

Excelling in Speed

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Abstract

Gustav Weder, former bobsled pilot and double Olympic gold medallist in bobsled shares his experience and insights on what it takes to reach the highest level in the speed sport of Olympic bobsled. He presents many practical suggestions related to mental readiness and focusing that can help anyone who wants to embark on the road to performance excellence. He believes that the most difficult challenge he faced was how to continue to win after your first or second or third win. He provides some excellent insights on how to accomplish this goal.

Bobsled was my life for 15 years and I think I tried to do the things that would optimize my performance at a pretty advanced level. I will try to share some thoughts that could help some others who are on the road to excellence. First we have to define just what excellence is. The first thing is that to become great in sport is to realize there is a long, long way to go to get to the top; I will talk about my way of getting to the top. There is also a second topic that is very important. When athletes go to the Olympics, only one can win. The competitive situation there, where it really counts, is highly demanding. We prepare athletes to go there and to excel, but they can be excellent and finish 4th. I think that we have to keep that in mind: how we prepare people to perform when it counts and to keep winning in perspective. And the third point is that when you win once, that's fine; you're happy, and you've achieved what you really wanted to achieve. Then you usu-

ally want to go on, and win again. The challenge to win a second time, a third time, and so on is really much bigger than winning the first time. And so finally I would also like to share some thoughts about how to remain at the top.

Initially, becoming great in sport, was not my way of looking at things. I started out at 21 years old to become a bobsledder. I did a lot of athletic training before that. At 21 years old, many athletes' athletic careers are over, but it was then that I began bobsledding. Before that I was a track and field athlete and a gymnast. So I had 15 years of preparation before beginning bobsledding.

I was always looking at the physical side of things. I trained hard, very hard, and I became better. So I was really prepared perfectly, physically, for my first time at the Olympics in 1988 in Calgary. We had the best starting time. My brakeman was the number one brake man in Swit-

zerland. He was a huge guy, not only huge; he was very fast in sprinting too. We had been in top shape physically. We had top training results, and we were the favorites there. Yet I think I can say there we didn't perform up to our potential. We finished fourth, and we knew that was really an average performance that we had. That event made me think a lot. Up until then, from 1982 to 1988 I was always focusing on the physical things, training hard, sprinting very fast, pushing hard with the sled, driving down, trying to analyze all those physical things. But then I realized that's not enough to win when it counts. After that experience I started to go in another direction. For the next four years, from 1989 to 1992, I tried to work more mentally, to learn the mental skills necessary to be ready for the second Olympics. Because I knew that to perform at the Olympics on the highest level, and to succeed there, it's a mental game.

The year from 1988 to 1989, we came first at the World Championships in the four man bobsled by changing only a few little things. In 1990 we were at the top. We finished second in 1991 twice. We were the favorites for 1992 and that was not the best feeling; I knew that feeling from 1988 in Calgary. We were the favourites coming to Albertville and knew that the whole country was expecting us to win a gold medal. Before arriving there we had been very good in training. We had been prepared well. But imagine the first run...we are going down that first run on the track, having worked hard for ten years now from 1982 to 1992, and after the first run we came to the finish, looked at the board and saw our time and ranking. We were in ninth place after the first heat, and I

thought, "Shit!" The same shit as in Calgary - four years for nothing. But I thought that for only four or five minutes and then I became angry, and my brakeman got mad too. He pushed me and said, "Hey, c'mon, c'mon, that's only the first heat and the track here is difficult. The weather conditions can change, and we just have to keep this in perspective. It was only twenty-nine hundredths of a difference." And in these twenty-nine hundredths of a second there had been eight sleds all very close together. So we just got into our minds and said, "Ok we have to change something", but I will talk about this later.

From 1992 to 1994 it was a totally different game again. In 1992 we won the gold medal, and we knew we would have another chance to win again in two years time. Now we knew we had the mental game more or less under control and we cultivated that. However, there were so many demands that came up after winning the Olympic gold medal! Athletes who win a gold medal at the Olympics are asked to travel all over the country to fulfill the needs of others and this can cause them to lose contact with their personal needs. So we had to learn how to handle and master those demands. There was another game as well which I call the holistic game. This was the mental game of trying to figure out what all the components of performing at such a high level are, how related to each other they are, and what influences each component. What is it really?

