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OU student places fifth at Olympics

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

OU performing arts freshman Jean Racine didn't have the performance she had hoped for, instead she and partner Gea Johnson finished fifth in the inaugural Olympic women's bobsleigh competition on Feb. 19.

Americans Jill Bakken and Vonetta Flowers took the gold medal, ending a 46-year drought for the United States in Olympic bobsleigh.

"America was on the podium today, and that was the goal," Racine told the Associated Press. "We didn't win, but America did."

Racine, a 23-year-old native of Waterford, and Johnson, a former heptathlon champion, were thought to be United States' best chance for the gold in the two-woman event. The duo set a track record in December during the U.S. Olympic trials in Park City, Utah – the same course they ran during Olympic competition. That record run came on the heels of Racine's controversial decision to drop her previous partner, Jen Davidson. With Davidson, Racine finished first in the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 World Cup standings and won nine of 12 World Cup races over that period. But a series of sub-par times this past season led Racine to choose Johnson over Davidson prior to the Olympic trials.

Just three days before the Olympic competition, Johnson suffered a strained hamstring. In the end, Johnson's decision to perform with the injury led to the disappointing fifth-place finish.

In the Olympics, the two-woman bobsleigh consists of two runs, with the final standings determined by the fastest total time over both runs. As the pusher, Johnson was mainly responsible for getting their sled off to a fast start – a necessity in a sport where races can be decided by as little as .01 of a second. But Johnson's hamstring flare up hampered their starting times. Only two sleds in the field of 15 had worse starts.

In the end, just .44 of a second separated Racine and Johnson from the bronze medal. They finished with a time of 1:38.73 behind a team from Switzerland.

Bakken and Flowers finished first with a cumulative time of 1:37.76. Sandra Prokoff and Ulrike Holzner of Germany won the silver with 1:38.06, and Susi-Lisa Erdmann and Nicole Herschmann, also of Germany, won the bronze with 1:38.29.

After the races ended, Racine said she did not consider switching partners despite Johnson's injury.

"Three days before the Olympics, that's nearly impossible to do," Racine said. "I know if Gea could get through this, she would have a better push than anyone else. She pushed her heart out."

Still, after trading in her college textbooks for sled runners and being thrust into the national spotlight, Racine said she plans to some day return to OU to finish her studies.

"I really enjoyed going to school at Oakland, I miss it," she said before the Olympics. "I like learning things and challenging myself. But there was no way I could train the way I needed to and be ready for Salt Lake and still be in Rochester studying. There are no Olympic-caliber bobsled tracks anywhere near Oakland. And I think the professors would have killed me for missing as much class as I probably would have had to cut this winter before the Olympics.

"I know I'm going to come back to school eventually. This is just the priority right now."

For more information on **Racine**, the bobsleigh competition and the Olympics, visit the official site of the **2002 Olympic Winter Games**.

SUMMARY

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