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The team practises the starting push countless times. Everything has to be just right. With an explosive power build-up and coordinated, fast boarding, they catapult the bobsleigh to a faster start time than the competition. Every hundredth of a second counts.

A bobsleigh team is like the Three Musketeers:
All for one and one for all.



This is the story of a bobsleigh pilot from Saxony, who has become a media darling: Francesco Friedrich – champion, high flyer, record chaser. The first time we meet, in October 2018, he is 28 years old and married with a son. He is already three-time European Champion, four-time World Champion in the two-man bobsleigh, World Champion in the four-man event and double Olympic Champion in the two-man and four-man bobsleigh. In 2013, at age 22, he became the youngest World Champion of all time. Since winning Olympic gold, Francesco Friedrich is at the top of his career. The 2018/19 bobsleigh season will show if he can rise even higher.

PIRNA, GERMANY, 10 OCTOBER 2018:
PREPARING FOR THE SEASON

It is 9.30 on Wednesday morning in Francesco Friedrich's hometown in the Elbe valley, south of Dresden. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, it is 17 degrees Celsius – ideal weather for training. Not on the bobsleigh track, but in preparation for the season. Francesco Friedrich and his pusher Jannis Bäcker have come to the athletic grounds for sprint and strength training. In between, they play football to limber up. Jannis is Francesco's longest-standing teammate. He helped Francesco win his first World Champion title in 2013.

They laugh as they kick the ball around the field. But as soon as they get to the starting line on the running track, their con-

centration is virtually tangible. Suddenly, Francesco gives the command and they both take off on an explosive start – like the push-off phase of a bobsleigh race. After practicing sprints, they head to the weight room. Francesco tells us about his preparations for the new season: "The highlight for us is definitely the World Championships. We have to consistently improve our performance by then." Bobsleigh racing is a complex sport, involving physical training, technical accuracy, teamwork, summer training and winter competitions.

"Franz", as he is known, is not just a top athlete, but also the team's manager. He is in charge of the bobsleigh equipment, meeting sponsors, and overall organisation. But as team captain, he doesn't like to single himself out: "Everyone does their bit to make sure we're in good shape. The lads have gained a lot of experience in our years together. This accumulated knowledge helps us to continuously improve. You have to trust your team, otherwise you can't deliver top performance."

After two years training intensively for the Olympic Games, the team took a longer break. As Jannis Bäcker says, "Your body needs time to recuperate. Even though we started training later, we were quickly back up to speed again." They recently had their first performance tests, which went very well. "The team is on the right track", Francesco says. "After our double Olympic victory, there didn't seem much more to win. But by taking a step back, we can refocus and set new goals."

Francesco has a full day. First, he takes his son to kindergarten after breakfast. A policeman by profession, he has been given



Choosing the right runners and looking after them is an extremely time-consuming task.

leave for training and competition. He trains in the morning and spends the afternoon with other tasks: physiotherapy, team organisation, technical work, meeting sponsors, media commitments. Afterwards, he completes a round of strength training for the legs: “You have to coordinate so many complex processes to really get up to speed in the push phase. Everything has to be just right, and that includes the gaps between training sessions. It’s important not do the same routine every day, but to vary it. Muscles you already exercised need a chance to relax, so we train other muscles on subsequent days”, he explains. “Everything has to be just right” sums up his pursuit of perfection.

Acceleration is one challenge, speed control another. Bobsleighs have become faster over the years, thanks mainly to better runners, optimized materials and enhanced design: “There’s always room for improvement.” That is Francesco’s philosophy, and his team is constantly tweaking the technical details. “The many minor improvements that nobody really notices add up to create progress”, he explains. “Even a one-percent gain can make the decisive one-hundredth-of-a-second difference in a competition.”

ALTENBERG, GERMANY, 29 OCTOBER 2018:
TRAINING ON THE TRACK

A few days later, Francesco and his team have their first training session on their home track in Altenberg, a small town in the Ore Mountains of Saxony, south of Dresden. It snowed for the first time the previous day and workers are busy sweeping snow from the track, covering the most important sections with a tarp, and trying to create ideal ice conditions for the athletes. The thermometer is just below zero degrees Celsius.

At lunchtime there is a press conference. The bobsleigh track has a new sponsor: the ENSO power company of Dresden. The aim is to develop the region into a hub for top-class sport in Saxony. The programme is also funded by the district of Saxon Switzerland and the Eastern Ore Mountains, the Federal State of Saxony and the Federal Republic of Germany. They all share a common goal: the 2020 World Championships in Altenberg. Francesco is the official ambassador and looking forward to it tremendously: “It will probably be one of the greatest moments in my career.” But there are still 480 days to go before that happens. For the time being, he is focusing on the tasks at hand,

such as the 2018/19 World Cup season with eight competitions each in the two-man and four-man bobsleigh events, followed by the World Championship in Canada.

