



How to Manage Risk and Succeed

by Four-Time Olympian Ruben Gonzalez

Every time I've done something risky, whether learning how to luge, climbing Kilimanjaro, skydiving in South Africa, training to swim from Alcatraz to shore, or running with the bulls in Spain, I've managed the risk by learning from the experts. By learning from the best. By following a coach, guide or mentor.

This is the story of how I managed risk when running with the bulls.

We stood in the plaza for hours, trying to stay warm in spite of the chilly Pyrenees Mountain morning. Gathered with us were about 3,000 people of all ages from across the globe who, like us, were drawn to Pamplona by the mystique of running with the bulls.

You could feel the tension rise with each tick of the clock, drawing us nearer to 8:00 AM and the much anticipated release of six bulls and several steers into the cobblestoned streets of Pamplona. Only 15 to 20 feet wide, the half-mile course offered no escape route. However, since bulls can run much faster than people, it did promise the certainty that, in time, everyone would be overtaken by the bulls.

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The wait was longer than the Bull Run itself, which only takes about 3 to 4 minutes—albeit, the most dangerous and exhilarating three minutes of your life.



There are always injuries. In fact, there are so many injuries that emergency medical crews and ambulances are stationed every 50 yards along the course. It was a given that someone would be hurt today. Occasionally, someone loses their life. In 1995, a 22 year old American was gored to death less than 30 seconds after the beginning of the run. His first...

What drives people to risk their lives by running with the bulls? Some say you feel most alive when you are nearest death. Others run for the challenge. Personally, I just think it's fun, exciting, and exhilarating.

Before going to Pamplona, I prepared by taking the same approach I take with everything. I sought knowledge from the experts. I read three books about Pamplona—each several times. I even called one of the authors, a man who's been running for 30 years, to pick his brain. Then, I spent many hours watching videos of the Bull Run to study the paths different runners took as they ran.

At first, the videos looked to me like nothing more than a horde of people running for their lives. After watching the videos over and over, though, I started to see well-defined patterns. All of a sudden, the things I had read about in the books started to make sense. I realized that there is a right way and a wrong way to run with the bulls.

I did my homework and that made all the difference.

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What did I learn from all my studies? They gave me a handful of insights that drastically reduced my risk and turned a potentially deadly adventure into a science—or what became to me a strategic challenge.

Just like in business and in life, you find two types of people in the Bull Run. There are the amateurs who show up unprepared, wing it, and often get hurt. On the other hand, there are the professionals—experts who are armed with knowledge and skill and rarely get hurt.



In the Bull Run, 95% of the people are amateurs. The remaining 5% are the pros—the experts—the winners. Just like it is in business. Just like it is in life.

What did I learn from my research? I learned simple things that made a huge difference in my Pamplona experience.

First and most importantly, make sure to run sober and watch out for the drunks. There were lots of them out there. The drunks are more dangerous and more unpredictable than the bulls. The drunks trip, fall, and cause human pileups that you have to hurdle as you run down the street.

Secondly, if you fall, cover your head and stay down. The bulls will jump over you. If you get up, you become a big target and you could easily get hurt.

Third, tie your sash in a slip knot. Everyone in Pamplona dresses the same during the Fiesta—white shirt, white pants, red bandana around the neck, and a red sash around the waist. If you tie your sash in a double knot (like 95% of the amateurs did) and a bull's horn hooks your sash, the bull will drag you along the streets, your head bouncing off the cobblestones the whole way. Any tourist guide will tell you that this is not the best way to spend your time in Spain.

Finally, where do you run?

The half-mile course has five sections. Most of the deaths which have occurred were at the beginning and at the end where the street is narrow.

Most injuries and gorings occur at a sharp right hand curve in the middle of the course. Stay away from those three areas unless you've been running for many years.



The whole time you are running you are deep in a narrow canyon made up of 10 story buildings on either side of the narrow streets. You are in the shade the whole time except right before you enter “Dead Man’s Curve,” or “La Curva” as it is known in Pamplona. Right before “La Curva,” you’re blinded by the

early morning sun. The bulls are blinded, as well, and they slip on the moist cobblestones and slam into the retaining wall at the far side of the curve. Many injuries occur here when the runners get pinned by the falling bulls.

The experts told us to begin the run about 50 yards past “La Curva” on the right side of the street. Why? Because the bulls tend to run on the left side of the street after passing “La Curva.” By starting the run from the right side, you have a chance to gradually approach the bulls as you run down the long straightaway past the curve.

The top runners position themselves in the middle of the street and try to run right in front of the bulls’ horns for as long as they can before they are overtaken. I was happy to run beside the bulls. Close, but not too close. I was actually running “from the bulls,” not “with the bulls.”

There's a bull run every morning for the eight days of the Fiesta. I was there for three days. I watched the first day and ran the second and the third. I'm still a beginner at this. Like everything else, practice makes perfect. I'm told it takes at least two to three years of running all eight days just to learn the basics. And then it takes a lifetime to master the basics.

So, what does all of this have to do with success? Everything! Whenever you're about to try anything new, something that looks too hard and too risky to be worthwhile, do what high achievers everywhere do. Don't try to figure it out on your own. You don't know what you don't know, and what you don't know can hurt you.

Rather, find the experts. Do your due diligence and minimize risk by learning from the best. Then, give yourself a couple of years to learn the basic skills by taking consistent and persistent action. By doing that, in time you'll become the expert others turn to for advice. By pursuing excellence in everything you do, you'll make your life a masterpiece.

Put it to action:

In your finances, your business and your life, if you want to manage risk and be more successful, follow a guide or an expert. You'll be glad you did.

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