

Jamaica: How a subtropical country could joining the Olympic Winter games.

It is 1988, and at the starting line of the bobsleigh track in Calgary, Canada, the field is dominated by countries best known for their cold winters and long-standing winter sports traditions, including Switzerland, Canada, the United States, Austria, Italy, the Soviet Union, East Germany, West Germany, and the United Kingdom. Yet among these familiar names stands a team no one expected to see: Jamaica.

For the first time in Olympic history, a Caribbean nation competed in the bobsleigh event at the Winter Olympics, proving that even a tropical island could challenge the conventions of winter sports.



Flag of Jamaica. Source: wikipedia.org

Country of sprinters

When people think of Jamaica, they often think of legendary sprinters such as Usain Bolt, Yohan Blake, Asafa Powell, and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce. That is hardly surprising. Situated in the heart of the Caribbean, Jamaica enjoys a warm, tropical climate throughout most of the year, making it one of the last countries you would expect to see at a winter sporting event.

That is precisely why it came as such a surprise when Devon Harris, Dudley Stokes, Michael White, Freddy Powell, and Chris Stokes lined up at the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. It marked the first time—but certainly not the last—that a country with a tropical climate competed at the Winter Games.



But how did Jamaica, a nation with no snow and no winter sports tradition, end up sending a bobsleigh team to the world's biggest winter sporting event?



Jamaicans at the start of their Olympic Winter games. Source: Youtube.com

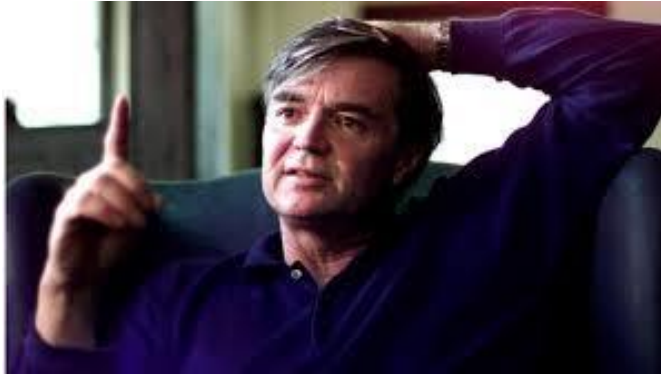
The road to the Olympic Winter games

How did Jamaica even qualify for the 1988 Winter Olympics? After all, the country had already established itself as a regular participant in the Summer Olympics following the Second World War. Since the 1948 Summer Games, Jamaica had competed in almost every edition, earning a global reputation for its success in the 100- and 200-meter sprint events. Over the decades, the island became synonymous with world-class sprinting, producing legendary athletes such as Usain Bolt. To this day, Bolt remains the fastest man in history, thanks to his world record of 9.58 seconds, set on August 16, 2009, at the World Athletics Championships in Berlin.

The idea of competing in the Winter Olympics, however, did not originate on the running track. Instead, it began at the U.S. Embassy in Kingston. In 1985, George B. Fitch, who was serving at the embassy at the time, suggested that Jamaica might be ready for an entirely different sporting challenge: winter sports. His reasoning was simple: "A true athlete should be able to excel in any sport."

Together with businessman William Maloney, Fitch championed the creation of a Jamaican bobsleigh team. Bobsleigh seemed like the perfect fit, as success in the sport depends heavily on explosive power and exceptional sprinting speed at the start of a race—qualities for which Jamaican athletes were already world-renowned. Fitch and Maloney believed that Jamaica's sprinting talent could be transformed into something extraordinary, giving the country a unique opportunity to make sporting history.





George B. Fitch is seen as the founding father of the Jamaican bobsleigh team. Source: Moserfuneralhome.com

After receiving approval from the Jamaican Olympic Association, the search began for athletes willing to join the country's first-ever bobsleigh team. Finding suitable candidates proved more difficult than expected. The sport was virtually unknown in Jamaica, the training conditions were far from ideal, and resources were extremely limited. In the end, the organizers even had to recruit volunteers to complete the team.

That is how athletes such as Dudley Stokes, Devon Harris, and Michael White became part of the Jamaican bobsleigh squad. What had started as a bold and unconventional idea was gradually becoming a reality. Jamaica's journey to the Winter Olympics had officially begun.

Training camp

Thanks to sponsorship from George B. Fitch and support from the U.S. Embassy in Kingston, the athletes were able to attend training camps in Austria and Canada. The team was coached by Howard Siler and Pat Brown, both former American Olympic bobsledders. Confidence grew, the necessary resources became available, and Jamaica was ready for its Olympic debut.

After months of preparation, the moment finally arrived in 1988. In Calgary, Jamaica became the first tropical nation in history to compete in the Winter Olympic Games. Regardless of the final result, simply reaching the starting line was already a historic achievement.

However, one incident highlighted just how improvised the project still was at times. During training sessions on frozen lakes in Canada, Caswell Allen suffered an injury after a crash. His replacement was found in a rather unexpected way: Chris Stokes, the brother of Dudley Stokes, had only traveled with the team to support his brother. Before he



knew it, he was selected as a last-minute replacement—despite having never sat in a bobsleigh before.



The Jamaican team on a press conference after their participation in the Winter Olympic games in 1988. Source: today.com

Results

Given the circumstances described above, it was hardly surprising that the Jamaican bobsleigh team finished near the bottom of the standings at the 1988 Winter Olympics. Dudley Stokes and Michael White made history as the first Jamaican athletes ever to compete at the Winter Games, but sporting success proved difficult to achieve. In their Olympic debut, they finished in 34th place in the two-man bobsleigh event. After four runs, they ended the competition in 30th place out of 41 participating teams.

The four-man bobsleigh event was far from smooth either. During the first run, Stokes broke a component of the bobsleigh, while in the second run Michael White struggled to maintain the correct position inside the sled. The team finished third and second from last in the two runs, respectively.

For many countries, such results would have been considered a complete failure. In Jamaica, however, the team's participation was celebrated as a historic achievement. They had accomplished the seemingly impossible: becoming the first tropical nation ever to compete at the Winter Olympics. Their story continues to live on today and even became part of popular culture. In 1993, the film *Cool Runnings* was released, bringing the Jamaican bobsleigh adventure to a worldwide audience.

It was not their final ranking, but their courage to participate that earned Jamaica a lasting place in Olympic history.





The cover of the movie Cool Runnings, which got inspired by the achievement of the Jamaican bobsleigh team in 1988. Source: IMDB.com

Conclusion

Although the sporting results were disappointing, the story of the Jamaican bobsleigh team became one that would never be forgotten. Their courage, determination, and even their occasional amateur mistakes were precisely what made their Olympic journey so remarkable. The team proved that participation can sometimes be more important than victory—and they became an inspiration for other countries outside the traditional world of winter sports.

That legacy is still visible today. During the 2026 Winter Olympics, countries such as Haiti, Benin, and Pakistan are set to compete—sometimes represented by only a single athlete, and sometimes making their debut in Olympic history. Whether these athletes were directly inspired by the Jamaican bobsleigh team is uncertain, but the message Jamaica left behind in 1988 remains undeniable.

It did not matter where you came from. With determination, courage, and the willingness to challenge expectations, even the impossible could become reality: a tropical nation competing at the Winter Olympics. That is exactly why the Jamaican bobsleigh team remains one of the most iconic stories in Olympic history.

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