The 2010 Olympic Winter Games were going to be my last. My decision to retire at the close of the Vancouver Games was never contingent on my result, the possibility of a big sponsor, or even the temptation of that next adrenaline rush that comes with racing on a new track (for the 2014 Games in Russia). I considered retirement after the 2006 Games in Torino after feeling disappointed with my tenth-place finish, but I couldn’t manage to pry myself away from the chance to compete in a third Olympic Games in front of a home crowd. I wanted to give my best performance and to finish my seventeen-year journey on a high.

However, the four years leading to Vancouver 2010 presented me with some of the toughest physical and mental obstacles of my career, and, as the Games drew nearer, it became obvious that this, my swan-song Olympic race, would be less about chasing that elusive podium and more about personal triumph. I had come back from a multitude of head injuries and shoulder surgeries in good enough form to realistically finish in the top seven, but I suspected that my initial dream of a medal on home soil was in need of adjustment. I prepared for the final race of my career with more determination, drive, focus, effort, and tears than ever before. Nothing I had done, though, prepared me for what happened on the day of the opening ceremonies of my final Olympic Games.
On 12 February 2010, I was waiting for the shuttle to take me back to the athletes’ village after picking up a few things that morning in Whistler, when our team’s media attaché notified me that Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili had just died during a training run that morning and instructed me to return immediately to our team house so that we could all meet and debrief.

In complete and utter shock, and with tears burning hot on my cheeks, I boarded the bus and struggled to keep my composure for the next twenty-five minutes. When I overheard two people sitting across from me say how luge is “a crazy sport” and how awful it was that someone had to die, I instinctively hid the massive accreditation I was wearing, which announced to the world my name and my sport.

Moments later, I ignored a call from a familiar member of the press who was obviously hoping to bypass the proper channels of athlete access during the Games for an interview. Given my background in journalism, my relationship with the media has always been one of mutual respect and candidness. It surprised me that the person was calling my personal cellphone, given the fact that our team was already in a media blackout—we weren’t giving any interviews, except for at the track in the designated press areas after training or racing was over.

At that point, I knew the story had exploded. News of the luge death had gone viral in less time than it took to ride the bus back to the village. I took a few deep breaths and tried to prepare myself for what lay ahead. In paralyzing disbelief, our team stood united as we supported each other through one of the most heart-wrenching moments in our careers. Sobs of sorrow suffocated me, and a cocktail of emotions surged through my veins. I was flooded with waves of alternating sadness, guilt, anger, and shock. We awaited our fates helplessly as whispers of the race being delayed or cancelled started to circulate. As we worked through our grief, we tried to remain calm and focused. We needed to retain the mental competence for a safe descent down the track in the upcoming days.

Then we were dealt another devastating blow, with the announcement that the starting heights would be moved lower down, shortening the course. In a sport that is measured and executed in fractions of a second, the move essentially wiped clean our team’s four years of strategic preparation. To give ourselves the best chance of success, we had left no stone unturned—obsessively dissecting the fastest track lines, researching and tuning the fastest equipment, training in a variety of conditions, and becoming stronger than ever. The one thing we hadn’t prepared for—or even imagined—was having to race from a lower height. The women and doubles were left, on our home track, with no idea of how to navigate the first (and most critical) corner of the track, the starting curve.
We watched the Olympic race that we had been training for, and the hopes that
went along with it, circle the drain and disappear. Instantaneously, we were thrust
into the vortex of a dizzying whirlwind of media reports, some insinuating that the
Canadian team and the Whistler track had contributed to Nodar’s death. With the
results of the investigation and coroner’s report still to come, we were already being
blamed for an unsafe track: the overall tone of the coverage began to frame us as
villains with un-Canadian values by implying that we had denied other nations
(including Georgia) adequate access to train on our track.

Media coverage manipulated our motivation to “Own the Podium” into
appearing as though we had cheated and/or intentionally set out to sabotage everyone
else. With the media’s momentum and its ability to influence public opinion in
full tilt, we athletes on the Canadian team felt that we were left with little choice but
to remain silent. Even mentioning the words “accident,” “mistake,” or “driver error”
became sensationalized in the mainstream media, causing huge public backlash, as
is illustrated by David Letterman’s comments on late-night television, reported by
Entertainment Weekly:

“A mistake?” said Letterman witheringly. “I just wonder if it had anything to
do with those exposed steel girders . . . Don’t blame the kid, for god’s sake” . . .

“For them to say that he made a mistake, that just stinks,” continued
Letterman. Why is it, he asked, that “they then repaired the track and cov-
ered up the girders and started [the race] from the women’s starting point?
“You know what it is? It’s hypocrisy, ladies and gentleman.”

