

Ruben Gonzalez – FourWinterGames.com

Finding the Courage to Succeed

By Nick Darlington for HUGE Magazine - 2017

Ruben Gonzalez is a 4-time men's singles luge Olympian, #1 bestselling author, peak performance expert, and motivational speaker but the journey to the top was by no means easy. Growing up, he was a slowpoke and the benchwarmer in soccer. To anyone looking at him, Ruben's dream of becoming an Olympian seemed impossible. But with a tenacity learned from reading about successful people, the boy nicknamed "bulldog" held onto his dream. When he saw 18-year-old Scott Hamilton win the gold medal in the Sarajevo Winter Olympics, Ruben's life changed. He said to himself, "If that little guy can do it, so can I." Taking up the notoriously dangerous luge, Ruben started training and, despite many broken bones, persevered and qualified for the Calgary Winter Olympics in 1988. What followed was three more Olympics, many more broken bones, and the launch of his motivational speaking career, where he enthusiastically helps others find the courage to succeed.

Ruben was born in soccer-mad Argentina, where every little boy dreams of going to the World Cup. When he was six, his parents moved to the U.S.A. in search of a better life. "Things were getting really bad over there in Argentina," Ruben recalls. "There was a lot of terrorism. It was a dangerous place to raise a family."

Despite playing soccer growing up and not doing very well at it, mediocre to say the least, by age 10 Ruben had developed a passion for the Olympics and wanted to be an Olympian when he grew up. He read everything he could find and became an expert or "Olympic groupie," as Ruben jokingly remarks. He was so passionate about the Olympics and spent so much time talking about it that his dad eventually got fed up hearing about it.

Although Ruben wanted to take part in the Olympics, it felt like a pipe dream. He lacked belief, didn't think it was possible, and so didn't bother getting started. Knowing that Ruben loved books and wanting him to start walking the walk, Ruben's dad encouraged him to read biographies of successful people. In many ways, his dad was a catalyst for the greater things to come in his life.

As he read, Ruben noticed that successful people shared common traits. "The one thing I kept reading about was perseverance," reflected Ruben. "Successful people were a bunch of hardheads who refused to quit. They had a dream. They kept on trying and

trying and trying!” So, as a 5th grader, Ruben decided: “If quitting robs you of your goal but perseverance at least gives you a shot, then it’s a no-brainer. So, from that day on, I didn’t quit anything.”

By high school, Ruben had earned the nickname of “bulldog” because of his tenacity. He played soccer but was a slowpoke so he was always chosen last for teams. He ended up spending most of his time on the bench. Always wanting to be part of the team, he looked for ways to be useful in helping the team. He would help with the water and carry the towels, anything to be part of the team. Ruben’s perseverance paid off which garnered the respect of his teammates. And it’s the same perseverance that he’s carried with him his entire life that he instills in others in inspiring them to succeed.

In spite of his bulldog attitude growing up, Ruben still lacked one thing - the courage to get started on his Olympic dream. But in 1984, Ruben’s life changed forever. Now aged 21, he was watching the Sarajevo Winter Olympics on television. “I see this little 18-year-old kid,” he recalls. “Scott Hamilton was his name. Gosh, he must have weighed 115 pounds, but this kid won a gold medal in figure skating. He was a little guy but he was tough. He gave me hope. I thought to myself that if he could do it, I can too.”

If his dad was the catalyst, Scott was the spark that ignited the belief Ruben needed to finally take massive immediate action. “All of a sudden, I went from having no belief to believing so much. It was scary,” expressed Ruben. Once again, Ruben made a life-changing decision. He committed to being in the next Olympics, no matter what!

With only four years to prepare, he had to move fast. He went to the library and started researching. It took him five minutes to realize he’d have to be a super athlete to compete in the summer sports, so he looked at winter options. With four years to train, he had to focus on his biggest strength. Ruben was never a quitter, so he turned to sports that were tough; sports where there were many broken bones and thus many quitters; sports like bobsledding, ski jumping, and the luge.

Ruben continued narrowing down his choices until, finally, he decided on the luge. His dad suggested he not reinvent the wheel and that he find a mentor or a coach. But he and his family lived in Houston where very few people knew anything about lugging. Ruben decided to contact Sport’s Illustrated to find out where the nearest luge track was. They informed him that it was in Lake Placid, New York.

Ruben then called the track and spoke to a guy, saying he was an athlete in Houston who wanted to learn how to ride the luge so he could compete in the Olympics. When he told him he was 21 years old, Ruben heard laughter. The guy on the phone said that

he was too old and should have started 10 years ago. But Ruben - always tenacious - wouldn't take no for an answer and remained on the line. "I figured if I hung up the phone, it was all over," recalled Ruben.

Somehow in the conversation, Ruben mentioned he had been born in Argentina. At that point, the guy at the track got excited because there weren't enough countries participating in the next Olympics luge event and the sport was in danger of being excluded. The guy said they would help Ruben if he represented Argentina. Without any hesitation, Ruben gladly agreed.

