

The word "TIME" in white serif font on a red square background.

There's Still Fear at the Luge Track



Vancouver Olympics 2010



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

Just spend a few minutes around Marty Lawthers, the mother of chipper U.S. Olympic luger Chris Mazder, and you'll discover the roots of Mazder's disposition. During Sunday afternoon's men's luge final at the Whistler Sliding Center, Lawthers enthusiastically shows off both her cowbells — one has a pink ribbon that Mazder's girlfriend gave him — and the "Go Chris!" face paint on her cheeks. But mention Friday's tragic luge accident, which claimed the life of Nodar Kumaritashvili, who hailed the former Soviet republic of Georgia, and Lawthers' sunny mood soon turns dark. "A death happened just the other day, and here I am cheering," she says. "I do think about that, and I do feel bad."

Lawthers doesn't regret letting her son luge; she trusts his skills, and talks about how he's received a rare chance to travel the globe pursuing his passion. But she's angry that the Olympic track designers have been pushing the limits in recent years, and did not install protective walls around the tricky final turn until after the tragedy. "This should not have happened," Lawthers says. "You know that a track can injure your son. You don't think it can kill him. I so feel for his mother. She thought she was sending her son to the Olympics. She didn't expect him to go to war and not come home."



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

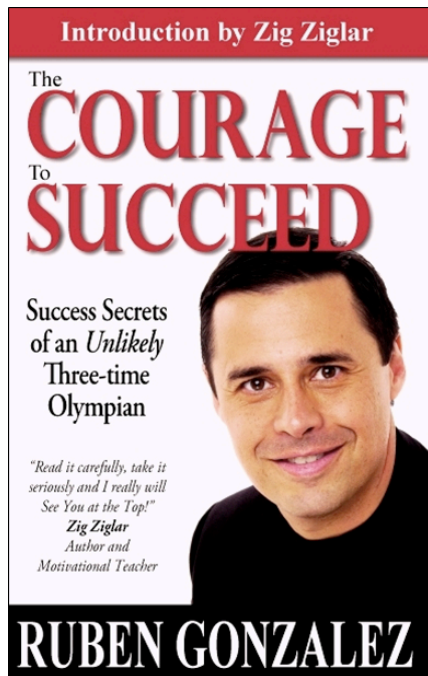
- Ruben Gonzalez

German Felix Loch, 20, became the youngest luge gold medalist in Olympic history on Sunday, as he compiled a time of 3 min. 13.085 sec. over four runs, 0.679 faster than his fellow countryman David Moeller. And while the event retained its festive feel — a giddy Loch hoofed it up and waved the flag like, well, a 20-year-old kid who was his luge-obsessed country's first men's gold medal in a dozen years — the awful memories of last week's accident still loomed. "It's always there," said Moeller after winning his silver medal. "Lots of my teammates say they can't look at the pictures from the accident ... It was a dark day for luge, and hard for all of us."

After the accident, in which Kumaritashvili was thrown from his sled into a metal pole on the track's final turn during a practice run, Olympic officials considered postponing or even canceling the event. But the athletes themselves met with each other last Friday and urged organizers to push forward. "We thought it was a way to show that life goes on," says Shiva K.P. Keshavan from India, who finished in 29th place of 39 competitors. "But Nodar will never be forgotten." Until Friday, the Whistler track was proudly marketed as the fastest in the world, as sleds approached 100 m.p.h. (169 km/h). However, in the days leading up to the tragedy, about a dozen athletes crashed during their Olympic training runs.

Kumaritashvili's father said his son told him that he was scared of the track.

In addition to erecting new protective walls on the final curve, Olympic organizers moved the men's start down the mountain, to the area where the women's luge athletes were scheduled to start their race.



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



The near vertical drop at the beginning of the luge runs helped sliders build the excessive speed; eliminating some 600 feet (183 m) from the 4,600-ft. (1,402 m) track kept most runs below 90 m.p.h. (145 km/h). Loch hit 91.6 m.p.h. (147 km/h) on a Saturday heat, the top speed in the competition. Under the new setup, no luge athlete was injured during the two-day competition.

The alterations, however, couldn't eliminate the psychological toll of Kumaritashvili's accident. "I was pretty scared the whole time," says Domen Pociucha of Slovakia, who finished 27th. "Of course, what happened will still go through your mind. It doesn't matter where you start." Many athletes were grateful for the adjustments. "The track was really, really fast today," says Polish luger Maciej Kurowski, who finished 23rd. "If we would have kept it at the men's start, it would have been crazy fast."

Not every athlete was as appreciative. The start change, according to several athletes, cheapened the outcome of the event because it gave such an advantage to the German racers. The strong, well-schooled German athletes are particularly strong starters, and on a shorter course, the weaker starters, who excel at negotiating the curves, don't have enough time to pick up speed at the bottom of the mountain.

"God blessed the Germans today," says Ruben Gonzalez of Argentina, who came in last. "Once I saw the wall up, I thought we were fine. They didn't have to move the start. At the next World Cup they have here, you watch, they will be starting from the top."

Racers in the women's event, which starts on Monday, are even more irked about the changes. While the men started from the women's position, the women will now start their race where the juniors take off, right before the sixth turn in the 16-turn Whistler track. "I understand it," said American Erin Hamlin, the reigning luge World Champion, while taking in the final moments of the men's competition.



"But I've worked so hard training from the women's start and getting into rhythm, for nothing." Competitors in the women's event were only able to practice a handful of runs on the new course.

Glum Canadian women's luger Alex Gough, also on hand to watch the men's competition, could not hide her disappointment. "I understand that they needed to have a reaction," she says. "It was an unfortunate and tragic accident. But they didn't have to go that far." Even in the face of tragedy, the lugers are looking to retain their athletic advantage. That's either a sign of their ability to cope; or a somewhat unfortunately reminder that at the end of the day, victory still matters most.

"You have to develop the attitude that you are willing to outwork, outhustle and outdo the competition."

- Ruben Gonzalez

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

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