The first challenge at the press conference comes from Nico Walther, who is in the same club as Francesco, BSC Oberbärenburg. Francesco takes it in stride. Nico and his team won the German Championship just a few days before on the track in Winterberg. "Competition among German teams is good and creates an incentive to keep up the meticulous work", says Francesco.

SIGULDA, LATVIA, 8/9 DECEMBER 2018:
WORLD CUP OPENER IN THE TWO-MAN BOBSLEIGH

Sigulda has a narrow track only for two-man bobsleighs. Two races are being held in this event on one weekend. Francesco wins the first race, beating the Latvian Oskars Kibermanis. His new pusher, Alexander Schüller, has passed his initiation test. Nico Walther finishes sixth. In the second race, the Latvian makes up for lost time and Francesco, this time with brakeman Martin Grothkopp, wins with just a 0.06-second lead.





Nico Walther has a better run and ends up fourth. Despite his win, Francesco is not happy with his performance: “The start wasn’t as good as yesterday and we didn’t have a clean run in the middle section.” Whether he wins or not, he always sets high standards and is his own harshest critic.

WINTERBERG, GERMANY, 15/16 DECEMBER 2018:
FOUR-MAN BOBSLEIGH

The first two World Cup events in the four-man bobsleigh are scheduled for the weekend after. On Saturday, Nico Walther finishes ahead of Francesco, who is followed by the third German team piloted by Johannes Lochner. The German bobsleigh teams have already achieved very good international rankings, even though it’s still early in the season. On Sunday, all three of them are on the podium again, but this time Francesco is on the top step. “Things went well today”, is his short comment. A reminder to himself not to be too complacent!

ALTENBERG, GERMANY, 6/7 JANUARY 2019:
WORLD CUP AT HOME

The whole world is waiting with baited breath for Francesco’s duel with Justin Kripps of Canada. Francesco and Justin had tied for the gold medal at the 2018 Olympic Games in PyeongChang (Korea) in the two-man event. Even though Francesco is on home turf, it will be a hard race. Justin will be well prepared and in good shape.

The bobsleigh run in Altenberg was built in 1987. The 1,413-metre-long track has 17 turns, a 15-percent grade and is one of the most challenging in the world. Thirteen bobsleigh, skeleton and luge World Championships have been hosted here to date. Francesco doesn’t want to take any risks in front of a local audience, either with the equipment or the team, so he resorts to his Olympic crew: “We’ve been very happy with our first races so far this season. In Altenberg, I’ll be teaming up with Thorsten Margis in the two-man bobsleigh and with Candy Bauer, Martin Grothkopp and Thorsten Margis in the four-man event. The track is in excellent condition, my compliments to the crew in



Altenberg. I think we have a good chance of getting a spot on the podium, also thanks to our local fans.”

On Saturday afternoon it is pouring, darkness is already falling, and the first heat in the two-man event is due to start at 4.30 p.m. Will the downfall impact the quality of the ice? Once the race starts, the rain eases up. Justin Kripps sets a good time with 56.30 seconds, followed closely by Oskars Kibermanis (+ 0.07 s). The rain starts pelting down again, the wind picks up, and the tension rises. Finally, it is Francesco’s turn with Thorsten Margis as his pusher. They achieve a new best start time. Despite a faster top speed than Justin and Oskars, Francesco ends up third, just + 0.08 seconds behind the lead. Nico Walther is close on his heels in fourth place. It’s neck and neck. How will Francesco react in the second heat?

Despite the jostling crowds, Francesco is totally focussed on the second heat. It is his chance to deliver. With a shout, the team pushes off with explosive force, launching the bobsleigh with a better start time than the rest of the field. Every hundredth of a second counts. This time, they have a smoother run. As they cross the finish line, Francesco and Thorsten raise their fists in

triumph. Not only does it feel like a good run, they were considerably faster than everyone in the first heat. Can Justin, Oskars and Nico catch up? The audience follows their rivals through every curve, commenting on each split time. Justin loses valuable time in every section of the track and fails to gain a lead in the final stage. In the end, Francesco finishes first, ahead of Justin in second place (+ 0.37 s), Oskars in third (+ 0.48 s) and Nico in fourth (+ 0.54 s). His fans are beside themselves. The wind and rain are forgotten; all that matters is that Francesco has won.

At the awards ceremony, he is visibly relaxed, almost exuberant after the fantastic second heat. All the tension has vanished for the moment. Talking to television crews, he smiles, says he is delighted to have won, comes across as self-assured, but not arrogant. He is sincere with his fans, waves and gives autographs, lets them take selfies with him. They love their “Franz” because he is approachable, a local, one of them – despite his great success. On the next day of the competition, the track is lined with spectators. The temperature has dropped overnight to below zero, it is snowing and the wind is icy. Francesco is racing with his Olympic squad again. In the first heat, he takes a clear lead, while Justin

Kripps does not seem to be having a good day. He loses too much time and lags behind in 19th place. The second heat confirms the day's result: Team Friedrich finishes first, Oskars Kibermanis second and Nico Walther third. Despite improving his performance, Justin finishes in a disappointing 12th place. Francesco goes up to him and shakes his hand, warmly, respectfully.

