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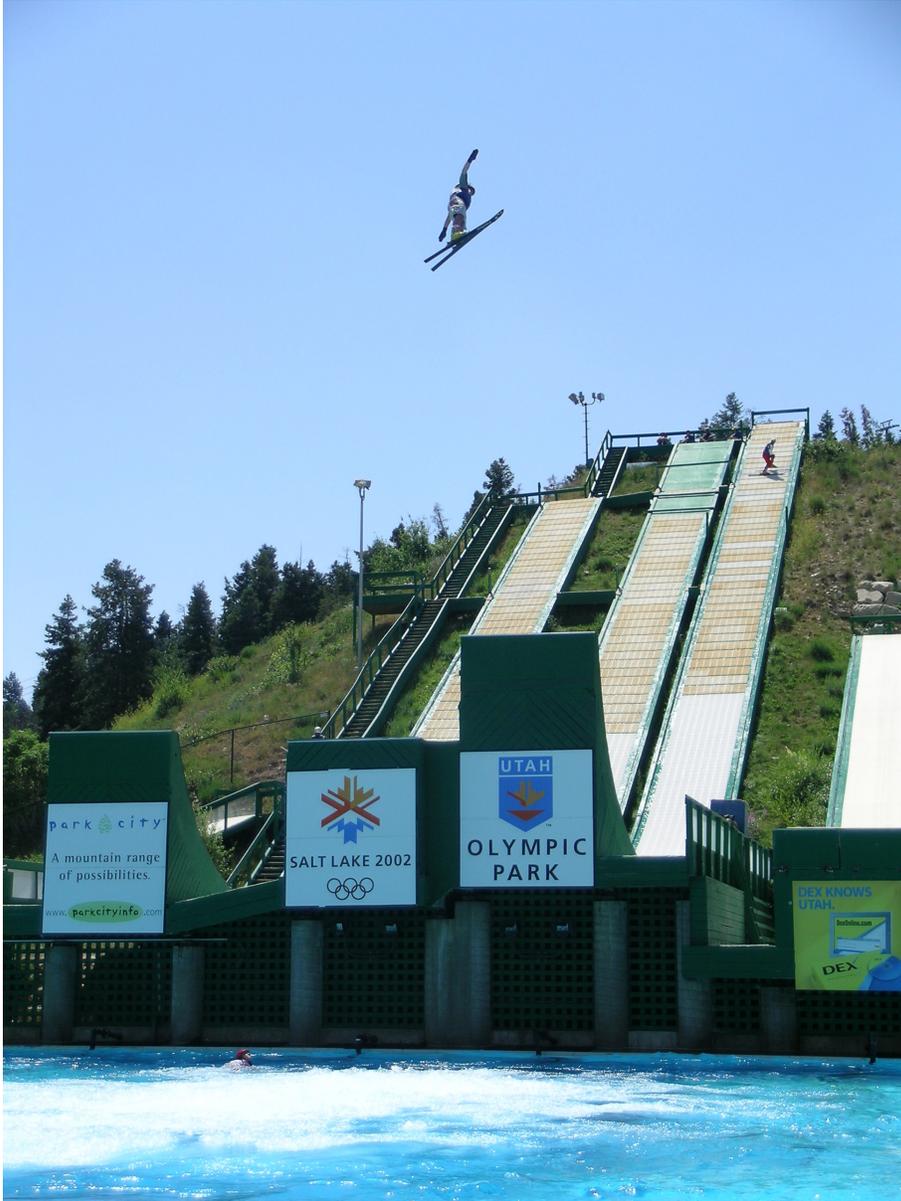
Olympic Fantasy Camp

Fit or Fat – with chutzpah and a few bucks, you too can (almost) be an Olympian

By: Deborah Abrams Kaplan

Standing at the top of the freestyle ski jump at Utah Olympic Park, helmet tight, legs flexed, I took a final look around. The EMT was in sight. The coach watched from the bottom. It was a sunny, summer day as I pushed off, skiing slowly down the astro-turf covered ramp until I was airborne, hovering above the swimming pool in a wetsuit and skis. The crowd gasped as I landed in the water with a terrible thud.

“ARE YOU OKAY?” yelled Coach John. Well, my neck hurt, and my lungs needed air, but technically I was fine.



“You need to look straight,” the coach advised, adding “that’s what everyone looks like on their first jump.”

After another belly-flop, I pushed off for my third try. I muttered continuously to myself “look straight, look straight.” And I noticed a difference. I saw the horizon and not the ramp.

