



Even Cancer Could not Stop Her

A couple of days after finishing my competition at the Salt Lake City Olympics I was sitting in the Olympic Village coffee shop drinking an espresso. There, I met an incredible lady. Ildiko Strehli of Hungary.

She was in her mid thirties and I was 39, so we both stood out like sore thumbs in amongst the other athletes - the average age for winter Olympians is early twenties, when you walk in the Olympic Village it feels like you're in a college campus where everybody's in great shape. I looked so much older than the other athletes that almost every day someone would ask me if I was a coach.

I asked her what her story was. How she'd gotten to the Olympics. Her story was incredible. Ever since she was eight years old, Ildiko Strehli had dreamed of competing in the Olympics in the bobsled. Well, she was about 25 years ahead of her time because women's Bobsled did not become an Olympic sport until 2002.

Ildiko was a ski instructor in Park City when it was announced that there would be a Women's Bobsled competition in the Salt Lake City Olympics. She had only four years to train and go for it. Right away, she signed up for Bobsled driving school in Park City.

But she could not do it alone. She had to create a Bobsled team from scratch. Ildiko went home to Hungary, held tryouts to look for a strong and fast teammate to be the “breakman.” The breakman helps push the sled at the start and brakes the sled at the end of the run. A Hungarian discus thrower, Eva Kurti became her breakman.

Now they had a team but no sled. So Ildiko maxed out her credit cards, bought a sled and started training. Only the top 15 sleds in the world would get to compete in the Olympics. Two years before Salt Lake City, Ildiko was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to get a double mastectomy. As she was lying in the hospital, she thought, “It’s all over. How can I train for the Olympics? I barely have enough strength to walk.”

When Ildiko was in the depths of her discouragement and depression, Eva brought Ildiko Lance Armstrong’s book “It’s not About the Bike: My Journey Back to life.” The book about how Armstrong had overcome cancer to win the Tour de France race over and over again. Ildiko got excited about the possibilities and was filled with a higher purpose. She decided, “I won’t do this for myself. I’m going to qualify for the Olympics to show cancer survivors that they can realize their dreams too.”

She painted a pink ribbon with the words “Sled Full of Hope” on the side of their bobsled, and started training again. Against all odds, Ildiko and Eva qualified in the 15th spot and became Winter Olympians.

When Ildiko told me her story, I had tears in my eyes. I told her, “Ildiko, you are what the Olympics are all about. You truly have the Olympic spirit. I don’t care whether you won a medal or not. I’d rather know you than all the other medal winners combined!

She smiled and said, “I just wanted cancer survivors to understand that cancer can change your life, but you can’t let it change you. Don’t be afraid to dream, and to dream big. If I can do it, so can they.”

No matter how bad your circumstances are, if you believe something is possible, and if you can find a higher purpose to inspire you to do the work, you can realize your dreams.

Put it into action:

Find a higher purpose that will inspire you to reach your dream. Surround yourself with people who will not let you quit. Find a coach or mentor who won't let you quit.

Notice the pattern yet? Successful people do anything that will increase their probability of success. They are willing to do whatever it takes to reach their goals. They stack the deck in their favor so that when life deals them a bad hand, they can recover and keep from quitting.

That's why having a coach or mentor is so critical. And that's why associating with like-minded people is so critical.

Go out and rent the movie "Miracle," about the US Hockey Team beating the Russians in the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics. They never would have done it without their coach.

While you're at it, watch "Rocky." Do you think that Rocky would have gone as far without his Coach Mick? Sure, Rocky is fictional, but have you ever seen any pro athlete that didn't have a coach?

Your life is a lot more important than a game or a sports championship. Don't you think you deserve to have someone in your corner as well? Remember, the best way to cross a minefield is to follow somebody. Preferably someone who has already crossed it.

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