

The PODfolio Podcast – Season 2, Episode 5: Speed Skating: Lessons for life & investment

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DANY LEMAY: Because if you just go with your normal approach, I would call it index-like approach. I mean, you're not going to win a medal at the Olympics.

SPEAKER: Welcome to The PODfolio, WTW's investment podcast series aimed at institutional investors, industry professionals, and enthusiasts alike.

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LOK MA: Hello and welcome to The PODfolio investment podcast with me, Lok Ma, as your host. The title of today's episode is "Speed Skating: Lessons for Life and Investment." And that is not a metaphor. We really are just going to talk about speed skating.

There are, of course, many interesting people on board the good ship WTW. But when I found out about the double life of today's guest, I just had to get him on the show. And, yes, we will draw some parallels with the investment world, mainly so this can count as work.

But really, I mostly just want to talk about speed skating and the winter Olympic games. So Dany Lemay, welcome to our show.

DANY LEMAY: Hi, Lok. Super excited to be with you today.

LOK MA: Now, you're an investment consultant at WTW. In fact, you lead our Montreal investment business. But you've also been involved in the skating world, specifically short-track speed skating for over 25 years, I believe, in various capacities, just coming back from the Beijing Winter Olympics as an announcer.

And skating is a sport that really caught my eye watching the games even before the idea of this episode ever came about alongside the figure skating, of course, and the super cool newer freestyle events as amongst the most exciting spectator sports from the Winter Games. And curling, of course, which is big in the UK for that fortnight, giving us our only two medals. So, Dany, first of all, can you give us a quick overview of short-track skating?

DANY LEMAY: Of course. I would say it's kind of a hybrid between the more traditional speed skating that people use to see, I mean, on long track, 400-metre track, and car racing to some extent. For us, in North America, we tend to compare it to NASCAR racing on ice.

But it's certainly a nice combination of, obviously, strength, technique, agility but also tactics. And that's why I've seen the lengths over my career between what you have to do on the investment side, what I had to do as an athlete, and now what I have to do as a short-track speed skating announcer.

LOK MA: Yeah. And I'll just have a go at describing the experience of watching this sport so purely in the context of sheer entertainment value. For me, it's all about chaos and drama from the outside. So you mentioned NASCAR.

When you're driving a car and you take a corner too fast and for that split second, you wonder if you're going to make it round. But that kind of tension basically runs as far as I can tell all the way through watching a race. And there's all this quite aggressive jostling for position, people crashing into each other,

spinning out crashing into the barriers on the side, these kind of razor sharp blades on the skates flailing around all over the place.

It's a bit like watching like Game of Thrones or other TV shows known for being ruthless with their characters, as in absolutely anything can happen to anybody. A favourite can go out very easily. Front runners in a race-- they take each other out. And then someone storms through. And I think, Dany, probably my favorite spectacle-- if I can tempt our listeners to look this up on YouTube, perhaps-- is the relay race, which is carnage.

So in a relay, you've got the skaters who are actually racing. They're kind of flying around this outer circle. And then meanwhile, their teammates are going around an inner circle. Because they're trying to keep up the momentum. And all the time, people are jostling, falling over, picking themselves up.

And then for the relay changeover, which is my favourite bit-- so instead of passing on a baton, you charge up to your teammates, basically give them a shove so you're passing your momentum onto them, and you launch them off into the race. Yeah, my missus watched a lot of this. And we absolutely loved it-- most entertained. Hopefully, that's just a quick flavour of what the sport is like.

In terms of participation, Dany, I think in many places around the world, it's still seen as a bit of a niche sport, if you like. But I understand it's actually quite popular in many countries. So where is skating a big sport? And which countries are the dominant ones, would you say-- other than mighty Canada, of course. DANY LEMAY: Yeah, certainly. Well, it is fair to say that Canada and the United States basically launched the sport back in the '60s, '70s. But since it became an Olympic sport-- first as a demonstration sport in '88 in Calgary, actually, in Canada, and then an official sport in Albertville in France in 1992-- various parts of the globe picked up the sport.

And the Asian countries-- especially South Korea, China, Japan-- really picked it up early. And I would say over the last 15 years-- I mean, Europe, a large number of dominant countries like the Netherlands, like Italy, like Hungary now that has really, really picked up short track quite well, really made short track a true global sport. I mean, we had, I think, seven different countries that won medals in Beijing a few weeks ago-- really showcasing, again, how global the sport has become.

LOK MA: I think my job as a podcast host is to be a little bit challenging, Dany, even if we're just talking about sport. So I do have a couple of slightly spiky questions for you, if you don't mind. So the first one is related to my early observation that, no, this is sprint racing, but with quite a lot more contact than you see, for example, in a running or a swimming race.

There is a lot of jostling for position. There were definitely a few naughty hands in Beijing. So I know there are rules about not cutting people up and so on. But to me, I think being at least sharp-elbowed and testing the limits of the rules-- those feel like things that could give you a bit of an advantage. So Dany, is this a sport where nice guys tend to finish last?

