

Exclusive Interview with Ruben Gonzalez, Three-Time Olympian

HowToChangeBelief.com recently interviewed Mr. RUBEN GONZALEZ -- motivational speaker, author, columnist, actor, businessperson and three-time Olympic champion.

Ruben was not a natural-born athlete. He took up the Olympic sport of luge at 21, an age when most of the competition had a nine-year head start on him. Against all odds, four years and a few broken bones later, he competed in the Calgary Winter Olympics. And at the "old" age of 39, he found himself racing against 20-year-olds at the Salt Lake City Olympics.

In this interview, Ruben shares some of his insights into success and how anyone can achieve success if they really want to.

HowToChangeBelief: Ruben, how does someone from a hot, humid city like Houston end up competing in the Winter Olympics in the luge?

Gonzalez: I wasn't a great athlete. I never could jump high or run fast. I was as average as they come. All my life, I was the last kid picked for P.E. [physical education]. It was pretty sad (laughs).

But when I was 10 years old, I saw the Olympics on TV for the very first time and I was hooked. I never really believed it was possible for me at the time [to become an Olympic champion], so I never took any action. But several years later, at 21, I was again watching the Olympics and I saw Scott Hamilton win a Medal in the figure skating. Scott is about five foot one, weights about 110 pounds, and he gave me hope. If that little guy can do it, I figured, I can do it too. During that moment, I committed myself to become an Olympic champ, no matter what. For me, it was a done deal.

But I had to find a sport. Not being a great athlete, I had to find a sport that suited me and my strength. My strength had always been perseverance, so I looked for a sport with a lot of broken bones and a lot of quitters, but I wouldn't quit. That was my whole plan. I went in knowing it was going to be tough and knowing that 90% of the people would quit. If I could hang in there, I would have a chance. Most people quit on themselves way too soon. They don't give themselves a chance to learn the skills they need to reach their dream.

HowToChangeBelief: What is it like to luge down a mountain at 90 miles an hour? It must be a real adrenalin rush.

Gonzalez: When people watch the luge on TV, I think they believe all we do is hold on tight and pray. It may look like a waterslide, but it's a waterslide on steroids. Gosh, you're going eighty or ninety miles an hour, the world is flashing by, you barely have time to think. The luge is very responsive. If you simply hiccup, you could cause it to crash. Sometimes, you experience six Gs on the curves. At 200 pounds, I had 1200 pounds squashing me against the wall. That's tough on you.

And the little things make a big difference. You're making hundreds of tiny corrections all the way down. And when you finish the run, you don't have a brake. What you have to do is sit up on the sled and slow yourself down by dragging your feet on the ice. It takes a couple of hundreds yards to come to a stop because you're finishing the run at eighty-some miles an hour. I've been doing it for 20 years and I'm still scared on every run.

HowToChangeBelief: Let's talk about success and what your Olympic experiences have taught you. What would you say are the things that will determine where someone will be in five years?

Gonzalez: The books you read and the people you hang around with. Those two things will determine what's feeding your mind. My coach always said "You're six inches away from success." I never knew what he meant until he explained it to me one day. That six inches is the distance between your ears, i.e., what you're feeding your mind. By the way, my coach was a four-time Olympian and three-time champion. He was the Michael Jordan of the luge, so he is very credible when he says these things.

I have always read biographies. My dad told me that if I studied the lives of great people, I would figure out what works in life. After reading enough biographies, I realized that the story of a successful life is always the same story – somebody had a dream, they went through a struggle where they refused to quit, and they ultimately had a victory. During the struggle phase, they either figure out the solution on their own through trial and error, or they were guided by someone else who saw the way to victory. That's the other thing: They all had coaches and mentors. Nobody is self-made. If you're smart, you'll seek advice. I never would have made it to the Olympics without the coach.

