



Mental Toughness in Business, in the Olympics, and in Life



By Ken Beaulieu for Continental Airlines Magazine

When Nodar Kumaritashvili of Georgia lost his life in a high-speed accident on his final training run at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, I couldn't help but wonder if his fellow competitors would find the strength to get beyond the heartbreak and their fears for the next day's race, on a course considered the world's fastest. They had every reason to give less than an Olympian effort, but chose instead to show the world why they were on the big stage and we were parked on the couch watching them.



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

One of those intrepid lugers, Ruben Gonzalez, was at the finish area when Kumaritashvili lost control of his sled on the final curve and flew over the track wall, striking a steel pole. "In 26 years in the sport, I had never seen anyone fly out of a luge track," Gonzalez told me. "My first thought was there was no way Nodar could have survived. My next thought was that could have been me."

Gonzalez was so shaken by what he had witnessed that he called his sports psychologist after the opening ceremonies. He was reminded that it was a freak accident, that he would know how to avoid a similar fate. But fear continued to hang over him like a thick black cloud until he saw that the final curve had been reconfigured and a protective wall added.

Gonzalez took up the sport of luge at the age of 21 because he wanted to compete in the Olympics. He



figured the high injury rate would cause many athletes to quit the sport, leaving him in a better position to realize his dream. After enduring two difficult years, crashing “four out of every five runs,” he began to see progress and finally broke through in year four, with a top-50 world ranking. That earned him a ticket to the 1988 Olympics in Calgary. Now 47, Gonzalez has competed in four Winter Olympics, in four different decades.



I asked Gonzalez, a highly regarded business speaker, if he sees a correlation between business and a sport like luge. He noted that in each, success comes from being mentally tough and willing to pay the price, and more important, knowing how to learn from your mistakes. “At the end of every luge run we debrief with the coach and watch videos of our runs to see how we can be faster next time,” he said. “In business, you need to measure everything so that you can analyze how to be more effective, more productive, and more profitable in the future.”

“Success comes from mental toughness, the willingness to pay the price and the ability to bounce back up quickly when life knocks you down.”

- Ruben Gonzalez

As difficult as it was to race after Kumaritashvili’s death, Gonzalez wasn’t surprised by how the lugers responded – a tribute to their perseverance. “In business and in life,” he said, “when bad things happen, you need to bounce back quickly. Become relentless. When you do, success is just a matter of time.”

To watch a video filled with highlights of Ruben’s most popular presentation visit:

www.FourWinterGames.com

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