A video of the entire crash, including Kumaritashvili’s death, was played repeat-
edly, provoking a mass emotional reaction in the public. Immediately, hate mail
started to appear in my email inbox accusing me of being “heartless.”

Pitchforks in hand, the media and a growing number of the public were already
on a hunt for scapegoats, and it seemed that nothing we could say would change the
direction of the fingers pointed at us. We felt like the media storyline had gone too
far, that it wasn’t possible to undo the damage that was already done. Luge is a sport
that most people know little or nothing about and that generally only gets coverage
every four years at the Olympics: how could we possibly explain and demystify the
complexities of the sport in a five-minute interview?

As the world mercilessly fired at the Canadian luge teams, we remained focused
on the race. It simply wasn’t our job at that point to investigate, hypothesize, or
weigh in on the accident, or to justify ourselves and convince the world of our
innocence. Our job was to scrape together what little dignity we had left and hold
our heads high. In my opinion, the media as a whole, in a frenzied race for the latest
scoop, missed the mark altogether. The stories that surfaced seemed nothing more than the low-hanging fruit on the tree. I was frustrated that no one appeared to be interested in or willing to dig deeper into some of the more fundamental issues that continue to plague the sport. Instead of finger-pointing and filling gossip columns, the press could have used the tragedy as an opportunity to bring to light some of the real problems faced by luge in hopes of prompting positive change.

The knee-jerk reaction from the International Luge Federation (FIL) to move the start gate down, a response in part to the media’s pressing scrutiny, not only had an irreversible and devastating effect on the Olympic race but also perpetuated an image of luge and the Whistler track as “unsafe” in kamikaze proportions. Moving the men’s race to the women’s starting height and the women’s and doubles race to the kids’ starting height (where they currently remain) not only diminished the integrity of the race and called into question the competence of all the athletes, track crews, and coaches, but it also validated unsubstantiated suspicions and accusations about the track being too dangerous, as well as the belief that the Canadians had denied other countries adequate training.

Reports of the track’s allegedly excessive speed and its technically demanding nature produced harsh criticism in the media regarding the height of the track walls and the unpadded steel beams at the finish. Minimal research would have demonstrated that these are common at nearly every track around the world. Often, it can be the older, less efficient tracks that raise safety concerns because of antiquated architecture at a time when the technology of sleds have made them faster than ever. Even if the steel support beams had been padded, what guarantee is there that the outcome of the crash would have been different? Severe crashes occur at every track at every speed. No track in the world has every beam padded. Through the media’s incessant focus on details like padding, the Whistler venue was portrayed as having ignored standard safety measures within the sport, which was simply not true.

There is nothing particularly unusual about Whistler’s design, with the exception of its vertical drop, which made it the fastest track in the world at the time of the 2010 Games. Not surprisingly, generic reports of “excessive speed” surfaced as the culprit for the fatal crash. A sport where athletes race unarmoured bodies down ice tracks with no brakes on millimeter-wide edges and have minimal course vision has inherent risks. When, then, does speed become “excessive”? Is 130 kilometres per hour acceptable? Who determines what speed is considered “safe”?

The truth can be painful. It can be ugly. And often the truth is exactly what people don’t want or aren’t prepared to hear. At the time, nobody seemed satisfied
that driver error was a likely cause of the accident and death of the Georgian athlete. It appeared that an angle of gore and malice was too delicious for the press to pass up.

In my opinion, the most pertinent story that failed to emerge is the issue of athlete eligibility for the Olympic Games, a topic that has been debated for years with no definitive conclusion. An extreme and inherently dangerous sport like luge demands many years of training and racing (an accumulation of thousands of runs down the tracks) for an athlete to be considered at the world-class level and to be able to navigate, in any and all situations, his or her way safely down a course. There is no denying that because of the growing cost of building and operating these facilities, track designers are now combining the elements of high speed and technically challenging curves—factors that had been kept separate in older tracks.

A track was often known to be either a high-speed “gliding” track or a slower, more technical track. As these components are combined in one track, and as the sport evolves in terms of both the technology of the equipment and the competence of the athletes, tracks are becoming more demanding than ever. This alone requires athletes to have more experience than ever before—the cost of which many teams (including the Canadians until recent years) simply cannot shoulder. Smaller nations, especially, struggle to finance the travel, training, equipment, and coaching that the realities of the sport now require. The level of expertise needed by both the athlete and the support staff make the days of athletes and nations with minimal experience (who show up to compete only at the Olympic Games every quadrennial) a thing of the past. It’s simply not realistic any longer for nations that cannot ensure adequate training because of limited budgets and/or lack of adequate access to appropriate training facilities to compete in the more extreme sports. It’s a real conundrum for a sport like luge, whose continuation at the Games depends on growing participation and mass Olympic representation.

