# ****Why Would British Athletes Choose Winter Sports?****

The British terrain and climate are not really designed for winter sports – there are few mountains suitable for skiing and our winters simply aren’t cold enough. Yet Team GB will be taking a 56-strong squad to the winter Olympics in Sochi. So how do athletes from a green and pleasant land come to be involved in winter sports on snow and ice?

Paths into winter sports are varied and often quite different to the more conventional routes seen in summer Olympic sports. There is also a large variation between winter sports – bobsleigh, skiing, ice skating and snowboard athletes, for example, will all have come to their sport in different ways.

The majority of athletes have a background of junior participation, often having made their entry into the sport at a young age, but in some Winter Olympic sports this is not the case. It is very common for athletes in these sports to start late, having begun their sporting career elsewhere.

Take bobsleigh and skeleton for example: these are sports that you can only start as an adult – you just can’t do them as a child. This makes career paths into these sports very different. Olympic silver medallist Shelly Rudman didn’t try skeleton until the age of 21, which is very late compared to athletes from other Olympic sports. This contradicts some models of athletic development, which suggest that investment in a sport as a junior is a requirement for success.

Many athletes transfer from other sports and many are “spotted” as potential winter sport athletes through so called “talent transfer programmes”, such as UK Sport’s Girls 4 Gold programme which started in 2008. Skeleton athlete and potential 2014 Olympic medallist Lizzy Yarnold is a graduate from the Girls 4 Gold programme, having transferred into the sport from athletics.

## **The slide from athletics**

Craig Pickering in a previous, less icy, life. David Davies/PA

Transition from athletics seems to be a common route into sliding sports: bobsleigh, skeleton and luge. Olympic skeleton medallists Shelly Rudman (silver in 2006) and Amy Williams (gold in 2010) both had a background in athletics before switching to skeleton. The speed and power elements of athletics transfer well into the push start required in both skeleton and bobsleigh.

Bobsleigh has a long-established tradition of recruiting high calibre track and field athletes into its fold. Current GB squad members Craig Pickering and Joel Fearon are both sprinters who have represented Great Britain, with Pickering achieving medals at World and European level. On his transition into bobsleigh Craig Pickering said, “I’ve been in athletics for so long I started to feel a bit jaded. This is a new challenge I’m really excited by.”

The transition from athletics to bobsleigh is not exclusive to the UK. For example, 100m Olympic medallist Lauryn Williams and world 60m hurdles champion Lolo Jones will be representing the USA in the sport in Sochi.

## **Live near a ski slope**

Paths into winter sports are often dictated by opportunity. Facilities for winter sports participation are few and far between and so location plays an important part. If you live near an ice rink you are more likely to become involved in speed skating or figure skating.

Kate Summerhayes, who will be representing Team GB in freestyle skiing in Sochi, learned to ski when she was six at the Sheffield Ski Village, which was only ten minutes away from her home. There are certainly geographic patterns in team membership – for example the GB curling and Nordic skiing teams are dominated by Scottish athletes. Is this connected to there being better facilities and infrastructure for these sports in Scotland? A lack of winter sport facilities in the UK could certainly be hindering our prospects and the types of facilities available may limit the range of our participation.

Interestingly, Team GB normally only enter athletes into the short track speed skating event and not the long track events. This could be a consequence of limited long track speed skating facilities.

## **Money and role models**

Finance is also strongly related to opportunity – participation in winter sports often requires overseas travel and expensive equipment. At the upper ends lottery funding and sponsorship is available, but the financial aspects may prevent potential athletes starting a winter sport. Learning to ski as a child, for example, is a privilege largely reserved for children whose parents have the income to afford skiing holidays.

Finally, one of the most important factors influencing why an athlete might move into a winter sport is role models. Medals won in the past three Winter Olympics in skeleton have certainly boosted the profile of the sport and may encourage more athletes to consider taking it up.

Any British athletes gaining medal honours in Sochi will certainly be ambassadors for winter sports and have the potential to inspire a generation to take to the slopes, ice rink or track.

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