FROM THE ALPS TO AMERICA, JANUARY/FEBRUARY: A UNIQUE WINNING STREAK

Now they are off to the Alps for the next three World Cup events: in Königssee near Berchtesgaden (Germany), Innsbruck/Tyrol (Austria) and St. Moritz (Switzerland). In Königssee, the athletes are not only competing for World Cup points, but also for the European Championship. Francesco is ahead of Justin Kripps in the two-man event again and wins his fourth European Champion title. The four-man race is won by the German team headed by Johannes Lochner, who is racing on his home track here. Francesco comes in third, but continues his winning streak at the World Cup in Austria, with a double win in the two-man and four-man events, ahead of Oskars Kibermanis and Johannes Lochner.

At the World Cup race in Switzerland, the result is the same, but with a bigger time gap. Team Friedrich has a substantial lead over the competition. Justin Kripps is not competing. He has already returned to Canada to prepare for the World Championship in his home country. The next competition is the World Cup event in Lake Placid (USA), which hosted the 1980 Olympic Games. Justin is back, but initially suffers a clear setback, coming in 10th in the two-man event against Francesco, before winning the four-man bobsleigh race. Francesco drops to fourth place. His winning streak in the four-man bobsleigh is broken for the second time. Could this be a bad omen for the World Championship?

WHISTLER, CANADA, 2 – 10 MARCH 2019: WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

The finale of the season is the World Championship in Whistler, Canada. It is slated to become the greatest showdown on the fastest bobsleigh track in the world. With its steady grade, the bobsleighs can accelerate to 150 km/h and more, or up to 30 km/h faster than on any other World Cup track. The top favourite in this race is local hero Justin Kripps. Francesco knows that the run in Whistler does not forgive even the slightest error. Any wrong pull on the steering rings is punished by hard contact with the walls of the track, which can cost him speed and time, or even cause a crash, as happened to Justin during training.

The World Championship involves four heats over two days. The first heat in the two-man event does not go well for Francesco. But he comes first in the next three runs and takes the title of World Champion, just 0.59 seconds ahead of Justin Kripps. "In the last heat, nobody else had a chance", says Francesco. It is rare to hear such words of superiority from him.

The World Championship in the four-man bobsleigh event takes place a week later. It's a nail-biting race. Right at the start of the first heat, Francesco tears a muscle in his right thigh. The pain causes him to make a mistake in the first bend, bringing him in third behind Justin Kripps and Oskars Kibermanis in first place. The physiotherapy team does all they can, and Francesco is able to push with his leg taped instead of starting in sitting position. They finish the next heat second, just 0.04 seconds behind the leader. The injured muscle throbs. Will one night be enough to alleviate the pain? On Sunday, the team has to mount a full offensive in the third and fourth heats. It's all or nothing. And they succeed, finishing both runs with the fastest time! What's more, they have broken the world speed record of 157 km/h, the fastest bobsleigh run of all times! In interviews afterwards, Francesco is full of praise: "My team did a fantastic job. I was able to rely on everyone throughout the year."

With his fifth consecutive World Champion title in the two-man bobsleigh and his second double World Championship in a row, Francesco Friedrich has made it into the history books in this sporting event. He has matched the 58-year record held by Eugenio Monti of Italy, who won the World Championship five times in a row from 1957 to 1961, and became double World Champion in two consecutive years. Francesco is now aiming to smash Monti's record at the World Championship from 17 February to 1 March 2020 on his home track in Altenberg.

Bobsleigh racing is a spectacular sport that thrives on international diversity. That's why the World Championships are also an important advertisement for Saxony as a venue for top-class sporting events. "Altenberg aims to offer guests a special experience", says Matthias Benesch, manager of the bobsleigh track and 2001 European Champion in the four-man event himself: "We want to prove we are good hosts with exciting competitions and an attractive entertainment programme. For our international guests, the World Championship will forge a link between Altenberg as a traditional sports venue, the Ore Mountains as a wonder of nature, and Dresden as a city of culture."

Francesco's ambition is to win the World Championships six times in a row. Is he obsessed? No. Passionate? Yes! Francesco Friedrich is not the high flyer he is made out to be, but a likeable, down-to-earth team player. He is not inherently unbeatable. But he is a meticulous worker, who keeps everything under control with confidence, presence of mind, and absolute resolve. And he is definitely a hunter, hard on the heels of the all-time record.