Legitimate issues within the sport such as athlete eligibility for World Cup and Olympic events, as well as track accessibility and broader standardization of equipment, need to be actively addressed on a permanent basis rather than with short-term Band-Aid solutions on a “per race” basis. I believe that for the safety of all athletes, the rule makers and criteria setters such as the FIL need to re-evaluate their standards for World Cup and Olympic entry.

Undeniably, the rest of the world is trying to play catch-up to the Europeans with regard to luge history, knowledge, and experience. The increased use of the technically demanding tracks that exist outside the European perimeter, such as those at Whistler, Lake Placid, and Sochi, is vital to luge’s growth and survival. Routinely inviting non-European nations that have challenging tracks—such
as Canada, the United States, Japan, Russia, Norway and Latvia, as well as other nations in close proximity to these venues—to host competitions would begin to even out the field of play. Of course, owing to the astronomical costs, not every country has the resources to build or sustain such facilities.

The Germans alone have four tracks, more than any other nation. Often, all four of those tracks are included on the yearly World Cup race circuit, while the countries with the other challenging tracks host events every second, third, or fourth season. This gives the Germans a clear advantage at nearly half of the World Cup races every year. The remaining nations whose tracks are included on the race schedule also take home advantage, including the Canadian team at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver and the Russians in the 2014 Olympics. Smaller nations without tracks and with extremely limited budgets will always be at a disadvantage.

Furthermore, as in any sport, international success in luge is the key to financial opportunity for nations that need to increase their budgets for technological research and development, for the acquisition of qualified coaching and support staff, and for the funding of five months of worldwide travel, training, and racing. A strong finish by Canadian lugers at the 2010 Olympics was an opportunity to secure the country’s luge program for future generations. The condemnation of the Canadians by international media for using our home track to an unethical or immoral advantage was completely unfounded. Other countries also have the advantage when races are held at their venues. The media coverage created the perception that because Canadians had more runs on the Whistler track (a geographical and mathematical certainty), the rest of the world was denied adequate opportunity to train. Following the rulebook, Canada offered all nations the required amount of training—whether countries took full advantage of the training opportunities was up to them. If opportunities for other countries to train were thought to be inadequate, questions should have been directed toward those responsible for drafting the rules, not toward the Canadian team for following them.

Absent from news reports that I saw was the success of the World Cup held in Whistler the season before the Games, as well as the fact that the track had been tested, inspected, and approved on multiple occasions by the FIL and all other appropriate governing bodies. Members of the US luge team and media were very vocal in their anti-Canadian comments about the safety of the Whistler track and our home track advantage, yet nowhere was it mentioned that some of the top-ranked sliders voluntarily pulled out of the 2000 Goodwill Games in Lake Placid after questioning the track’s safety. Coming into the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City,
no one seemed to ostracize the US team for maximizing its home track advantage by having more runs than other teams at its venue.

The significant problems associated with the luge track in Italy before the 2006 Olympics in Torino also flew under the radar. An accumulation of crashes and injuries leading into the World Cup test event in 2005 led officials to cancel the World Cup. Boiled down, like it or not, accidents are inevitable. It’s in the nature of the beast.

Tracks have different designs, weather conditions are constantly changing, and the evolution in the technology of the sleds has made it possible for athletes to go faster than ever before. There is no possible way in a sport like luge to predict and/or avoid every potential chance for injury for every slider at every venue, especially given the diversity of athletes’ experience and access to training. There are simply too many variables that even a modified rulebook could never entirely address.

Anyone who has ever been on a luge sled has also fallen off it. Even the world’s most experienced sliders aren’t exempt from ice burns though paper-thin speed-suits every now and then. That’s why it becomes even more critical that the athletes who compete in luge (and other extreme sports) are fully prepared to be there. Crossing the finish line a few times at slower, less technically demanding tracks doesn’t provide an athlete with the skills needed to make confident split-second decisions at the most challenging venues. At the Olympic level, it’s not about knowing what to do when conditions are favourable: it’s about knowing what to do when they’re not—something that requires more than two short years of experience in world-class competition.

The physical, technical, and mental demands of the Whistler venue for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games track weren’t a surprise to anyone who showed up to race on the track. Even so, accidents can happen. Whether you are a luge athlete, a doctor, a pilot, or simply a commuter on your daily drive to work, human error is an unfortunate part of life. The Olympics are about competition between the best athletes in the world. They are not an open invitation event for all to compete, and maybe now, at the immeasurable expense of a life, the issue of athlete eligibility will be taken more seriously.

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