

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, athletes from Switzerland and Germany had one of the most intense rivalries the sport of bobsleigh has ever seen. Over those two decades - at a time where there was only a men's competition - sliders from Germany (at different stages East, West and the Germany we know today) and Switzerland alternated positions on the podium at the Olympic Winter Games. Between the two-man and four-man competitions, the Swiss won four gold, one silver and two bronze medals. German teams finished first on five occasions, second on seven occasions and third on six. Swiss origins

The origins of bobsleigh take us back to 19th century Switzerland, when locals took advantage of frozen paths, descending down them driven only by gravity. Around the 1880s, switchgear and chassis were installed to give them more protection. The first club was founded in 1897, in St. Moritz, in the canton of Grisons. With the exception of Squaw Valley 1960, bobsleigh has been a mainstay of the Games, since the very first one in Chamonix 1924. However, it was only at Salt Lake City 2002 that a two-woman event was added to the programme. As the "cradle" of the sport, it was natural to expect Swiss athletes to excel at the Olympics. Over in Germany, centres such as Königssee and Oberhof have contributed greatly to the development of bobsleigh, with the latter located in the former East Germany.

The 80s: East German dominance Innsbruck 1976 saw some sleds from the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) reach the podium, but at Lake Placid 1980, the strength of Switzerland and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) prevailed. In the two-man competition, Erich Schärer and Joef Benz of Switzerland won gold. Silver went to Bernhard Germeshausen and Hans-Jürgen Gerhardt, and bronze to Meinhard Nehmer and Bogdan Musiol, all from East Germany. The East German medallists in the two-man competition were also part of the winning quartet in the four-man event. This time, Switzerland won silver with Ulrich Bächli and Rudolf Marti added to the two-man team. Bronze also went to East Germany, with a team made up of Horst Schonau, Roland Wetzig, Detlef Richter and Andreas Kirchner. Four years later, in Sarajevo, the blue and white team of East Germany won the gold and silver medals in the two and four-man events, with both titles decided by differences of less than half a second. The Games in the former Yugoslavia also saw one of the sport's biggest names emerge: Wolfgang Hoppe. Having previously competed as a decathlete, the legendary athlete won gold in both the two and four-man events. "I'm satisfied that we went down well and won gold. Yesterday the track was very difficult and it prepared us for today," Hoppe told the United Press International website (UPI) after winning one of his medals.

Calgary 1988 is well remembered for the participation of Portuguese, Mexican and Jamaican teams. They were also the last Games in which Germany competed as two different countries. Following their disappointment at the previous edition of the Games, the Swiss bounced back with gold in the four-man event, with the East Germans making do with two silvers and a bronze medal.

The 90s: Swiss strike gold At Albertville 1992, Switzerland's Gustav Weder, Donat Acklin, Lorenz Schindelholz and Curdin Morell took bronze in the four-man event, while Germans Hoppe, Bogdan Musiol, Axel Kühn and René Hannemann won silver. This time the gold went to the Austrian quartet. The two-man event was a very close battle, with the top five places decided by less than half a second. Germans Rudi Lochner and Markus Zimmermann took silver, ahead of compatriots Christoph Langen and Günther Eger - the difference between the two pairs less than a tenth of a second. The Olympic title went to the Swiss duo of Gustav Weder and Donat Acklin as they triumphed by less than three-tenths of a second. Two years later at Lillehammer 1994, Weder and Acklin repeated the feat. They were less than a tenth of a second faster than fellow Swiss athletes Reto Götschi and Guido Acklin (Donat's younger brother), who finished with silver. Italians Günther Huber and Stefano Ticci finished under two tenths of a second behind. "It was a tough competition... when it comes to hundredths of a second, the smallest mistake counts. It's good to see more medals for Switzerland," Weder told the South China Morning Post after winning his second gold medal.

Switzerland took second place in the four-man event, with a team formed by Weder, Donat Acklin, Domenico Semeraro and Kurt Meier. This time, they missed out on gold by less than a tenth of a second, with the Olympic title going to a German team made up of Harald Czudaj, Karsten Brannasch, Olaf Hampel and Alexander Szélig. Third place also went to a German crew. Among the bronze medallists was Wolfgang Hoppe, who secured his sixth and last Olympic medal.

Nagano 1998 was the last edition of the Games in which only men participated. German and Swiss teams both made it onto the podium, but by this time they were already competing against emerging forces in the sport. In the two-man sled, Christoph Langen and Markus Zimmermann took bronze, however, in the four-man

competition, they won a second consecutive gold. Coming home six-tenths later, Switzerland took silver with the French and British quartets tied for bronze. In 2002 the women's competitions were added to the Olympic programme and countries such as Canada, Italy and the USA began rising to prominence. The Swiss and German teams no longer had a stranglehold over the competition, even though German teams continue to be powerhouses of the sport. Germans won gold at Turin 2006 and PyeongChang 2018, but missed out the podium at Sochi 2014, which was the last edition of the Games where Swiss athletes won gold through Beat Hefti and Alex Baumann in the men's doubles. Bobsleigh at Beijing 2022 If you ask which country's athletes are the favourites at Beijing 2022, the answer won't be surprising: Germany. In addition to winning gold in all three events at PyeongChang 2018, they also won nine of the 12 medals on offer at the 2021 Worlds in Altenberg. Francesco Friedrich is a two-time Olympic champion, specialising in two- and four-man sleds. His countryman Johannes Lochner is also among the favourites. On the women's side, German hopes lie with Mariama Jamanka, the two-time world champion and current Olympic champion. One highlight of these Olympic Winter Games is the debut of monobob, a women's competition for just one athlete. Beijing 2022's bobsleigh competition takes place between 13 and 20 February at the National Track Sports Center in Yanqing.