Representing Argentina, was taken under the wing of those training the competitors from different countries who wanted to participate in the luge competition. Ruben would have to train as much as possible so he could cram ten years of training into two. He would have to qualify in the top 50, with the results tallied two months before the start of the Olympics in 1988. "It was brutal," exclaimed Ruben! "The first two years I was killing myself. I mean I was crashing four out of five times. I broke my foot twice, my knee, elbow, hand, thumbs, and ribs." Despite his many injuries, Ruben never thought of quitting. When asked what kept him focused, he said, "The desire to compete in the Olympics."

Ruben has written several books. His first book, "The Courage to Succeed", was the story of what Ruben had to do to get to the Olympics, and how by following certain principles anyone can reach their goals and dreams, no matter what they are. The reason Ruben chose that title was because he believes that no matter what ones' goal is, they need to have two types of courage. They need to have the courage to get started and they also need to have the courage to endure; to not quit. Ruben's website is aptly named GetStartedandDontQuit.com.

Ruben elaborated, "Everything is tough at the beginning because you don't have any skills. The courage to get started comes from believing it is possible. Remember when I first saw the Olympics, I got excited? But I didn't believe, so I did nothing. I didn't have the courage to get started. When I saw Scott Hamilton, the belief kicked in and I was ready to get started. I had a burning desire. I was going to do whatever it took to march in the opening ceremony. It wasn't even about the medals for me. It was about getting to be in the club. So, quitting was just not an option. It just wasn't!"

In four years, Ruben achieved the unthinkable. His positive attitude, courage to get started, and courage to endure propelled him into the Calgary Winter Olympics in 1988. And he would do it again, and again, and again, competing in Albertville in 1992, Salt

Lake City in 2002, and Vancouver in 2010. He became the only Olympian ever to compete in four Winter Olympics in four different decades.

Looking back, Ruben remembers how he enjoyed the Calgary Olympics. The competitors felt welcome, like rock stars. But Albertville was a different story. Many athletes, including Ruben, quit because of poor customer service. His coach talked him into making a comeback at the Salt Lake City Olympics, saying he would regret it if he didn't compete because the Olympics in the U.S.A. were the best. Ruben, not one to regret things, decided to take part.

The preparation was tough. He was training in the mornings with time off in the afternoon. He used that time to visit the track and watch other riders so he could see how to improve. He recalls the thrill of watching it close up, "You feel the speed. It's like a rocket going by. And so one luge would go by and I would think, 'Oh my gosh I can't believe I do that'. And then another one would go by and I'd think the same." Ruben watched for hours.

When it was his turn the next morning, he had one of the worst crashes of his career, only a year and a half before Salt Lake City. Entering curve 13, he remembered all the people he'd watched and started doubting himself. "My brain said that I couldn't do that," Ruben recalls. "So, I forgot to steer. I had an awful crash. I broke my hand, my foot, and totaled my sled. My sled was a disaster. Pieces were everywhere."

With the courage to succeed implanted within him, it wasn't long before Ruben picked himself up, once again. "Halfway over the Atlantic Ocean, I finally got my head on straight and thought, 'You know what, I have had broken bones before. In six weeks, my bones will be fine'. I decided that, although I had a cast on my foot and my arm, the next day I was going to hit the gym. Even if I couldn't lift anything, I will at least be back in the game."

Ruben may have been back in the game but he had another problem; he couldn't afford to buy a sled. "I started making a list of all of my luge friends," remembered Ruben. "I decided I would call them when I got to Houston. One of my buddies, Adam Cooke from the New Zealand team, lent me a sled. He was a lot shorter than me, so his sled was too small. I didn't fit but I tell you it was better than sliding on my rear end. So, I qualified for the Olympics on his sled."

With the worst seemingly behind him, the unthinkable happened; yet another crash, only three days before the start of the Olympics. "I don't know what they did to the track, but it was smooth like glass," reflected Ruben. "And so, I'm coming down and I

think... 'Oh my gosh, this is amazing, I love this'. I was thinking so much about how nice the track was that I forgot to steer. Bam!"

All Ruben remembers was seeing the sky and the ground, twice. Luckily, he didn't break anything but he was urinating blood for the next three days. He refused to go to the doctor because they would have scratched him from the race. Ruben competed, only to later find out that he had bruised his kidneys. He was lucky to escape from serious injuries.

Injuries and crashes weren't the only problems in the buildup to the 2002 Olympics. Shortly after 9/11, many feared terrorists would target Salt Lake City for publicity. Ruben's mom didn't want him to go. "But it didn't matter to me," stated Ruben. "Because if I died, I was going to die happy. It doesn't mean I'm brave. It just means I am that passionate about my goals and dreams."

