

A comment on the Vancouver Winter Olympics

# The unnecessary death of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili

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The tragic death of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili during a training run at the Whistler Sliding Centre north of Vancouver, British Columbia on Friday continues to cast a dark cloud over the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. It also raises disturbing questions about the purpose and consequences of the whole Olympic enterprise.

The Olympic establishment was predictably quick to close ranks and blame the victim. On the day following the accident the International Olympic Committee and the International Luge Federation (FIL) issued a joint statement. They listed the luger's "errors" on his final run and stated that "The technical officials of the FIL were able to retrace the path of the athlete and concluded there was no indication that the accident was caused by deficiencies in the track."

The statement deliberately misses the point. Luge is an inherently dangerous sport, with about 3 percent of competitive runs ending in crashes. There will always be "errors" leading to accidents. They should not lead to death.

The credentials of the track designers could not be more impeccable. The original design was by Udo Gurgel, responsible for the design of six previous Olympic tracks. Detailed plans were drawn up by Stantec Architecture, who performed the same function for the 2002 Winter Olympics. The design team clearly had the knowledge and experience to deliver according to the expectations of their clients.

In the aftermath of the tragedy several commentators have noted that a track does not have to be faster to be more challenging. And yet it seems unlikely that the decision makers behind the Vancouver Games would have been content with building the world's most technically interesting track. They wanted the world's fastest. And that is what they got.

Athletes have been privately and publicly expressing concerns about the safety of the track ever since it opened. Curve 13 was nicknamed "Curve 50/50," reflecting the perceived chances of negotiating it successfully. Defending world champion Armin Zoeggeler of Italy was among those

who crashed during practice, while Romanian Violeta Stramaturaru was knocked unconscious and had to withdraw. Australia's Hannah Campbell-Pegg commented: "I think they are pushing it a little too much. To what extent are we just little lemmings that they just throw down a track and we're crash-test dummies? I mean, this is our lives."

Given the unprecedented speed of the track, elementary safety considerations should have dictated extended practice times to familiarize athletes with the challenges they were facing. This is especially true for athletes from smaller, poorer countries, who inevitably have less exposure to cutting-edge track design than their more affluent colleagues.

Kumaritashvili, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, "told his father he was terrified of the track before doing the run that killed him."

The ugly reality is that Canadian authorities stringently restricted practice runs to boost their team's "home-field advantage." Canadian athletes were given nearly 10 times as many runs as non-Canadians.

The preferential training arrangements for Canadian athletes did not apply to the sliding events alone. A major row erupted in 2009 when US skaters were denied access to the Olympic skating facilities in Richmond, BC. The story has been the same across the spectrum of sporting events.

Thrown on the defensive, Canadian officials insisted that they have stuck to the letter of Olympic regulations and have behaved no worse than every other host country before them.

That may very well be true. Unfortunately, the opening ceremonies told the world that Canadians were "different" (meaning, "different" from their neighbours to the South), because they were more polite, more tolerant and just plain nicer.

But Max Gartner of Alpine Canada did not sound "polite" or "nice" when he said, "There are a lot of resources getting spent on making this training possible. This is a Canadian

advantage we are not going to give away.”

Canadian luger Ian Cockerline commented regretfully, “You know, there’s money invested. It’s really what it comes down to at the end of the day, I suspect.”

Cockerline suspects correctly.

The “Own the Podium” program was launched in 2005 with the explicit goal of enabling Canada to finish at the top of the medal standings in the 2010 Winter Olympics. A total of \$120 million CAD has been raised from government and corporate sources and lavished on selected athletes perceived as potential medal winners. Coaches, physiotherapists, GPS systems, neuro-feedback transmitters—no expense has been spared.

To finish on top of the medal standings, Canada will need about 35 medals. A preliminary report estimated that without the “Own the Podium” funding Canada would “only” win 16 medals. In order to win those extra medals, Canadian government and business together are spending \$6 million CAD per medal.

No wonder they won’t let anyone play on their ice.

It should be noted that programs like “Own the Podium” are now standard for Olympic hosts. Australia spent \$135 million AUD on its Gold Medal Plan for the 2000 Sydney Games. Beijing spent huge sums to little effect on Project 119 to boost its 2008 results in events where it had traditionally been weak. The UK’s Mission 2012 will raise £300 million to cover its athletes in glory in London two years from now.

But even as countries like Canada are spending unprecedented sums on their elite athletes, the health of their general population is declining dramatically. The Public Health Agency of Canada says, “Over the past several years, Canada has experienced an alarming increase in obesity rates among adults, children and youth.” The agency estimates that as many as a quarter of all Canadians may be dangerously overweight.

Obesity is a complex condition with multiple causes, but lack of exercise and poor diet are significant contributing factors. Poverty, long and irregular working hours do not help either. Underlying all the complexities, however, is the simple fact of the corporate control of public sports. In the profit-driven sporting model, there is no place for the huge majority of the population as participants. The only role for the masses in this scenario is as passive consumers.

The peak of physical condition attained by the elite few finds its reflection in the physical debilitation of the many.

Given that what is perceived as meaningful participation in sports is only open to a small, well-rewarded elite, competition at every level becomes more intense and less “sporting.” Reports of fathers coming to blows with referees at their eight-year-old’s hockey game are just one sad

manifestation of this trend. Those who succeed in joining the ranks of the sporting elite are aware of the fragility of their position and are careful to do nothing that will offend the officials and sponsors who control their careers.

Professional athletes are only too aware that, as far as the sports business is concerned, they are indeed “just little lemmings that they just throw down a track.”

None of which has dampened the enthusiasm of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper for the Olympics. In a speech before the British Columbia legislature last Thursday, Harper called on Canadians to stop being “the least bit shy or embarrassed” about their patriotism. He admitted that “boisterous displays of nationalism, we tend to associate with others” (meaning “our neighbours to the South”), but then, leading by example, he unrolled a large Canadian flag and chanted, “Go, Canada, Go!”

Last December, Harper prevailed on the Governor General to close down parliament for three months. His obvious motive was to put an end to increasingly uncomfortable questions about the complicity of Canadian troops in the torture of Afghan detainees. Harper has been transparently calculating that the Olympic Games and the \$120 million medal bonanza would induce patriotic fervour across the nation. This would translate into unquestioning support for “our” soldiers in Afghanistan and threaten to tar the opposition parties as unpatriotic if they persisted in asking awkward questions.

The federal government has invested heavily in “Own the Podium.” No less than his corporate partners, Mr. Harper expects to get his money’s worth. He needs a good medal haul to get his domestic agenda back under control and enhance Canada’s prestige going into the G20 negotiations this summer.

Despite the official platitudes (and the wishes of the vast majority of spectators and participants) the Olympic Games take place in the poisonous atmosphere of global rivalry between nations and corporations. The increasing violence of international conflict and the growing contempt of the ruling elites for human life will inevitably make themselves felt. Tragedies like the death of Nodar Kumaritashvili are the unhappy result.



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