



‘Cooler Runnings’: Niles West Coach Gets Spot on Jamaican Bobsled Team

Michael Blair has a chance to "Feel the Rhythm, Feel the Rhyme" in the sled for Jamaica during the 2018 Winter Olympics.

By [Tim Moran \(Patch Staff\)](#) - October 15, 2016 10:33 pm ET

SKOKIE, IL - Michael Blair, an educator and athletic coach at Niles West High School in Skokie and a former NFL player, has earned a spot on the Jamaican bobsled team.

Yes, *that* Jamaican bobsled team. The one made famous in “Cool Runnings,” the 1993 movie starring John Candy that followed the story of the unlikely true story of how a nation near the equator like Jamaica became involved with a sport that requires freezing temperatures and lots of snow.

Blair, a dual citizen in Jamaica and the United States, has been invited to train with the team and has an ultimate goal of being in the sled for Jamaica during the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

Back in July, Blair met Harry Nelson, strength coach for Team Jamaica, while he was in his native country to promote Ninety10 Sports, his sports performance and development company. Nelson connected him to Devon Harris, Secretary General of the Jamaican Bobsled Federation.

Harris [offered Blair the opportunity to train with the team based on his “mental focus, work ethic and physical prowess,”](#) according to a news release. Blair has already begun training, with his sights set on garnering a permanent seat in the sled for the March 2017 Olympic trials.

“I have the skills, elite professional experience and knowledge necessary to make the Jamaican National Bobsled Team,” said Blair, a former NFL running back who played for both the Cincinnati Bengals and Green Bay Packers during the 1998 season.

Blair played college football at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.

He has started [a GoFundMe effort, neatly called “Cooler Runnings 2018” for help with expenses related to training](#) with the Jamaican team.

“I’ve got about a month to raise about \$75,000, so that I can keep my house, car and life on hold while I train with the team,” said Blair, an educator and football and track coach at Niles West. “To me, that is the scariest part. Flying down a mountain on an ice track in a tiny tube seems like a breeze compared to that.”



Baranek: Thornwood, NFL alum Michael Blair chasing Olympic bobsled dream

As a little kid at age 6, Dolton native Michael Blair would watch Bears games on TV with his father, Patrick.

During one game they stopped watching and started talking.

"I told my dad, 'This is what I want to do, play football on TV,'" Michael Blair said.

His dad's answer?

"He just said, 'OK. You can do it.'"

Michael Blair turned a kid's dream into reality by having a football career that stretched from Thornwood to Ball State to the [NFL](#) with the [Cincinnati Bengals](#) and Green Bay Packers.

As a mature man at age 41, Blair started dreaming again. This summer he told his mother, Vivienne, that he wants to compete for the Jamaican bobsled team at the [2018 Winter Olympics](#).

Her answer?

"She just said, 'OK. You can do it,'" Blair said with a laugh. "That's always their answer when I say I want to try something.

"That's one thing about my family. They will support you 100 percent in anything you do as long as it isn't illegal, immoral or defames your name. So I do everything wholeheartedly."

Blair, who teaches executive function and life skills at Niles West, is well on his way to making this new dream come true.

A connection was made when Blair brought his Ninety 10 Sports American Football Camp (www.ninety10sports.com) to his family's homeland in Kingston, Jamaica. He met the strength and conditioning coach for the Jamaican bobsled team.

"We started talking and exchanged numbers," Blair said. "I told him, 'You know, I've always wanted to do that.' He gave me the team president's number and told me to call him."

Blair contacted Devon Harris, one of the founding members of the team that competed in the 1988 and '92 Olympics. Harris jumped at the chance to recruit Blair, despite the fact he acknowledged he's "never seen a bobsled, never smelled one, never sat in one, never touched one."

The reason why Harris jumped is simple.

"Bobsledding ... it's a rugged sport," Harris said. "One of our biggest challenges is when we try to recruit athletes and get them out for the first time. They'd go down the run and come back, 'Umm, this is not for me.'"

"Michael has been competing for many years in a sport that is rough and tumble and requires you to take big hits. I would dare say he had many harder hits than he'd take on a typical bobsled run. I'm looking forward to seeing how well he does."

If he does compete for Team Jamaica, he would be upholding a cherished family tradition. His father — who died while Michael was in college — and three uncles played soccer for the Jamaican national team. Also, his mother was born in Jamaica.

Blair graduated from Thornwood in 1992. He played on back-to-back state playoff teams under Terry Kennedy, including the 1991 Thunderbirds who were 8-4 and advanced to the state quarterfinals. In 1996, he played for Ball State in the Las Vegas Bowl.

After his NFL career with the Bengals and Packers ended, Blair played for several seasons in the XFL and the Arena Football League. Then he played the role of a football player in two movies, and was a travel journalist for a show on the Travel Channel.

When he retired from the Arena League, Blair came back to Thornwood to coach football and serve as a truant officer from 2007 to 2010. Even after moving up north and working at Niles West as both a coach and a teacher, he finds his way back to South Holland and hosts a yearly youth football camp at Thornwood.

"I was at their game (Sept. 2) against Andrew," Blair said. "I still bleed blue and gold. One of my fondest memories is playing on a Saturday with a clear sky and the sun at high noon and smelling the food before the game."

Now, the focus is on 2018. Blair stepped down as a football and track coach at Niles West to concentrate on getting ready for the opening of bobsled training. It starts in October in Evanston, Wyoming. He's all in.

I wouldn't bet against him.

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