So the books you read and the people you hang around with is huge. My dad said you want to hang around with people you have respect for, not people whom you have influence over. If you are only hanging around with people whom you have influence over, then no one is pushing you to excel. If you try to pull away from the pack, they'll try to push you back because your success will threaten them. So you want to hang around with successful people because successful people think big. You may feel out of place, you may feel like you don't belong, but do it anyway. The success of those winners will rub off on you and you'll start thinking big and you'll start believing in yourself. I was pretty much running on other people's belief and then my own belief kicked in.

And you don't have to limit your reading to just biographies. Pick up the classics. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. *A Man's Search for Meaning*. *Think and Grow Rich*. *See You at the Top*. Read those books and surround yourself with successful people and your belief level will grow. You and I have heard a million times *What the mind can conceive, it will achieve*. That may sound pretty and all, but if you don't believe in yourself, that is pretty much worthless.

I started doing this when I was ten and my belief level grew. I went from a ten-year-old kid with a dream and zero percent belief to a twenty-one year old who had read biographies and hung around winners all that time. And when I saw Scott Hamilton, that was the catalyst, the *ah ha* moment, if you will. If he can do it, I can do it. But I guarantee you that if I hadn't been reading the books and hanging around with winners, there would have been no *ah ha* moment when I saw Scott Hamilton.

HowToChangeBelief: In much of your writings, it is obvious that you place a lot of emphasis on the word courage. Why do people need courage to succeed?

Gonzalez: In my book *The Courage to Succeed*, I describe two types of courage that I believe you need in order to succeed.

First, you have to have the courage to get started. That comes from believing that something is possible, capable of being accomplished.

Second, you have to have the courage not to quit, to endure, to keep going when the going gets tough. This type of courage comes from desire. If you want something badly enough, nothing is going to make you quit.

At the Olympic training center, all of the mental training they give you is designed to give you both types of courage. We believe something is possible and we also have the desire to see it through.

HowToChangeBelief: How can someone develop courage?

Gonzalez: By continually facing your fears. Having courage doesn't mean that you're fearless. It means that you're acting "in spite of" your fears. Do you think the guy on the front line who's getting shot at is not scared? Of course he is. We idolize him and respect him because he's courageous. He's not running. He's taking action in spite of his fear.

How do you do it? Aristotle said "We become what we continually do." When you're in a situation that's a little bit scary, if you will take action, your fear will disappear. Let's say you're at a restaurant with your friends and the waiter come to your table to take the orders. No one wants to be the first one to give their order. "What if I order something stupid?" Have you ever noticed when somebody orders chicken, everyone orders chicken? It's safe to do so. The next time you have dinner with your friends, go with the mindset that you are going to order first. As the waiter approaches, you're going to get excited because you know you're going to order first. What you just did was set yourself up for a personal victory. It takes many personal victories before you will have a public victory. Remember when you were a kid and were afraid to jump off the high dive? Once you finally did it, you thought it wasn't that bad at all and spent the rest of the afternoon on the high dive.

So, look for things that will stretch you.

HowToChangeBelief: Is there a single quality that most successful people possess?

Gonzalez: Yes. It's called perseverance. Refusing to quit. Quitting is not an option. When I was twenty-one and called Lake Placid – that's where the luge track was – they wouldn't let me in at first. They said I was too old. I wouldn't take no for an answer. I didn't know how I was going to get in, but I knew hanging up the phone wasn't an option. But they finally let me in. Perseverance is what will get you through every single time.

When you read the great biographies, you find that the steps are dream, struggle and victory, but the perseverance is what got all of them through.

HowToChangeBelief: Let's talk about visualization. That's a technique we talk about a lot today. What role has visualization had in your life?

