing like this in real life."

40 Dewitt remembers his first run, in 1997. He remembers approaching a curve and thinking, "I have no concept of the physics that are about to be involved."

OLYMPICS: SKELETON

ORIGINAL TEXT

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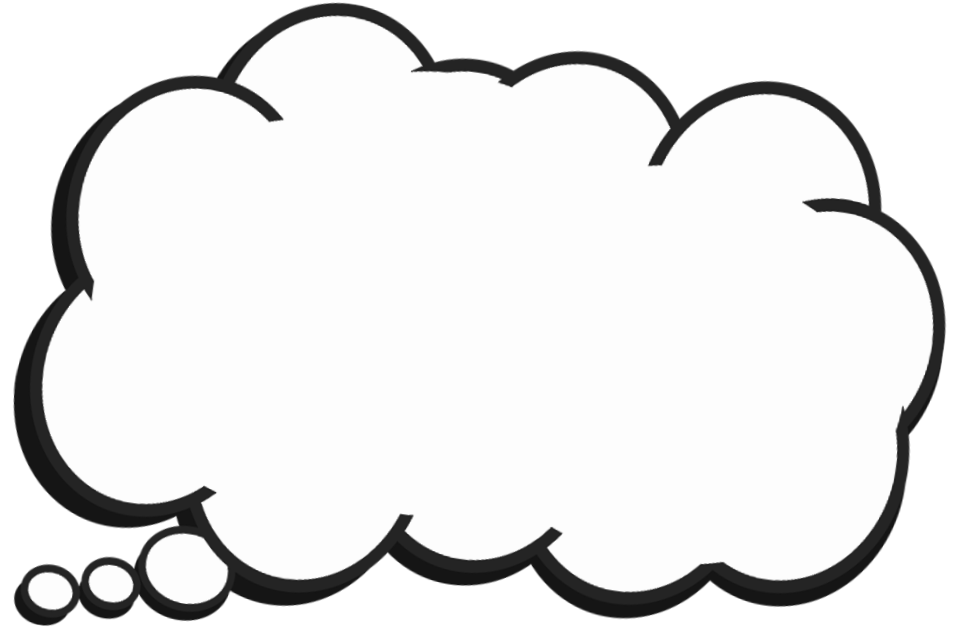
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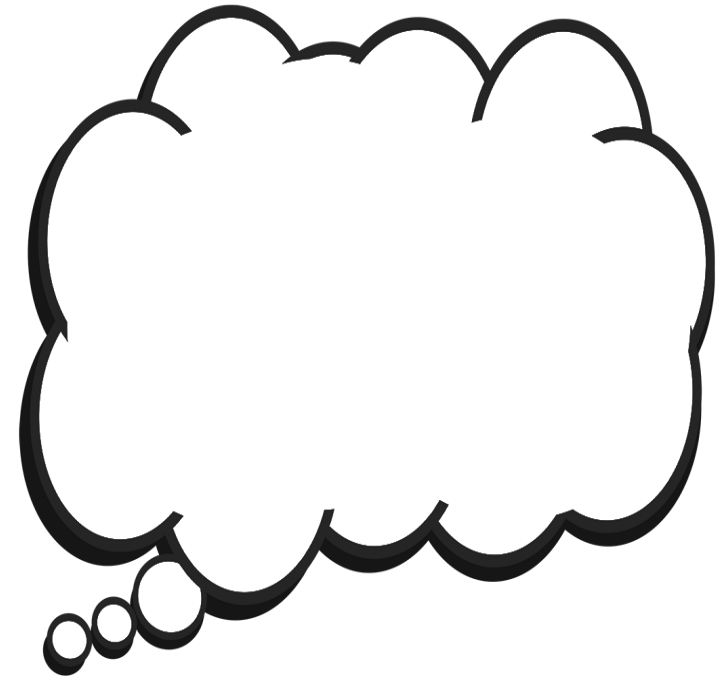


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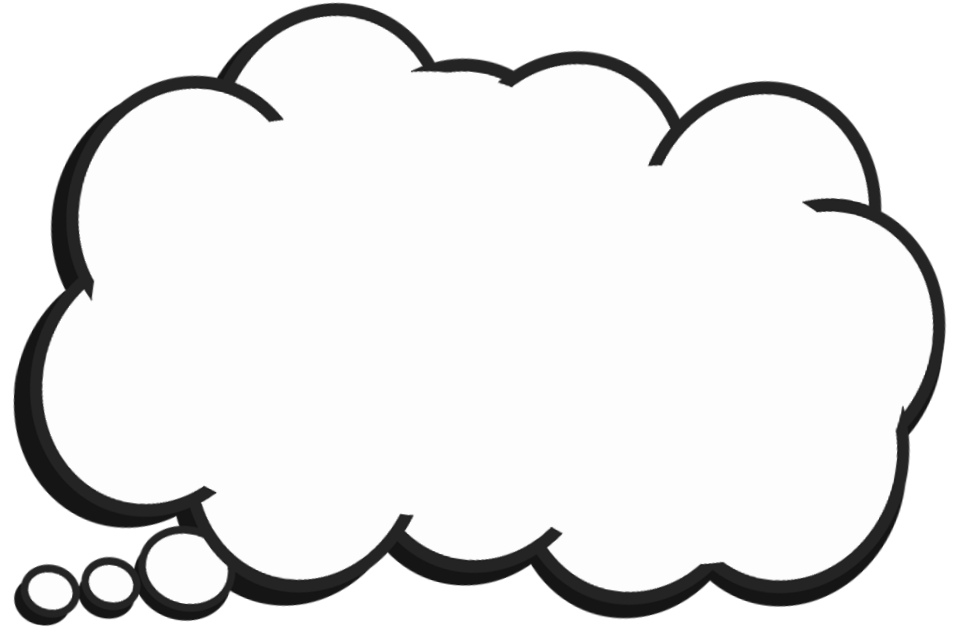