Then came the unfamiliar feeling of hitting the water with my feet, not my chest. I stuck the landing! In a moment of Olympic glory, I yelled out “WOO HOO,” pumping my arm in the air.

For \$65 to \$2,000, any Joe Shmo, fit or fat, can live the Olympic life. U.S. Olympic sites in Park City and Lake Placid host a variety of intro clinics and fantasy camps, for bobsled, skeleton, luge, freestyle skiing and ski jumping. Several rinks host ice hockey

and figure skating clinics, where even beginners get coached by Oksana Baiul, 1994 Olympic gold medal figure skater.

While participants like me try a sport once for bragging rights and cocktail party conversation, others continue on the local or national level.

Just saying you did it is accomplishment enough for most. By the end of Utah Olympic Park's skeleton camp, you'll start from the top of the mile-long track, dropping head first from the equivalent of a 40 story building at 75-80 mph, your stomach flat on a skeleton tray, your chin inches off the ice.

"People have no idea what they're getting into," said Robbie Lyon, a U.S. skeleton coach. "It feels like the biggest run of adrenaline - something you can't explain 'til you do it."

Lyon said he's talked with fighter jet pilots who found the skeleton run more exciting than their plane rides. "You get as many G's (forces of gravity) as a fighter jet pilot," he said.

For sliding, athletic ability helps you improve your technique and timing, but it won't help you get down the track. "It's 90 percent mental, and 10 percent physical," said Lyon. "It's not hard to lie on the sled."

While fantasy camps are generally open to teens through seniors, most campers are 30-55 – those who can afford it and "really want that experience," according to Steve Peters, the U.S. Bobsled and Skeleton Federation's eastern programs manager. Sliding camps surprisingly attract an equal number of men and women.

And though small, with 8-10 participants paying up to \$2,000 each for sliding camps, they usually sell out. For the money, campers get instruction from Olympic coaches and athletes, ice time, equipment and clothing use, lodging, food, and sometimes videos of their performance and a tax deduction.

While a destination fantasy camp interests some weekend warriors, others just want to immerse themselves in the sport.

David Hamasaki didn't start playing ice hockey until he was 30. Now 35, the San Francisco project manager allocates a week each summer to go to "a podunk place in Minnesota to spend 14 hours a day skating with a bunch of guys."



Hamaaki has been twice to Heartland Hockey's adult camp, and already set aside a week for this summer's camp. Run by Steve Jensen, former Olympian and NHL player, the program focuses on beginner and intermediate players.

Heartland Hockey's adult campers sleep in kids' dorm rooms, each room decorated with a different team theme. "When I got there I had to take a picture and send it back to my girlfriend," said Hamasaki, since the dorms had curtains, clocks and trash cans with team logos.

The intense ice time and the professional coaching did wonders for Hamasaki's hockey skills. "During the evening skate scrimmages, the coaches will come out and play with you," he said. "They've played professional or Division 1, or are signed. It raises your level of game."

Hamasaki says that while the campers share a love of hockey and competition, they have no illusion they're anything but amateurs. "We're not in the NHL," Hamasaki said. "We've all got to go to work at the end of the week – there's no knocking each other's teeth out."

Rubbing elbows with the sports' elite can be intimidating, but the Olympic coaches and athletes are happy to work with amateurs. Mary Swim, a 45 year old Morgantown, WV

computer programmer, has been to all four of the Adult Training Camps at the Ice House in Hackensack, NJ.

“They’re used to working with Olympians,” Swim said of the coaches who included Oksana Baiul (1994 Olympic gold medalist) and Robin Wagner (who coached Sarah Hughes to 2002 Olympic gold).

“They didn’t know what to make of us at the first camp,” Swim said. “They managed to hang in there and bring it down to our level.”

Craig Maurizi attributes the clinic’s success to the coaching staff, based out of the Ice House. “It’s *who* is presenting the material, not necessarily what the material is,” said Maurizi, the Ice House’s director of figure skating. “It gives people a big shot in the arm in terms of motivation. These world class skaters and coaches take these skaters seriously.”

The camp attracts a range of skaters, from beginners who can’t jump on ice, to national level amateur skaters from 20 U.S. states, and as far as England and Qatar. The camp hasn’t had a problem filling the 120 camper slots.

As the Turin Winter Olympics kick off this week, I’ll be watching the competition with new perspective. I could barely land on my feet after jumping four feet in the air on skis. Olympic aerial freestyle skiers soar 60 feet up, doing multiple rotations, spread eagles and 360s – *and* they land on their feet.