



nytimes.com 06.02.2014

# *Luger's Name Matches the One on His Waistband*

By SAM BORDEN FEB. 6, 2014

Photo



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Bruno Banani, formerly known as Fuahepa Semi, training on Wednesday. Credit Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters

KRASNAYA POLYANA, Russia — Bruno Banani is a German men's underwear company. The brand, which features styles with colorful names like *Booty Bass*, *Rusty Iron* and *Blockbuster* (it can come as a G-string), is well known in Europe for its unusual marketing campaigns. The company has sent its garments underwater to the Bermuda Triangle, and in 1998, Russian astronauts wore the underwear aboard a space station.

Bruno Banani is also an Olympic luger from Tonga. Surprisingly, this matching of names is not a coincidence: Banani (the racing luger) and Banani (the racy underwear) have combined to create a situation at the Sochi Games that is a uniquely Olympic blend of underdog inspiration crossed with strident capitalism.

The back story, at least the nonunderwear part of it, sounds like something out of a movie. A Polynesian who does not even know what luge is and has never lived a day in his life with a temperature colder than 60 degrees hears a radio advertisement announcing a national search for Tonga's first winter Olympian. He shows up for the tryout, wows the panel and goes on to make

history. It is a one-man version of the Jamaican bobsled team and the film “Cool Runnings,” but for luge.

The rest of the tale, though, is where it turns bizarre. Makai, a global company that highlights its “experiential marketing,” coordinated the search for a winter athlete in 2008 because one of its executives had a connection with the Tongan royal family. Princess Salote Mafile’o Pilolevu Tuita wanted to see an athlete from her country compete at the Winter Games.

Banani, who was known then by his original name, Fuahea Semi, beat about 30 other hopefuls in a tryout that included fitness testing, a run through an obstacle course and a short ride on a luge with wheels down a slope that was not much steeper than the typical driveway. Shortly after being chosen, Banani said, Makai officials explained to him that luge was an expensive sport and that he would most likely need a sponsor to help cover costs.

Their suggestion: Bruno Banani, the underwear company, which was situated near Makai’s German offices and had a reputation for adventurous campaigns.

“I loved when they sent their underwear into space,” said Mathias Ihle, the head of Makai’s European division. “Look, this was quite a risky plan. We were a very young agency. We had just started. We wanted to prove that we were creative. So in order to promote him, we came up with the idea of changing his name.”

Jan Jassner, the general manager of Bruno Banani, said he and other officials were immediately intrigued when Makai approached them.

“We thought it was really cool and a little bit funny,” he said. “We have heard from other people who have names Bruno Banani. But this was a different kind of story, a great story. We watched him in a luge race in Germany, and we saw that he was coming down and doing a good job and he was finishing. So we said, ‘Let’s go for it.’ ”

Reaction to the strategy has been mixed. Some observers, like Thomas Bach, the president of the International Olympic Committee, were skeptical; he called it a “perverse marketing idea” in a published interview two years ago.

Ihle pointed out that the marriage of athlete and product was hardly a novel one (although even he would admit that usually the product is named after the athlete and not the other way around). He also noted that athletes and entertainers changed their names to seem more marketable all the time.

Within the athletic community, Banani the luger has been welcomed. Part of that is because of his natural humbleness.

Banani said it came from his awareness of how fortunate he was. After all, he said, he was studying computer science and playing rugby with his friends most days when he suddenly fell into a new job and, after consulting with his family, a new name.

“The fastest you can drive a car in Tonga is 70 kilometers per hour,” or about 40 miles per hour, Banani said through a smile on Wednesday. “I love speed — I know that I will be able to go faster than that here.”

Banani is trained by a German coach, Isabel Barschinski, who worked with Makai from the beginning of the casting call. (She calls him Bruno, as everyone does these days.) Barschinski helped Banani channel his natural athletic ability into shrewdness on the track. Banani moved to Germany to train, and he and Barschinski now have a partnership with the German luge program that has helped Banani’s progress even more.

In 2010, Banani nearly qualified for the Vancouver Games but narrowly missed out after a bad crash. In this Olympic cycle, he qualified for the Sochi Games at a race in December after a 28th-place finish (out of 42 lugers) in Park City, Utah.

While Banani may not be as fast as his namesake — the garments were called “the fastest underpants in the world” after a 2002 stunt in which the company put them in a particle accelerator — he does not hide his joy about achieving a goal that even his coach thought might be unrealistic.

“I wasn’t sure this was possible,” Barschinski said. “But Bruno has learned very quickly, and that shows how hard he is willing to work.”

Banani’s first official run will come Saturday. His sister is traveling to Russia to watch him compete, and Banani said he planned to stay for the rest of the Olympics after the luge competition was finished, to soak in the experience.

He does not yet know what he will do afterward. He would like to continue competing, he said, but if his sponsorship agreement is not renewed, then he will most likely return to Tonga and try to find a job in computers.

One thing he will not do, however, is change his name. Again.

“This is the name that makes history in Tonga,” he said. “Why would I change it?”