



# That Could Have Been Me



Vancouver Olympics 2010

Ruben Gonzalez was scheduled to take the evening's 39th run down the luge track Saturday evening. The day's 38th run was supposed to be by Levan Gureshidze, but the Georgian luger did not race because of Friday's horrifying crash that killed teammate Nodar Kumaritashvili. So Gonzalez slid in Gureshidze's place.

Doing so was not easy.

"Ohhhhh," Gonzalez said in a low moan when asked about his emotions at the top of the track. "I saw Levan this morning at breakfast. It was the first time I had seen him since the crash. He doesn't speak a word of English and I don't speak a word of Russian, so we just hugged. I was somehow able to ask him whether he was going to take his run today and he shook his head no. I understood why.

"Then I saw his name on the start list and I didn't know. About 10 minutes before the start, one of the track officials asked me, 'Is he running? Is he here?' And I said, 'No, I don't think so.'

"I saw the crash run through my mind a couple times at the top of the track while I was waiting to go. I was here when Nodar crashed and I saw it, so I was reliving that. I haven't seen the replays of the crash and I don't want to ever look at it again. I don't have to. I can see it in mind.

"You try to put that image away when it's your turn to race. You don't ever think something like that will happen. Before yesterday, I didn't think it *even could* happen. I've been in the sport for 27 years and I didn't think it was possible that someone could fly out of the



Four-time Olympian Ruben Gonzalez is one of the country's leading keynote speakers.



**“Every success you’ve ever had or will ever have is the product of your courage to act and the courage to endure.”**

**- Ruben Gonzalez**

track. So when it happened, my first thought was, 'How did that happen?' And my second thought was, 'That could have been me.'"

Following the first fatal crash in 35 years and a police investigation, Olympic lugers learned Friday night the competition would go on as scheduled, with two runs Saturday and two more Sunday. When they reached the track for two training runs Saturday morning, however, they learned it would not be quite as scheduled. Citing emotional concerns and reacting to safety concerns over the track's notorious high speeds, the International Luge Federation (FIL) decided the men would start from the lower women's start house, thereby lowering speeds. The FIL also raised the wall in Turn 16 where the fatal crash occurred.

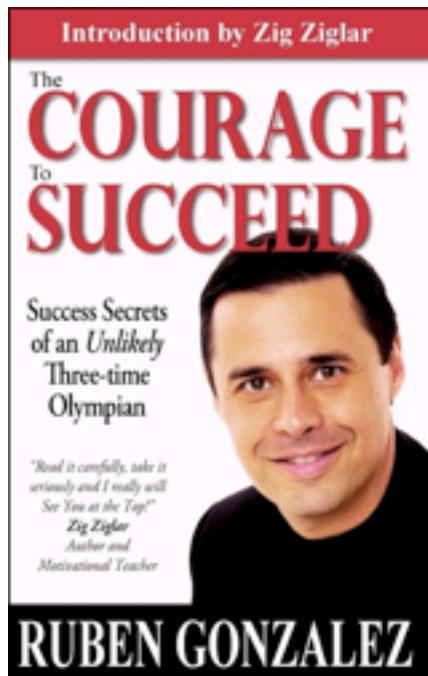
There was no consensus among the lugers whether the change in starting position was correct. The Canadians were furious when they learned about the lower start, complaining it took away their home-track advantage.

"This track was certified by the International Luge Federation, certified by the Vancouver Olympic Committee," said Canada's Jeff Christie. "We gave all the training runs we needed, plus more, from the top of the track. We held a successful World Cup last year, and moving it kind of takes away some of our advantage."

Others, particularly the Europeans, said it was the right move.

"For sure, the speed makes it dangerous," said Austria's Wolfgang Kindl. "I think it's too fast and we all know what happened yesterday. They added something to the track and today it's a little safer, but it's not that safe as other tracks."

Germany's Andi Langenhan said the track was not too fast before but that politically, "They had to change something. ... The world is looking at us and everybody is saying, 'Maybe it's too difficult, maybe it's too fast,' so they changed it and we do what they say."



The bestselling book "The Courage to Succeed" is a manual on how to become a high achiever.

While the Canadians lost their advantage (Samuel Edney was the top-ranked Canadian after Saturday's run at 10th overall, nearly a second out of first), German coach Norbert Loch readily acknowledged his team gained one from the lower start position because it places a greater importance on getting a good start, something at which his team excels. His son, Felix, is the leader heading into Sunday's finals, and teammate David Moeller and Langenhan are second and fifth, respectively.

Saturday's top speed was 91.6 mph, about four mph slower than in the training runs at the men's start. American veteran Tony Benshoof (seventh overall) said he would have preferred staying at the men's start, but starting lower undoubtedly made the track safer. "Absolutely. We're going a lot slower and it's way simpler. It's like twice the track from up at the men's start."

But as Christie said, they are "amateur professionals," so they had to adapt and go on. So they squeezed into their bodysuits and grabbed their sleds and raced. "The morning was quite normal," Latvia's Martins Rubenis said. "But last evening, I felt really empty. One man is gone. There was pretty much empty space in my heart."

They raced with empty spaces in their hearts and newly applied black stripes on their helmets. It was not the sort of racing stripe they ever wanted to wear.

"It's kind of weird," Langenhan said. "You put it on and it's frightening."

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