

# The Penn Bobsled Team

By Lou Calomaris, W'68, WG'70

## I Intro

It was to be the first collegiate bobsled team in the country. Paul McCobb, C'68, had a goal. He wanted to be the first collegiate driver (pilot) to go to the olympics. He convinced the Dean of Men, Gerald Robinson, to give his approval for Penn's bobsled team, the first and only college bobsled team in the country at that time.



## II The Offer

It was late fall of 1967 when one of my roommates, Michael Sulzbach, C'68, first approached me about his fraternity brother's idea for a Penn bobsled team. I had piled up a lot of credits every summer from taking courses at GW and Catholic Universities. By the end of the fall semester I was taking less than a normal course load and was bored. Especially since my damaged knee kept me from fall football. It was during this period that I met Paul McCobb and was easily convinced that a bobsled team was not only feasible but a cool idea. When Paul contacted his father, a world renowned industrial furniture designer in New York City, his idea was rejected. His dad thought it was too dangerous and wouldn't support it. Paul had to work a second job as a foreign car mechanic to earn the money for his bobsled instead. He purchased an aerodynamic Italian designed Podar bobsled which had belonged to the past U.S. two man bobsled world champions. The bobsled cost more than \$5,000. Paul was able to get Dean Robinson's commitment to let him represent Penn with his self funded idea for the bobsled team. I must admit that I was intrigued from the outset. Paul convinced me and William "Willie" Marshall, C'68, to join him on the bobsled team. Willie and I were to be the brakemen.

## III The First Trip to Lake Placid

Paul's timing was propitious. The bobsled season started at the same time as our Christmas/ semester break. Paul was thrilled when he found out that my father provided our transportation in the form of his 1964 gold and ivory topped Cadillac DeVille. At least we would travel in style. I remember our first drive to Lake Placid. Half way there we were hit by a whiteout winter storm which reduced our visibility to less than a car length. This prompted many stops to wait out the storm. Towards the end of the New York thruway, we stopped for gas. In those days gas attendants still pumped your gas and I distinctly remember the fellow looking down at the car's tags and saying, "Hmm, you're from DC, aren't you?" He followed up with, "Where are you guys going?" When we told him Lake Placid, his response was, "How good is your antifreeze?" I remembered my father telling me that he always had it good for a few degrees below zero, which was plenty for DC. The attendant good naturedly laughed and said, "for Lake Placid, you should be good for 40 degrees below zero". Antifreeze in those days was so cheap I knew he was not just trying to sell me. He was actually worried we would lose the engine. Our first night in Lake Placid the temperature was 37 degrees below zero! This was before they had come up with the concept of windchill factor. The guy saved my engine!

## **IV The Course**

Bobsled courses rely on altitude and the momentum of going down a mountain slope. The Lake Placid run was on Mt. VanHoevenberg. I remember taking my first ride on an old pre WWII four man conservation sled. Before the run they had you sign an injury and death waiver. That got my attention right away. Even the old clunker conservation sleds got your adrenaline flowing (70-75 mph as compared to 80-90 mph on a current racing sled). In those days the only bobsled course in the US was at Lake Placid which was built in 1930 for the 1932 Winter Olympics. Lake Placid was an ideally bucolic winter and summer resort in the Adirondack Mountains. It was also the only fully integrated winter resort with not only a bobsled course but a luge run and downhill and slalom courses. I still remember the first time I was in the local pub, The Dewdrop Inn. I saw a photo of Adirondacks' most famous personage, Faye Dunaway, who worked as a waitress there 1960-61 when she was a college student. In those days though, the bobsled course was the real attraction. The course had sixteen turns and was considered to be the most dangerous in the world because of its two "S turns". The Lake Placid run also had longer straightaways creating higher speeds making the "s" turns even more dangerous. These types of counter turns were not featured in the European courses. The most difficult "s" turn was named, "Zig-zag", the thirteenth and fourteenth turns. If you made a mistake in the zig turn the odds were that the zag turn would end your chances of a successful run. One of the world's most famous four man driver and decorated Olympian, from Italy, Sergio Zardini, was killed in the Zig-zag turn on February 12, 1967. Ironically, Zardini held the world record on this course when he was killed racing the Shaeffer National Diamond Trophy. You no doubt have seen the narrow ice channelled course in the Olympics. That has not changed. What many people don't know is that you are not allowed to brake during a race.