Gonzalez: It has played a significant role. Visualization is a simple exercise that anyone can do. It doesn't mean you're seeing it in bright red colors or anything like that. It's just painting a picture in your mind's eye. You want to get your senses and your emotions involved. Think of a highly emotional event. Before I competed in my first Olympics, I might have been jogging or walking at the mall, but I could see myself walking in the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. I could hear all the people cheering. On my right was the flag and those rings. I looked over my shoulder and there was the Olympic torch burning bright. And there was the Olympic orchestra playing the Olympic anthem – my favorite song. And I saw us high-fiving each other. "We made it, man! We're here. It was worth it." I could feel the snow in my face. And the cold wind. The goose bumps. If you can mentally put yourself there and do it with emotion, you're going to start getting strong inside. You're going to be a guided missile and you're going to hit your mark. You may need to make some corrections along the way, but you'll hit the mark. It's about getting all of your senses to participate. What's it going to look like? What's it going to feel like? What's it going to sound like? And get emotional.

If you don't get emotional, it's going to be a waste of time. The mind can't tell the difference between what's real and what's imagined. When you go through the visualization exercise, your mind buys into it and helps to get you to do whatever is needed to make that dream come true.

When the rubber meets the road, it is always going to be "action." If you don't take massive action, it is just a pipe dream. And so, the visualization, the affirmation, reading the books, hanging around the winners, all of that is designed to turn you into a person of action. It's all about the action behind the attraction.

It's not all about the law of attraction. The law of attraction is just the first step.

HowToChangeBelief: I understand there was a time when you almost talked yourself out of the Olympics. Would you mind telling us about it?

Gonzalez: It was about a year and a half before the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics and we had a World Cup Race. We were training in the morning and the Italians were training in the afternoon. The Italians were the best that year. I wanted to see what they were doing, so I went to curve 13 which was the toughest curve on the track to see how the Italians were doing. Watching the luge live, as they go by at 80 miles an hour, is amazing. As they went by, I muttered to myself "Man, I can't believe I do that!" For two hours, I watched them go by. I wasn't having any problems with that track, but as I said, I simply wanted to see how well the Italians were doing. But the next day, it was our turn on the track. When I approached curve 13, my mind reminded me of my amazement the day before. "Man, I can't believe I do that!" To sum it up for you, I forgot to steer through curve 13 and had the worst crash ever. I broke my hand, my thumb, my foot, and totaled my sled. I had no money to buy another sled. As I said, it was a year and a half before the Salt Lake City games and I was trying to qualify.

After the accident, I had a pity party for about three days. "Woe is me! Why did this happen to me?" But nobody wants to show up when you have a pity party. I hopped on the plane to come back home. About halfway home, I finally got my head straight. I reminded myself that I came back with broken bones before. The next day, I was working out with casts on my arm, a cast on my thumb. Mentally, I was back in the game. So I called some of my luge buddies to see who had an extra sled. A guy from New Zealand, Adam Cook, lent me his sled. It was a little small for me, but it was better than sliding on my rear end. As it turned out, I qualified on that sled and competed in Salt Lake City on that sled.

HowToChangeBelief: What can you tell us about the new feature length film you are co-starring in called *Pass It On*?

Gonzalez: It will be released in a couple of weeks. You can learn more about in on my website www.thelugeman.com or www.olympicmotivation.com as well.

The film is about 1 ½ hours long. We wanted to pick up where *The Secret* left off. *The Secret* tells you about the law of attraction, but we realized that's not the whole story. There is a whole series of steps that people need to go through in order to be successful and make their dreams come true. So we broke the movie into four sections. The movie is actually called *Pass It On, Share the WISH*. The word WISH is actually an acronym for wealth, inspiration, success and happiness. It's not about wishing it is going to happen and then it will fall on your lap. It's about the concrete steps. We went to CEOs, philosophers, pro athletes, Hollywood people, successful people in all different walks of life to see what they are all saying that works. It's awesome. You can buy it on my website. If you do, I include a book I wrote call *Success Secrets of a Three-Time Olympian: 50 Tips to Take You to the Top*.

HowToChangeBelief: I want to thank you for your time this morning and look forward to getting together at some future time for an update.