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OU attendee among Olympic gold favorites

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

One American athlete who is among the top hopefuls to win a gold medal at the **2002 Winter Olympics** also attended Oakland University.

Jean Racine, a freshman performing arts major, earned a spot on the U.S. Olympic Bobsleigh team and will compete with brakeman Gea Johnson in the first women's bobsleigh competition in Olympic history.

Racine, a 23-year-old native of Waterford, is considered the top bobsleigh pilot in the world. She and Johnson enter the games as one of the medal favorites – many sportswriters pick them to win the gold. The duo set a track record in December during the U.S. Olympic trials in Park City, Utah. Their 48.92-second run broke the Utah Olympic Park record set in 2001 by Germany's Sandra Prokoff and Ulrike Holzner.

Racine and her previous partner, Jen Davidson, finished first in the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 World Cup standings and won nine of 12 World Cup races over that period, finishing no lower than third. Racine also won three gold medals, five silver medals and finished second in the 1998-99 World Cup season.

Racine's combination of athletic success, affability and good looks also have attracted a lot of high-profile endorsement deals. If you haven't spotted her in a television ad for VISA or on a Kellogg's cereal box, you might have seen her interviewed on NBC's "Today Show" or in promotions for General Motors, GNC Pro Performance, Xerox, Adidas or Northwestern Mutual Insurance. You also can read about her in recent issues of "Sports Illustrated Women," "GQ" and "Glamour."

In November, Racine was one of several athletes selected by the U.S. Olympic Committee to visit the White House to meet President George W. Bush.

Still, after trading in her college textbooks for sled runners and being thrust into the national spotlight, Racine has not forgotten where she came from. She says she plans on returning to OU after the Olympics.

"I really enjoyed going to school at Oakland, I miss it," she said. "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."

Racine first became interested in the sport at age 13 when a traveling luge clinic came to Waterford. She rode a sled on wheels and performed so well she was invited a month later to try the sport on ice at a luge camp. Racine's parents listened to her pleas and scraped together the \$500 needed for the camp. She almost backed out when she first saw the intense speed of the sleds on the ice. But after her first run, she was hooked.

Racine was a member of the U.S. national junior luge team from 1992-96 before making the switch to bobsleigh. She was training in Lake Placid when she mistakenly received a package meant for the U.S. Bobsleigh Federation. She called and requested information on the sport, then passed a series of tests and qualified for the national team. In September 1996, Racine went to pilot's school in Calgary and received her license. In her first international competition that November, she and then-partner Meg Henderson finished 12 out of 13. Racine won her first medal during the 1997-98 season with then-partner Krista Ford, then switched to Davidson to begin the 1998-99 season.

The past year has been a bittersweet one for Racine. While she competed and prepared for the Olympics, she also dealt with family illnesses and death. Her sister and grandmother both suffered from lupus. Her grandmother was later diagnosed with cancer and died in February 2001. Racine's mother, Cathy, had scleroderma, a rare connective tissue disorder, and died last May after a kidney transplant failure. The organ transplant, from Cathy's sister, was attempted to help her live long enough to see her daughter compete in Salt Lake City.

In the aftermath of these events, Racine found herself the center of media attention in December when she changed partners and chose Johnson – leaving Davidson, her best friend, partnerless and off the Olympic team.

Racine maintains the move was made in the best interest of the U.S. Bobsleigh Team – she and Davidson had a series of sub-par finishes this year. But after setting the Utah Olympic park track record with Johnson, Racine has her sights set on gold.

“I’m feeling pretty confident,” Racine told the Detroit News when she secured an Olympic spot. “Everything is just flowing, and you can tell when everything is right – you get this feeling that you’re almost flowing on ice . . . The bottom line was to make the American team and put together a team capable of winning the gold medal. Now, we’re halfway there.”

The **2002 Winter Olympic Games** begin Friday, Feb. 8. The women’s bobsleigh competition is Tuesday, Feb. 19.

SUMMARY

One American athlete who is among the top hopefuls to win a gold medal at the 2002 Winter Olympics also attended Oakland University. Jean Racine, a freshman performing arts major, earned a spot on the U.S. Olympic Bobsleigh team. Racine, a 23-year-old native of Waterford, is considered the top bobsleigh pilot in the world. She and Johnson enter the games as one of the medal favorites – many sportswriters pick them to win the gold.

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