I have certain things that I find are most important for me. And the first thing is just knowing or finding out what is important. A female skier, when asked why she was so good, said simply, "I think I did what was important, and I fo-

cused everything on what was important and I just did nothing else.” But it’s very complex, you have to always be looking a little bit ahead, a little bit in front, just trying to keep up with all the new things coming up so that you’re not left behind while some other guy is detecting the new things. Also you have to make and set priorities, and prepare for every possible scenario. You need to prepare for what could happen because performance in a high speed sport includes danger and fear. To perform on a high level you have to prepare for a lot of scenarios. Possibly no scenario that you prepared for will happen. But at least you have the chance that something you prepared will be useful in the situation you’re in. And it’s also important to watch the whole situation, constantly evaluating what is happening with the whole team. After competition it’s important to analyze what was good, what was bad, and then to focus on the good, and erase the bad. Next, it is helpful to go over the competition with the whole team, the coaches, with the mechanics, with the specialists on material and so on. This involves an intensive search to find all the limiting factors and to erase the things that did not have an effect on performance. Remember too, at the end, just knowing all this is not good enough. I mean, you can know everything in the world but you have to put it together. You have to do it. That’s the next step. It’s being in two worlds. It’s always analyzing and on the other hand it’s doing, and testing yourself. It is an analytical, intellectual approach. But to keep the motivation required over 10 or 12 or 15 years, to pursue something like that, I think that needs more, more than analyzing and trying to figure out what works. One needs heart or ambition, something that directs.

I didn’t have a dream to become an Olympian. I actually never had this dream when I was a kid. I just focused on having the perfect movement, or doing something very well. It didn’t matter if it was in track and field or if it was in gymnastics. I just tried to do it as well as I could. And if you do that, you will sometimes get a good ranking. You might find yourself somewhere in the first, second, third position, and if you do that all the time it directs you very much. So for me, it was just keeping this sequence of a dream in mind, always doing the best I could. When I was in Calgary the first time, that changed a little bit. I had this Olympic taste, you know - just being there and knowing that the rest of the world was coming there. It’s a nice atmosphere but it’s competition too. Afterwards I knew I wanted to go again. I wanted to erase the faults I had made in 1988 in Calgary. I wanted to do a good job, a real good job at the next Olympics. Then I had this dream more clearly.

You know, as an athlete you have to train hard, and I was doing a lot of weight lifting because normally I am a thin person. I grew bigger a little bit by doing a lot of weight lifting. I had to really work hard to put some weight on, by doing squats in front of the mirror. I was always seeing myself, in the summer, imagining myself at the start of Lillehammer, watching myself there, and saying, ‘I know why I’m doing these things and I’m doing two times more than anyone else’, or ‘I’m doing two more than I did yesterday’. I could only do that, I think, with these pictures in mind - feeding myself with what I wanted to do. Feeding the unconscious, telling myself why I am suffering so hard doing squats in front of the mirror

and trying to bring that drive into my performance. This leads to a very strong identification with what you're doing, always working with these images in mind. This also enhances your belief in all the opportunities for yourself and the coaches. You are self-directed. You are going for it and you are not accepting any limits, you are just doing it. As a result the commitment level becomes very high. I mean you can analyze and have a great ambition, but then you have to implement something, you have to do something.

That means you have to have a long-term plan. All people who train seriously know about periodization in physical training; I use periodization not only physically, but also mentally. We try to do a lot of loading physically. In the valleys between the physical peaks, I use a lot of mental techniques, especially relaxation, self-hypnosis, just to recover more quickly from the high loading. The loading goes on for two weeks, and then there is nearly a one week break. Watching videos, doing deep relaxation, doing self-hypnosis, just to recover your body more quickly, to be ready for the next time when you go for an increased loading. So that's the beginning of the training in summer, in April and May, and closer to the Olympics or a major competition, the physical loading goes down a lot. In the seasons where there are lots of competitions, there is nearly no loading physically, but what there is is of very high quality. If you do something, you do it fully, plus there is a lot of mental training every day. The mental loading goes up, especially before major competitions, where a lot of mental training is necessary. A good plan is not enough, as you know, you have to do it in daily work. You have to

train, you have to bring it into your body, and you have to bring it into a team. I believe that it is training that really brings you to where you want to go.

Our team was very successful between the years 1989 and 1992; every year we won at least one or two medals at the World Championships. It's not easy to keep motivated to begin serious training again in April when you have just won a gold medal in February. But you know if you don't do it, your competitors will because they saw the standards you set in February. You will be copied over and over. All the race videotapes are available to the competitors. They will copy your team, your movements, your behavior, and they will be there one year later, a copy of you. If you are the same as you have been the year before, you are also on the same level as these competitors. So you have to advance every year a little bit, not too much, but a little bit so that it's enough to remain at the top. So one needs to believe in constant training, in the willingness to progress, even if you're successful. This requires tremendous focus. It requires all the methodological training I mentioned before on this plan. This means living the plan or living this dream.