It's this passion that Ruben carried en route to his final Olympics in 2010 at the age of 47. Ruben jokes, "Everybody thought I was a coach because I was so much older than all the other competitors. It's funny that all of the coaches and track workers were cheering for me and would tell everyone, 'Come on, root for the old guy'."

Ruben's final Olympics brought another difficult experience; he witnessed a death. This was only the second death in the luge in fifty years, despite the sport's notoriously bad reputation. It was Friday night, the same night of the opening ceremony. He was still in Whistler where the small Olympic village he was staying was located. The riders had been training all week to get a feel for the track and make final adjustments to their sleds. Friday was the last practice before catching a bus to the opening ceremony. Ruben had taken his final run and was standing at the finish line and looking up at the big screen.

"I was watching Nodar who was one of the competitors from the country of Georgia," Ruben recollects. "Nodar was this 21-year-old kid. He wasn't medal material but he was better than me. He was nailing it. But as he entered curve 16, he made a mistake. I made that mistake so often that it's a knee-jerk reaction to fix. I was almost always expecting that mistake. But it had caught him off-guard because he had never made that mistake. By the time he corrected it was too late, which made it even worse. As he was coming out of the curve, he hit the inside of the straightaway and bounced up and flew into a pole at 90 miles an hour and died instantly."

Ruben remembers how no one knew what to do on the way to the opening ceremony. They were all in shock. The phones were ringing off the hook with ABS, CBS, and NBC

wanting to interview him. Ruben turned his phone off to process what had happened. He wasn't sure whether to compete or not. Would that be disrespectful? But once he walked into the stadium, he knew what to do. "I saw the Olympic rings. That's when I realized that Nodar had given his life for this and the best we could do was to honor him by doing what he wanted to do," said Ruben. "The riders all agreed; they would do it for Nodar."

For Ruben, it was his last Olympics. He rode four more times, with his last run that Sunday. After Vancouver, he moved to Colorado Springs with his two children, Gabriela and Gracen, who have both been Colorado State Champions in Judo. Ruben remarked, "I tell them that life is going to be tough; that it will knock them down. But they mustn't whine. They need to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and get back in the fight. So, our kids are little bulldogs, we don't have chihuahuas in our house." Indeed, Gracen has taken his father's tenacity to heart. After not winning a single fight throughout his first six tournaments, his first 18 months in the sport of judo, he won gold in his seventh!

Although Ruben teaches his children lessons about having a winning attitude and principles, he doesn't live vicariously through them. He tells them that if the Olympics isn't their thing, they should find something that is, no matter what it is. Looking back on his career, being able to walk the opening ceremony and compete in the biggest arena against the best in the world was such an honor. It was his biggest motivation in competing in the first place. Ruben admits that he was frightened each time he did the luge run and that, in fact, he didn't even like the luge. For him, it was just a vehicle for his dreams.

Ruben reflected, "Dreams aren't easy, they are hard. I have taken that attitude everywhere. A few years ago, I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. It is a mile higher than any mountain in the Rockies. I didn't do it alone; I found a guy who had climbed Mount Everest. He told me, 'For the next five days, you step everywhere I step. You rest when I rest. You drink water when I drink water.' We did it. I am not a mountain climber. I am a mountain follower." Ruben's courage to succeed is unmatched and he continues to challenge himself. He's currently planning to do a mile-and-a-half swim in open water, from Alcatraz to the shore.

Ruben loves to share his advice for those wanting to achieve similar feats and compete in challenging activities such as the luge. He emphasizes the importance of knowing the reason why you are doing it. "Your 'why' is what will carry you through when things get tough," states Ruben. "Why do you want to do it? Oh, because it's been a dream of yours since you were a kid? Well, why? If you keep asking why and try to get down to the core, and your why is big enough, then you're looking good and should go for it. But

if you think it will be something that's cool, nice to do, then you're not going to make it! You need to be willing to pay the price, and it is going to be a huge price, no matter what your challenge is. You have to want it badly enough."

Ruben also recommends finding a coach or mentor who has walked the walk. "If they wrote a book about it but they never did it, then that's nothing. That's worthless. Find someone who has done it," asserts Ruben. "Find someone who has lived it and then start hanging around with people who have already done it. Hang around those people because you become like the people you hang around with."

Ruben is one such person. He has done it. He has walked the walk. But it wasn't easy. He grew up a slowpoke and a benchwarmer in soccer. Although he found a dream and developed the tenacity to never quit, he still lacked belief. It was Scott Hamilton who gave him that belief to get started. And with courage, a plan, concerted action, and a strong desire to never give up, he achieved his dream despite career-threatening injuries. What makes it even more remarkable is that, with his courage to succeed, Ruben repeated that process over and over again. As a motivational speaker for over 15 years, he now uses his inspiring story to help others find the courage to achieve their dreams. Ruben summarizes, "I want the audience to walk out thinking, 'Oh man, if that guy can go to the Olympics, then I can do anything'. If they walk out with a little hope and belief, it's like I become their Scott Hamilton."