DANY LEMAY: It's fair to say that as an athlete-- I mean, you're trying to test a limit of the rules. And clearly, we have on-ice officials. And we have video referees as well making sure that skaters stay within the rules. But I would like to say that, if I'm thinking of some of the best short track speed skaters in the world like Charles Hamelin, like Arianna Fontana, who's the Olympian that has won the most medal in short track-- very, very nice people off the ice. I mean, no doubt about that.

But yeah, on the ice-- I mean, you've got to be fighting for your spot. If you're too much of a nice skater, I think you're going to end up having some problems. And everyone will pass you inside or outside any time. But yeah, it's finding that sweet spot where you can keep your spot.

Find a place in the pack to jump in a better position. And as I said earlier, it's a very strategic sport, especially when you get to that Olympic level where all the athletes are in very good shape. They're all great skaters. And it's a matter of who has the best tactic on the day.

LOK MA: Yeah, you mentioned the athletes being in good shape. And one of the things that me and my missus noticed is you've got to be in shape to get into those costumes. I mean, they look superhuman. But I think if you put me in that, it's not going to have the same effect. And my second spiky question is, I guess, to some extent about skating, but probably more about winter sports in general.

And it's to do with inclusion-- big theme running right through our podcasts. Especially if I look at events like alpine and freestyle skating, you see you see these very cool, glamorous, very talented people doing amazing things. And I think to myself, how did you get this good?

And I just get a bit of a vibe that these were maybe the kids who went skiing four times a year with their wealthy families. And that's how their talent got discovered and then honed, again, with a lot of family support that's not available to everyone. So are winter sports a bit of an exclusive club in that sense?

DANY LEMAY: Well, yeah. As I think of short track speed skating, certainly if we go back to diversity, we're very proud, maybe because we're a newer sport. Maybe that's part of it. But if you look at the athletes, if you look at the coaches and the referees-- I mean, as I mentioned earlier, a true global sport-- I think diversity-- that's something we're really proud of as a sport.

And in terms of how you get started, I'll take my own example. I mean, for many, many people in Canada, you get into speed skating or figure skating as a way to learn how to skate, in some cases trying to become a better hockey player-- ice hockey player-- which was my case, but ended up preferring short track speed skating than hockey.

And to what I've seen in the previous years with some of the other winter sports like skiing, as an example, speed skating and short track speed skating in general are less expensive and easier for families to get into. And we have a tradition in short track of seeing brothers and sisters moving up the ladder in the sport and short track being a truly family sport. So that's something, again, that we're very proud in terms of the culture that we have in speed skating.

LOK MA: So now on to your own involvement in speed skating, Dany. Can you just give us a runthrough of your own competitive career on the skating circuit-- pun intended, obviously. And I've also heard that there's actually a link between your skating and getting a job in the investment industry with WTW. So we'd love to hear about that as well. So kind of over to you.

DANY LEMAY: So yes. I mean, I had the privilege of beginning in the sport at the age of four. My father thought that it would be a good way to become a faster skater in order to ultimately become a better hockey player.

But I really picked up the sport at an early age and, at the age of 14, moved to Quebec City to train with more of an elite club, where-- and actually, one of my teammates studied actuarial mathematics at Laval University. And that's where I got to learn about what it could be. And really, years later, after I won the Canadian championship in 1998-- which was kind of the peak of my skating career-- but knew at the time that it wasn't enough to potentially compete at the next Olympic Games.

So I retired from the sport and got a co-op internship at Towers Perrin back then-- meeting, actually, one of my former teammates from speed skating-- and when I came home in Montreal, switched to the investment side of the business, where I've been for the last 22 years. And I would say the rest is history.

LOK MA: Wow. And I do want to circle back again. Another pun, I want to circle back to, talking about your kind of double life, kind of parallel lives-- balancing your job as an investment professional and another serious professional passion, if you like. But let's just talk first about your move to becoming an announcer. What does an announcer do? And how did you get into that?

DANY LEMAY: Well, the role of an announcer-- outside of being more of the in-house or PA announcer introducing the athletes, awarding the medals, things like that-- in short track speed skating, we begin the trend 25, 30 years ago of actually describing the action like you would hear on TV. But we would do it for the audience in a way to not only make it entertaining-- as you said earlier, the sport is already quite exciting, which makes my job as an announcer easier, in a way-- but also trying to teach the audience and get them to understand and appreciate the sport and the athletes a bit more.

So I really got into it. Because we had the World Cup in Montreal, where I did not qualify as a representative of the Canadian team. But they needed someone on the microphone that knew the sport well, knew the athletes.

So I had that role for the weekend. And that was, what, back in '95. And since then, I've done pretty much every world-class competition in Canada. And that led me, as you said earlier, to four Olympic Games in that role. I would have never imagined that back in 1995.

