

RD PHOTO ESSAY

COOL RUNNINGS

How a bunch of beach sprinters morphed into extreme skeleton sledders, careening headfirst down mountains at breakneck speeds in pursuit of Olympic glory

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VINCENT L. LONG

The process of turning warm-weather runners into Olympic sledders needed a combination of high-tech mechanical engineering and good old Australian improvisation. Main picture: a trial run on the San Sicario track near Turin, Italy. Inset: the final team in a huddle comprised (clockwise from bottom) Emma Lincoln-Smith, Michelle Steele, Bindee Johnston and Melissa Hoar. Below, from left to right: Hoar from Dalmeny, NSW, body skates on the Australian Institute of Sports' running tracks in Canberra; Melissa Breasley from St Kilda, Melbourne, replicates G-forces with weighted bags at home while watching a DVD of a skeleton competition track; Nicole Apps from Bimby, NSW, hitches a ride behind a ute; Steele from Bundaberg, Queensland, undergoes aerodynamic testing in Monash University's wind tunnel

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Australians like to have a go – even at an oddball Olympic sport that has no history or place in a flat, sandy country. The obscure mountain sport of skeleton sledding involves charging headfirst down an icy track on a wafer-thin board at speeds of up to 130 km/h. With an eye on boosting medals at the Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy, and just 19 months out from the Games, the AIS began a nationwide talent search for athletes capable of competing. Top of the scouts' list were athletes with speed, and beach sprinters fitted their bill. But turning them into Olympic-level sledders – when some had never even seen snow – took intense and inventive training. And only one athlete would make the final selection to represent Australia at the Games. Clockwise from top left: Johnston training in the gym; Steele contemplates a disappointing run; Hoar adjusts her hip pod; Johnston in action; and coach Terry Holland keeps a close watch at the icy track





Explosive acceleration is the key to fast times. The intensity of the experience gets to Emma Lincoln-Smith from Sydney (below far left and below left). Selected as the sole, long-shot Aussie competitor for the 20th Olympic Winter Games, Michelle Steele (above and right), a 19-year-old former surf lifesaver, dreamt of running for Australia before switching to sliding on ice: "The whole journey has been amazing"