So this is an overview of all the things we did over the years. The learning process from 1991 to 1994 centers in on the special issue that I want to address now: performing when it really counts. We know a lot about performing when it counts from the literature, from the experiences of all these excellent competitors and performers. There are a lot of routines, daily routines, especially on the day when you prepare for your competition and a lot of visualization,

focusing training, thought control that trains us to perform when it counts. Because a speed sport like bobsledding is so dangerous, I think visualization is very important. The short term plan, one or two weeks before an event, or a one day plan before an event is also very important in order to have an inner vision that's as clear as possible. I tried not only to visually see but also experience each situation, the feelings, the visual insights, in order to combine it into an inner world that is close to or nearly the same as what I wanted to experience in the future. That experience is actually being somewhere in the future, just in your head. I prepared for a one minute race that is dangerous and very fast. It is very helpful to prepare that in your head as perfectly as you can because when you're driving very fast you have no time to react to something. You see something, it's gone, poof...no chance to act. You see something, make a little mistake, and poof, it's gone. So you have to be able to act freely. You have to know what you want to do and by visualizing, or just pre-experiencing every situation that you can possibly experience beforehand helps you to compete when it counts. And that means to perfect this inner tape and to live it again and again and again. There have been situations in the years before 1990 when I did that so intensely that I couldn't shut off this tape. That was a bad experience. In the evening before the World Championships in Switzerland in St. Moritz, I practiced my visualization of the track so intensely, that I could not sleep because of it until 3 o'clock in the morning. And this mental tape had a dramatic effect on my health because I lost 5 kilograms in bodyweight and was just totally wasted. These mental runs had been so perfect,

these runs had been so intense, but no mistake, I was totally wasted. I had to control this later. I learned to shut it out, to reduce the intensity and use it in an appropriate way. And what this leads to is becoming one with what you do, just becoming one with the track, one with the line. That way there is nothing unfamiliar when you come to the track; it's just there and you don't think about it. You go in and it's there in your head anyway.

We are trying to prepare for the future, like Chris Hatfield the astronaut talks about - needing to train over and over and over again for one and a half years in order to go up in space for a week. And training for any possible situation allows you to at least be sure that you have one solution for every situation. Not the perfect one perhaps, but a good one. That is only possible if you do a lot of preparation for different scenarios. So that was important for me, one or two days before, having this inner tape perfectly ready. Then half a day before or in the morning before competition, it was really important for me just to be totally relaxed, like a slow moving snake. At the beginning of my career or when I started to do that, my coaches and teammates were a little bit negative or were surprised that I was so relaxed sometimes. They thought, "He can't be good today". But the opposite happened. I was slow moving the whole day in order to save energy for when it really counts. And when it comes to the point one second before going, it is turning on, only for one minute, and it is turning on at the finish. So it's being really relaxed and doing only what is necessary. It's being lazy trying to save energy because you did all you could do beforehand, in the summer, in the prepa-

ration, in your preparing of the inner tape. That was important for me, I think, just to be very relaxed.

When I was going for that feeling, when I was trying to feel the ice, be part of the sled, be part of the track, that was only possible when I had fun driving. When I walked up the track very slowly in the morning before the competition, I couldn't talk to anyone. I just had to feel the ice. I had to make contact with the ice. I had to be the ice. I had to be the sled. I would just try to get the feel for what was appropriate for that day, because every day is different. But it also had to be fun. The same description had been made by Vreni Schnieder. She has won three Olympic Golds: two Golds in Calgary and one gold in 1994 in Lillehammer; two in slalom and one in giant slalom. And she said in Lillehammer that she had stood at the top of the hill before the second heat and had to go out in the woods, had to take the snow, had to say to herself, "Hey, I'm going skiing today, I want to have fun". And she said, "I was there at the start imagining my home track, that I'm home in Switzerland and I'm doing what I've always done". And she just took off all the brakes. No more brakes – 'just go for it, and have fun because it's there'. She told herself she could do it, but not vigorously - just let it happen, it's fun. And that means to synchronize with nature.

Purmin Zurbriggen, the downhill skier was the same type of athlete. When I asked him, "Tell me, what was the most important thing that you have to have before the race?" He said, "You know in downhill skiing, there's always fear combined with fun. What I had to do was go find some deep snow, and to go

down like hell and then go up to the start and just do it". So being synchronized with nature is one thing that is important for athletes to do just shortly before they race, to remind themselves of that feeling of what they really can do, because that's what they expect of themselves - being one with the snow, being one with the track. And that takes a lot of trust, a lot of trust in yourself, in the your preparation.

It also means clearing your mind of all things that do not matter too much. Things like political things in sport organization, like sponsorships, you have to let go, and be really relaxed and clear. For me concentration or focussing is not something vigorous. It's the opposite. It's being relaxed so things happen automatically, being calm enough that your mind is able to be highly focussed. So then it's there without trying or saying, 'Hey I have to be concentrating'. That's not possible, was not possible for me. Controlling your emotional level is critical in a speed sport that involves technical skill, that takes highly skilled movements. If the emotions are too high, and you're too attached to what is going on, it's a total different perception to when you are totally relaxed and that makes it sometimes difficult. So the emotional level always has to be the same - the same level in training as in competition. And having the appropriate emotional arousal level is probably one of the most challenging things for athletes in disciplines like this or shooting or downhill skiing.

