

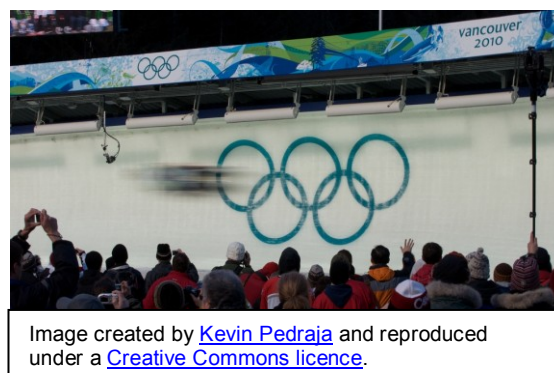
We live in an age where professional athletes are lauded as kings of men, where an athlete can earn £100,000 per week to play football, and where the athlete can also earn millions of pounds in lucrative and desirable sponsorship deals. However, athletes are regularly required to bear considerable risk as a requirement of their sport. Imagine the fights and body slams that occur regularly in ice hockey, or the highly physical nature of rugby. Such a concept is referred to as *risk transfer*, where the athlete is paid a good salary and, as part of their remuneration, accepts the transfer of risks inherent in the sport. Of course, many athletes also take on this risk as amateurs, meaning that they receive no remuneration for the risks that they take on. It is interesting to consider that no other industry is likely to accept the risks required of the athlete, as it would contravene many health & safety regulations.

Fair Play but High Risk?

Is it acceptable that athletes take on major risk as a regular part of their job? There is a clear argument on both sides of the debate; on the one hand, the athlete has to conform to the rules and regulations of sport, so is aware in advance of the risks inherent. Furthermore, many athletes are paid handsomely for their acceptance of a physical risk. On the other hand, is sport really such a priority that a person would risk physical harm, or even death, in order to pursue the sport that they love? Clearly the polarising and tragic case of the 21 yr old luge competitor Nodar Kumaritashvili brings the issues into sharp focus.

The Tragedy of Nodar Kumaritashvili

Nodar Kumaritashvili, a talented young Georgian luge competitor, was killed in a horrific training crash at the Whistler Sliding Centre during the preparation for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games. Kumaritashvili was on his final scheduled practice slide before when he lost control at 90mph, veered out of the track and slammed head first into an unpadding pillar that was situated very close to a hard turn on the track. Tragically, witnesses saw his visor and sled continue without him towards the finish line as Kumaritashvili lay fatally injured. Sadly, the site had already been subject to several crashes and had already been referred to as too fast and too dangerous by a number of competitors.



The IOC and International Luge Federation (FIL) issued a joint statement, with Jacques Rogge stating that "Our first thoughts are with the family, friends and colleagues of the athlete. The whole Olympic Family is struck by this tragedy which clearly casts a shadow over these Games". His thoughts were echoed by FIL President Josef Fendt who labelled the tragedy "... the gravest thing that can happen in sport". Vancouver Organising Committee (VANOC) head John Furlong said he was "heartbroken" by the death of Kumaritashvili.

FIL and Vanoc stated that the accident had not been caused by deficiencies in the track, but that they had made alterations as a "preventative measure". They instead attributed the tragedy to the failure of Kumaritashvili to come out of curve 15 early enough, and in not properly compensating for his correct entry to curve 16 as a result, causing him to subsequently lose control, commenting that:

"Based on these findings the race director, in consultation with the FIL, made the decision to re-open the track following a raising of the walls at the exit of curve 16 and a change in the ice profile..." "This was done as a preventative measure, in order to avoid that such an extremely exceptional accident could occur again."

Pressure to Compete

Kumaritashvili was living his dream to compete at his first Olympic Games. Tragically, he told his parents he was scared of one of the turns just days before the event. His dad was to recount to the Wall Street Journal that his son "...called me before the Olympics, three days ago, and he said, 'Dad, I'm scared of one of the turns.'" Despite the FIL's claim that there had been only a 3% crash rate on the Whistler track, the complaint rate of athletes had reportedly been far higher. Earlier that week, for example, double Olympic champion and gold medal favourite Armin Zoeggeler of Italy was caught out at the 11th corner and was flipped off his sled. It is clear, subsequently, that consternation still exists regarding the perceived culpability, or blamelessness of the FIL and the IOC in relation to this tragic death.



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START THE DISCUSSION

- Research the concept of risk transfer. Provide a definition and discuss with reference to suitable examples.
- Some athletes complained about the track and others felt that there was no problem with it. Who do you feel was right?
- Do you think the addition of padding to the metal pole, or changes to the track, indicate that the organisers realised that the track was too dangerous?
- When does the principle of 'Volenti Non Fit Injuria' no longer apply?

FIND OUT MORE

FIL Official Report to the IOC on the accident of Georgian athlete Nodar Kumaritashvili at Whistler sliding Centre, Canada, on February 12th, 2010, during official luge training for the XXI Olympic Winter Games

http://www.fil-luge.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/Sonstiges/FIL_Final_Report.pdf
FIL (International Luge Federation)
<http://www.fil-luge.org/>

CREDITS

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