

WINTER OLYMPICS FROZEN GREAT FOR ELSA

A STEEP LEARNING CURVE

No federation, no track and no clue but driven Desmond sled: 'I'll sort it out'



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FROZEN OUT BUT DETERMINED... Elsa Desmond is jumping for joy with Ireland after forging a path to Beijing Winter Olympics (above) all by herself

WINTER IS COMING... Luge athlete helps launch the IOC's Winter Sports Strategy in 2022

By **NEIL O'RIORDAN**

CHIEF SPORTS WRITER

OLDER readers will remember the Remington TV ad from the 1980s in which Victor Kiam said: "I was so impressed with the shaver, I bought the company."

Elsa Desmond, 27, went one better than the late entrepreneur. She liked her sport so much she founded the national federation.

Desmond – who was born and bred in England but qualifies for Ireland through paternal grandparents from Cork and Cavan – has already competed in one Winter Olympics – Beijing in 2022, in which she came 33rd.

But being at the Milano Cortina Games next year would be a case of it turning full circle for the doctor based in Akureyri, northern Iceland.

Because it was when the Games were last in Italy – in Torino in 2006 – that Desmond first encountered the luge and decided she wanted to do it.

She was eight when she decided hurtling down a track at up to 140kph lying feet-first, face-up on a

sled was for her. Desmond said: "Italy would be huge, partly because I was inspired by an Olympics in Italy and I remember watching those Games.

"There were no Irish women. There were also no British women, so there was no one there that I felt represented me, so I decided I would do it.

"And now the idea that there might be an Irish child the same age I was, watching and seeing me, would be really a dream come true. "My family knew from a very young age that I was going to get to the Olympics for luge.

"I don't think they believed it until I was on the plane to Beijing, but they always knew."

She puts the confident nature of that prediction down, in part, to being surrounded by Olympic rowers as her dad Brendan was a cox.

But she could have chosen an easier path, with nobody quite sure how she could realise her ambition. Desmond recalled: "I was told no, so I did other things.

"I did hockey, rugby, gymnastics when I was very young, hammer throw, water polo.

"I enjoyed all these other sports, but none of them quite clicked.

"And every year we would continue to email Ireland and GB and see if there was any way for me to get on a sled and every year they'd say 'no', so I'd continue with my other sports."

With no track in either country, her first experience came in Innsbruck, Austria, having convinced the British Army to allow her join in on their trip.

Desmond recalled: "It was all these adult men and me, this teenage girl, and I was faster than all of them.

"I think they thought I was a pain in the a**. Like I've been trying to get on that camp for years and I think they finally thought,

'Right, let her have a go and then she'll leave us alone. And that unfortunately didn't happen!'

Desmond competed for Britain at the 2019 World Championships before deciding to switch allegiance to Ireland.

She explained: "They had a change of coaching staff, which just really didn't work for me and I'd always had dual citizenship.

"I'd initially started with Britain just because they had a federation and Ireland didn't.

"I decided to move across and there was no one within Ireland that knew anything about this and we didn't know what we were doing either."

When emails to the Olympic Federation of Ireland went unanswered, a number was sourced for CEO Peter Sherrard.

She recalled: "We never got a response because he gets so many emails like that from parents thinking that their child will do it.

"My mum managed to get a



phone number for Peter and said, 'My daughter wants to go to the Olympics for you'. And he said, 'OK, fine'. And then she had to say, 'Actually no, my daughter will, she will'. And he always remembers that, he was telling me about it in Beijing.

"But they did all make it clear from day one that I wouldn't be funded, I would be doing this on my own and if I could get myself to the Olympics, they would, of course, support me from there.

"But to get there, I'd have to qualify myself."

That was, in part, because there was no national federation in existence through which funding could be channelled which prompted Desmond, then aged 19, and her family to go about setting one up.

She admitted: "It was definitely a bigger challenge than I realised. We first had to establish ourselves as a company.

"We also had to get the federation recognised by the International Olympic Committee, Irish Olympic Committee and the International Luge Federation.

"We ended up sending a lot of forms into the IOC and the International Luge Federation, but

then they would say, no, this isn't right, reject this, go back, change it, come back.

"So it was a lot of trial and error. There were a lot of mistakes made.

"We were able to get the company side of it easier because we had some experience through friends and family with that.

"It was the federation side that was a steep learning curve.

"It took us between 18 months and two years from when we started to when I was able to race and it was down to the wire. We almost weren't able to do that first race in the European Championships that I wanted, but we managed to sort of get things sorted."

Her dad Brendan is the chair, her mother Martha the treasurer, with Elsa both the Junior and Development Program Director and its only senior athlete.

It was all made worthwhile when – on a two-day bus trip from Latvia

to Germany – she got a call to say she had qualified for Beijing.

Normally, that call would go to a coach but she does not have one, relying on the Ukrainian team to plug the hole at the World Championships in Canada in February.

She said: "I just shot them an email and said, 'I don't have a coach, please can you help me?' and they said, 'Yeah'.

"There's a big language barrier but you have to have a coach on paper so without them helping me out, I wouldn't have made this race."

Whatever about her Ukrainian, her Icelandic is coming along, having decided to quit Britain for a country where her work can more easily sit alongside her passion.

Desmond said: "I'm an emergency medicine doctor and I was working in the NHS,

which for many reasons is an incredibly tough environment.

"I know many of my colleagues who have chosen to leave the NHS for similar reasons.

"That just speaks for itself in what an environment it is to work in.

"I was working 60 or 70 hours a week and my pay was quite minimal, I now work about 36 hours a week for double the pay, which allows me a lot more time to focus on my training and also for my mental health as well.

"I'm not feeling like I'm burnt out and it's also more sustainable for me financially."

Still, choices have to be made. She is weighing up whether to sell her car so she can buy a custom-built sled at a cost of around €20,000. Not your usual trade-in.

Desmond shrugged: "I mean, I'll be away for all of winter, so it won't be a huge problem and then luckily where I live in the north of Iceland, buses are free, so I can manage to get to work on the bus or cycle and find a way around it if I have to."