What I always did was to only trust in my own rituals. For me it was just being relaxed and aware, doing only what was necessary, nothing else, trusting in the here and now, just only that moment

counts. It was remaining flexible. What impressed me was what Purmin Zurbriggen told me when I asked him to tell me about his preparation for going down. The downhill skiers do not seem to have as an intense inner tape that I tried to develop for the track. The downhill skiers have to stay flexible. He said, “You know, I just prepare a few points where I have to go through, the most important points of the track down. But when there was a straightaway you see the tracks from the previous skiers shining in the sun. He said, “You know, you just take one, and you feel it’s fast so you stay there. If you feel it’s not fast, you just immediately change to another track, not going for a totally fixed plan, but staying a little bit flexible”. He was at such a high level that he just could do that. He just selected the lines by his feeling, just knowing which felt good and fast, and staying there.

In my sport it’s important to let the mistakes you made in the past go. That sounds very easy when we talk about it. But it is essential in a speed sport. If you have one thought about a mistake, 50 meters are past, and you lose concentration because you are hanging in the past. It is important to shut out the past and try to be aware of only the near future. Be in the present and a little in the future. Another athlete created the expression, “Harmony with perfection.” This means just trying to be in harmony with everything and letting it happen. As I mentioned before, not concentrating as hard as you can, not trying to push, just allowing it to happen.

I have one more point about remaining at the top. If you have won once, like in 1992 at the Olympics when we won the gold medal, there were suddenly so

many other demands that have nothing to do with sports that sometimes you lose perspective on everything such as what you really like to do. There are so many demands from sponsors and so on that you need to direct yourself in another direction. You have to be a manager of yourself and a very hard one. And what I think is most important is just reminding yourself of what is your real love in the sport. And there I agree totally what Terry explained to us about keeping the love, and keeping the passion, even if a lot of other additional demands are coming up from outside, from other people. And that means for me to really think about what real success and satisfaction means for me in sport.

Increased external demands - it’s just a question of managing them. If you are successful, the sponsors want to have a piece of you, and all of them want to have pieces. They don’t care about you; they care about their campaigns, because that’s what they expected and you have to give that because you’re living from the sponsorship money. And the other thing is that you become a public person overnight. Not only sponsors, but the entire public wants to have a piece of you. Then there are your fans and family - your close relationships are also focussing on your success. And your past successes can become your present identity and this creates future expectations. I mean it’s logical if you win once, you want to have the feeling again. For me, managing myself meant learning to say, ‘Hey I would like to but I can’t because of my training’, because of not wanting to waste all the energy. Recovery time is very important after a big event. And to keep in touch with reality, just remaining who you want to be. So

keep your own love. Stay what you are and balance all the needs that you have with the external demands. Decide to control only what you can control. And like with a speed sport, there are so many things happening that you have to select what is important for you and control what you can. Be yourself and stay what you are.

For me, real success and satisfaction are important issues. For me it was always to explore my potential, not necessarily going for gold medals. Then I was able to increase my confidence in my potential a little bit. The ultimate goal is always to expand these potentials and to build a philosophy of how to get there, how to make it possible to repeat successes. And that means to evaluate your successes, not failures because you have to know why you're successful, not why you failed. A lot of people evaluate failures. That's normal; that's easy. But much more time should be invested in evaluating why you have been successful. And for me that meant when things happened the way I wanted them to happen, I felt very satisfied. I identified with the goal, with the way to reach the goal. That meant being open to ongoing learning, and adapting to real new challenges.

One of the most important things is constant learning and avoiding over confi-

dence. I saw a lot of competitors win medals at the Olympics who did not win again because of this. They felt, "Hey, I'm good". They could not step back and say, "Why have I been successful?" You have to remain what you are and stay humble. Every situation is special and the next time you compete you have to not rely on your past success. That means storing all the successful feelings and creating an environment where it's possible to repeat this, but at the end to be self-responsible.

The last thing I want to mention is staying what you are, always going back to that love and passion and developing that personality. Decide to have fun - that is the only thing that is important in these situations. Follow the dream and live the sport, not only do it but live it. And by doing that you become authentic. I wanted to do bobsledding and I wanted to do it my way. That became a very important part of myself, just finding out who I really am, and what I really wanted to do. To sum up, that means that it's a really long term development; it's ongoing learning. It's becoming in part, unique, by freeing yourself to perform, and shutting out all the external demands, and loving what you do when it counts. It means developing a philosophy to get there. That's the goal.