

This Boise State luger is a winner

BY BILL SCHNUPP

As an older competitor in a sport dominated by younger athletes, Werner Hoeger was certainly an anomaly at the recent Turin Winter Olympics. But his age was only part of the reason he caught the attention of the media covering the 2006 Games. Although he finished 32nd out of 36 places while competing for his home country of Venezuela in the men's luge singles, the Boise State kinesiology professor's story was covered by media outlets such as NBC, CNN/Sports Illustrated.com, Reuters, the Associated Press, *The Miami Herald* and *The New York Times*, among others.

Seems a 52-year-old college professor and former world-class gymnast who carried the flag of his country — a nation not usually associated with winter sports — during the Games' opening ceremonies, then competed in an event that has its competitors lie on their back and hurl themselves down an icy trough at speeds of up to 90 mph, made for a good story.

Hoeger, who also represented Venezuela in the luge competition at the 2002

In the two-day event, Hoeger piloted his sled through four runs down a course that drops 274 feet, curves 19 times and sent eight athletes to the hospital in its inaugural week of trials last year.

Hoeger says his age was not a deterrent. "Just because I am getting older doesn't mean that I have to accept a sedentary lifestyle," he says. "One has to have goals in life to stay motivated and keep moving ahead."

A nationally known exercise physiologist and author of nine textbooks, Hoeger began his athletic career not as a winter athlete, but as one of the most decorated gymnasts in Venezuela's history. As the national all-around champion from 1970 through 1975, he clinched 34 individual event titles, an achievement that earned him a scholarship to Brigham Young University. His prowess was more than enough to have qualified him for the 1972 and 1976 Summer

Games. But when the Venezuelan squad failed to qualify as a team both times, Hoeger's Olympic vision went unrealized. That is until he saw Iginia Boccalandro, Venezuela's first Winter Olympian, compete in the luge in 1998.

"I love to compete, and I'm drawn



Werner Hoeger celebrates with his wife, Sharon, after completion of a successful run in the luge at the Turin Olympics.

because I missed out on the opportunity as a youngster," he told the Associated Press. "At first I didn't think I could do it."

Inspired by Boccalandro and her ability to reach the Olympics in a sport relatively unknown in their homeland, Hoeger and his children, Chris, Jonathan and Julianne, attended a luge clinic conducted by former Olympian Jon Owen the following summer. Months later, at Owen's suggestion, Hoeger and Chris traveled to Calgary, Alberta, Canada, for a trial run arranged by the International Luge Federation, an attempt that left Hoeger with a concussion and a broken ankle. Despite his injuries, he was hooked and later qualified for the 2002 Olympics along with Chris, making the pair the oldest and youngest male luge competitors at the Salt Lake City Games. Father and son finished 40th and 31st, respectively.

And the elder Hoeger came back for more at Turin. What about the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver, British Columbia?

"I don't know," he told Reuters. "I have to pay for it myself and I'm not getting any younger, but I have to say I'm really having fun."



Hoeger shows his Bronco spirit at the Olympic Village in Turin.

Winter Games in Salt Lake City, was the second-oldest competitor at Turin. The honor of being the oldest '06 Olympian went to 54-year-old Scott Baird, an alternate on the U.S. team in men's curling — a sport a bit less dangerous than the one in which Hoeger competed.

COURTESY OF WERNER HOEGER