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A stone's throw from Sochi? Older athletes aim for Olympics

By

While we're all just sitting around watching the Olympics, Anne Abernathy is training for them. Again.

The 60-year-old known as "Grandma Luge" appeared in a record six Winter Games — 1988 through 2006 — for the U.S. Virgin Islands. After a brief break from competition, she has zeroed in on a new sport: archery. With the help of coach Ruth Rowe in Centreville, Va., she hopes to be ready for Rio 2016.

So if you've ever wondered whether you can grow up to become an Olympian even if you're already grown up, the answer is yes.

The question is whether it's a good idea.

"My knee blew out last night. Welcome to the life of an Olympic athlete," jokes Abernathy, who's the first to admit that the path she has chosen isn't as glamorous as it sounds. It takes every minute of your time, every ounce of your strength and every cent in your bank account.

But there's nothing like facing off against the best in the world. That's why Abernathy can't quit. It's also why other folks who are old enough to know better still harbor fantasies of going for the gold.

Consider Silicon Valley venture capitalist Paul Bragiel, 36, who got caught up in Olympic fever last year. He moved to Finland to start cross-country skiing (which he'd never done before). He persuaded Colombia to grant him citizenship (despite his not knowing Spanish). And he looked poised to make it — until he was sidelined by sickness and missed the qualifiers for Sochi.

The lesson we can learn from Bragiel's experience is that with enough determination and resources, you can be a contender. To walk into an Olympic stadium, you need a little bit more than that.

For starters, Abernathy says, "get a good coach and do something you love." When she tried luge for the first time — at the age of 28 — she fell head over heels. (Although not literally: In luge, you go feet first down the track.)

She hadn't played sports in high school in Northern Virginia because her mother "didn't think it was ladylike," but as an adult she'd started playing racquetball and went to the gym regularly. So Abernathy was up for a physical challenge.

That's important because luge training takes a serious toll on the body. There's no mechanical steering or brakes, just your muscles, Abernathy says. She spent hours strengthening her core, back, shoulders, legs and even neck.

"There's no support and you have to hold it up," explains Abernathy, who used a belt to lift weights with her head.

The other aspect of the sport potential luge athletes need to be prepared for is the danger. Georgian Nodar Kumaritashvili died during a training run before the 2010 Winter Games, and although fatalities are rare, injuries from crashing into the walls are common.

“Every athlete has a luge tattoo,” Abernathy says, referring to the bruises (and worse) that come with the sport.

It's also not the easiest activity to do everywhere. (That's particularly true for Abernathy, whose residence is in St. Thomas: “There isn't that much ice there other than in drinks.”) Training required her to travel frequently to Lake Placid, N.Y., and tracks across Europe.

For adults hoping to follow a similar path to the Winter Olympics, there's probably a smarter sport to pick. One possibility: curling.

The oldest athlete representing the United States at the 2014 Games is 45-year-old Ann Swisshelm, a curler. Four years ago, Canadian skip Kevin Martin — whom you may remember as a very bald 43-year-old — led his curling team to the gold. So age isn't a limiting factor the way it is with many other Olympic events.

Even better, it's totally doable, points out Dominique Banville. She's a board member with the Potomac Curling Club, which operates the National Capital Curling Center in Laurel, Md.

“You look at it and think you can do it,” Banville says. “You see moguls, and you think you can't.”

The perceptions are somewhat deceiving. “Like any sport that experts do, they make it look easy,” notes Banville, who's also the director of the Division of Health and Human Performance at George Mason University. “When people compare this to shuffle board, it irritates me.”

Top curlers boast strong legs, backs and triceps to power their sweeping, have the flexibility required to deliver a stone and can keep at it for a three-hour-long game, Banville says.

To perform at a high level, you'd need to implement an off-ice workout routine — maybe using some moves from the book “Fit to Curl” by John Morris. But the most demanding part of a training program is practice, practice, practice.

Could someone reading this article be a potential Olympic curler?

The only way you'll find out is to try it, Banville says. Even if you don't wind up in the running for a silver medal, there's a silver lining: Unlike luge, it's a sport you can play for the rest of your life.