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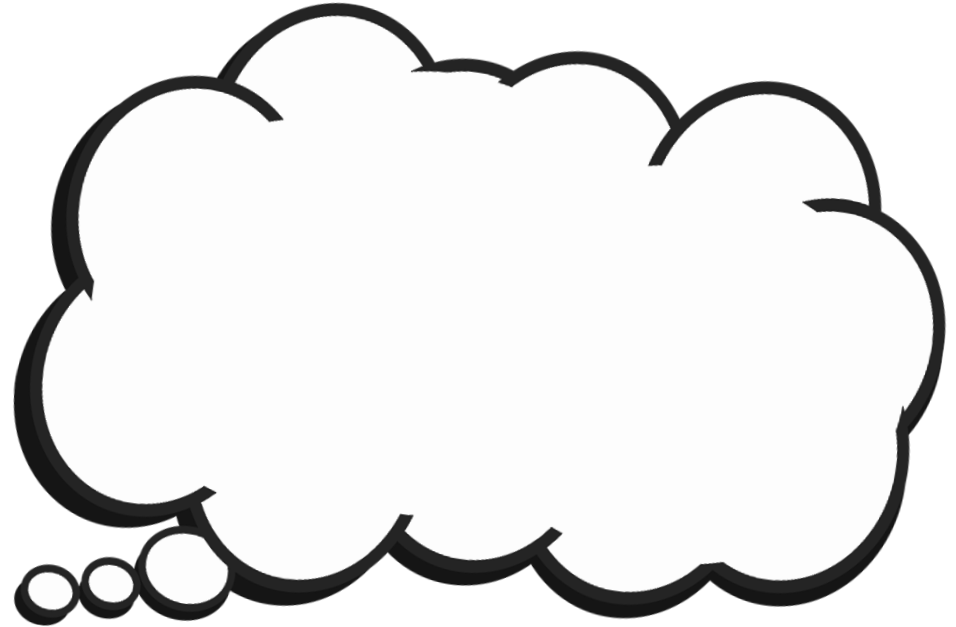


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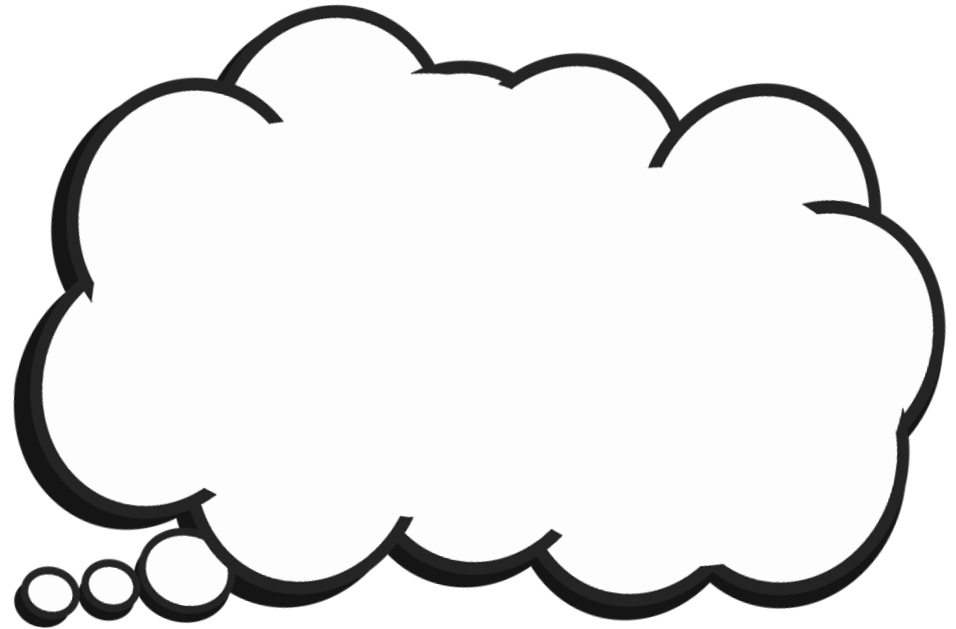


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