

NEW SPORT MEANS NEW OLYMPIC HOPE FOR VILLANI

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Sara Villani was a nine-year-old gymnast at the Halton Hills Gymnastics Centre when a coach explained the Olympics to her. The Olympics are held every four years and bring together the best athletes in the world, the coach told her. Athletes spend years preparing, then compete in front of thousands of people and millions more on TV.

"In my little kid brain, I thought, 'That sounds scary. That's not for me.'"

Fifteen years later, Villani has had a change of heart. She is now hoping to earn a spot on the Canadian Olympic team, not as gymnast, but by hurtling down a twisting, frozen track at 150 km/hour.

And yet, that doesn't seem so scary.

Last month, Villani wrapped up her first World Cup bobsleigh season as a brakeman where she teamed up with a pair of pilots to record three top-five finishes.

In her World Cup debut with Christine de Bruin, the Canadian duo finished fifth, beating two-time Olympic champ Kaillie Humphries and missing a podium finish by 4/100ths of a second.

"Christine is very experienced. I just didn't want to show how much of a rookie I am," the Norval native said. "I'd like to think I did a good job hiding it, but if she could tell how nervous I was, she never let it affect her."

Two weeks later in Germany, they turned in a season-best fourth-place finish.

Not bad considering it had been just 25 months



Dave Holland photo
Former gymnast and track and field athlete Sara Villani is now finding success on the international bobsled scene.

since Villani first climbed into a bobsled.

Villani never grew up dreaming about the Olympics. It wasn't until 2015 when she won the junior national heptathlon title that she considered the possibility of reaching the highest levels of her sport.

She followed that with gold in the pentathlon at the Ontario university championships, but an ankle

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injury limited her ability to compete the following year.

Then in 2018, she attended the RBC Training Ground, where participants perform tests to identify athletic strengths. Villani dominated, posting the top scores in four of the six tests and setting a strength record.

She was recruited by numerous national teams,

but was intrigued by bobsleigh. She had watched it during the Olympics and had seen the movie "Cool Runnings" — still most people's point of reference when she tells them what she does.

That December, she went to Calgary and, after learning the brakeman's role, it was time to get in a sled. Part way down the course, even the first timer sensed something wasn't right. Within moments, the sled was on its side sliding down the course.

"Not much can prepare you for that," she said.

The crash did not deter Villani. The following year she was competing on the North American Cup circuit, where she and Melissa Lotholz earned three medals in seven races, thanks in part to consistently having among the best push (start) times.

Villani was looking forward to building on her rookie season, but COVID-19 threw training

plans for a loop. The team didn't get permission to train together in Calgary until September, and with cases rising, Canada opted out of the first half of the World Cup season.

Protocols were put in place for training and Villani said athletes were very careful to follow them.

"We want to be able to train and compete," the 24-year-old said. "If we're not taking it seriously, we're basically losing our jobs."

With the Winter Olympics in Beijing about 10 months away, COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on plans. Competition schedules and qualifying processes for the Olympic team are still uncertain, but Villani said all athletes can do is prepare and be ready. She is continuing to train and raise funds to help cover the costs of travel and other expenses.

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