## **V The Rules**

A two man bobsled has a maximum weight of 750 lbs, including the brakeman and driver. The two riders, but especially the brakeman, are responsible for propelling you down the course from the start. There are posts (like duck blinds) set up along the course so they can see the sled's entire run. An automatic disqualification is issued for braking during a race because excessive braking would create dangerous rutts in the straightaways. The snow rooster combs from braking are very obvious. The brakeman is only allowed to brake after the sled crosses the finish line. The races are comprised of the best two of three heats on two consecutive days. The sled and its occupants are weighed at the end of a race. An important sidebar note should be made at this time, McCobb had a method to his madness, he was a rookie driver and more than reckless. He had decided the value of a big brakeman before others realized it. He knew that a big offensive lineman who had been pushing blocking sleds would have a real advantage; but, it wasn't just the leg drive. A 250lb brakeman would only be pushing a 500 lb load. The average brakeman at that time probably weighed in at 175lbs and would be pushing 75 lbs more than a 250lb tackle. This meant that the initial times from the top of the mountain would be greatly improved. This would increase with momentum as you moved down the mountain. Our times at the top were almost always excellent. The question would be if Paul could navigate us to the bottom without impacting the side walls too much.

## **VI The Shaeffer National Diamond Trophy**

If memory serves me correctly, there were four races in a season and then the International Gold Cup to decide the Olympic qualifiers. Penn actually won the Shaeffer National Diamond Trophy with a time of 2:38:38 beating past Olympic driver, Charlie McDonald, by four-hundredths of a second. Paul was able to have the best two of three heats (instead of four of six because of weather) and actually finish the race, which for him was somewhat of a miracle. This win was recorded in "The New York Times World Record Book" for the best time that year.

## VII The International Gold Cup

The last and most important race of the season, The International Gold Cup, and yours truly was the designated brakeman. I was bigger and stronger than Willie even though I wasn't nearly the athlete. William Marshall was an accomplished skier and a downhill racer; but, I was an enormous offensive lineman with the perfect physique for a brakeman. So I drew the assignment for that day. I was never much for remembering dreams. But the night before the Gold Cup I was awakened from a sound sleep by a big white blur and I felt something in my lip, a splinter. I totally discounted this dream because the course was all ice blocks, no wood that I knew of, anywhere. I had been down this course many times and often in slo-mo as Paul would have me brake so he could look closely at the turns and walls. Shaving that morning I still discounted the strange dream. Again, I knew there was no wood. At breakfast, before the race, I remember the German brakeman engaging me in conversation about my driver, Paul. "You know he is not just inexperienced but also reckless. You must be careful". The only way a brakeman gets seriously injured. Is if he gets knocked out of the sled. If anything feels wrong just make sure you have a death grip on the handles." Later that day we were leading the race after four heats. On the fifth heat I could feel that Paul's approach to Zig-zag was off. I remembered what the German brakeman prophetically said. There was a big white blur and I felt like I got hit by a pile of linemen all at once. The sled was dead on the track at the bottom of curve 15. Paul had entered Zig in an off line and we went high into Zag. Paul kept saying, "Cal, are you alright?" I realized my helmet had been knocked off and I could not put any pressure on my right hand or shoulder to get out of the sled. Then I realized that the right arm of my parka was shredded with wood. The exit of Zig-zag was lined with oak boards. When I was sitting on a steel observation table in the emergency room, I kept feeling something in my upper lip which turned out to be a wooden splinter. I have never discounted ESP or premonitions again. My right hand had three stress fractures in my fingers from gripping the handle so tightly. My right shoulder was dislocated from being wrenched by the crash impact and of course there was the wood splinter.

## VIII The Aftermath

No Gold Cup, no Olympics. Instead a stay at the University of Pennsylvania hospital and a very worried mother because she hadn't heard from me for two weeks. On my arrival home in DC, I went to an appointment with the orthopedist who had me give up football at the risk of not being able to walk straight later in life. He had told me to take up a safer sport. When he asked me why my arm was in a sling he could not stop laughing when I told him the safe sport I took up was bobsledding.

## IX Addendum

A footnote provided by Paul McCobb for the sake of historical accuracy. A year after the zig zag crash, while preparing his sled for the next season, Paul made a discovery, with an observation from an expert bobsled mechanic. The limiters on the steering wheel, that would prevent the runners from going out of line, had been removed by the former owners of the sled. This accounted for both the crash and other difficulties McCobb had on the more severe turns and curves. Had he discovered this in the prior season he may well have gone on to the Olympics.

Click [here](#) to read the story in the Daily Pennsylvanian.