LOK MA: So Beijing was your fourth Games as an announcer. How did you find Beijing? And actually, across all the four Games, do you have a favourite moment to look back on?

DANY LEMAY: Olympics, World Cups, world championship, national championships-- in a way, they're all the same in terms of how I need to do my job. Obviously, what's surrounded is magnified, I mean, 10 times when you're at the Olympics compared to any world championships. Certainly the Beijing Games were really unique because of the context with COVID-19 with the Olympic bubble that they had put in place.

So I think the structure of the Olympic bubble made it that we could really, I would say, deliver the Games in a way that we could not have imagined in the context of the pandemic. Certainly it wasn't as festive for me. I could not go really see other events or really walk around the city like I would normally.

And going back to your question-- I mean, certainly my very first Olympic Games back home in Canada in Vancouver was certainly something that was quite unique. But then having the chance to work in Russia, to work in South Korea in the contexts that were there at the time made it quite unique human experience at the same time.

LOK MA: OK, so I mentioned earlier this idea of people who-- I guess traditional professional jobs which they then combine with this very serious passion. I'm not calling it a hobby. I think it's much stronger than that, obviously. Here, we're talking about sport.

But I also know of various musicians, players at various card games, board games, et cetera, et cetera, who are still close to a professional level, many of them staying very, very deeply involved in this other pursuit that they're passionate about. And I wouldn't, of course, count you as belonging to that group, Dany. And you can see the links between these worlds.

For example, the link between mathematical ability and musical ability is well-known, and so on. So Dany, in terms of elite competitive sport, in your case, what links do you see between that and your day job? Are there things that skating has taught you that's useful to you as an investment consultant or in life in general?

DANY LEMAY: Certainly as I think of the different roles I've played, I've had the chance to play in the world of short track speed skating. Certainly as an athlete, of course, you have to deal with pressure. You've got to learn to deal with pressure.

You've got to deal with failures and losses. In a typical weekend of a short track speed skating competition, you have 8 to 10 races. You're not going to win all of those. And it's how you rebound from a loss or from disappointment that gets you moving upward, which is obviously a great skill to have in life. And being disciplined-- I mean, no doubt about that. Again, you'll have ups and downs. And you've got to be disciplined to succeed. I also-- I was a coach for about seven years. And that's really where I learned to mentor-- teaching people, get people to do or succeed in a way that they would not have thought themselves possible.

Because you believe in them. And you know what they're capable of doing. I became a referee about 15 years ago. I'm now an international referee as well. And certainly, that's a role that taught me to make decisions with imperfect information-- which, again, something in real life that you have to do.

And last but not least, as an announcer, as I think of trying to be short, precise communication, the art of storytelling-- I mean, that's obviously something I had to master and that I have to master as an announcer, which is also true as a consultant trying to help my-- the committees I work with to make the best decision possible. So now I feel very privileged that, again, my involvement in speed skating gave me a broader toolbox to support me as an investment consultant.

LOK MA: And that kind of brings to mind what I say to my kids is just get good at something. It doesn't matter what it is. Because getting good at something helps you get good at all other things, almost. And now this is the point where we try to draw out some investment-specific lessons from speed skating. So having talked about all these parallels, hopefully our listeners appreciate it's less contrived than it might sound in Eastern philosophy, if you'll indulge me, that there is this strong theme that dedication to any pursuit can reveal some much deeper truths. It's even less of a stretch when you think about speed skating and investment in this context. In both of those things, you're trying to outcompete other participants.

Both of these things involve a large element, as you say, of risk-taking and uncertainty. What are some of the lessons that we can draw from speed skating that we can apply to investing and managing an asset portfolio? And just to start you off, I mean, perhaps anything in terms of optimizing performance, especially in the context of outperforming, whether that's you're outperforming your own objective or outperforming a peer group.

DANY LEMAY: Certainly. Well, clearly being really skilled in one area, whether it's in sports or in a career, can certainly propel you to the next level but also can propel you to get to master another area. I'll give an example of the Olympics. Some will come at it with a very good technique.

Some will come at it with very strong-- like strong legs, things like that. But to win at any level, you've got to be well-balanced. And I think that's something you learn early in sports. That's something you've got to learn at some point in your investment career.

Definitely you can work with your teams. You can work with people-- I mean, all around the globe in our case at the WTW to do that. But you got to know your strength. And you've got to make sure you work, also, on your weaknesses to get better over time.

And going back to risk-taking, as you mentioned earlier, when people look at the Olympics and short track speed skating, to your point earlier, it's very, very exciting-- very dramatic, even chaotic to some extent.

But that's because you've got to take some risk. Because if you just go with your normal approach-- I would call it index-like approach-- I mean, you're not going to win a medal at the Olympics-- which, again, goes back to having conviction, having a way to take a reasonable amount of risk to succeed or outperform.

And I've seen that also in life and in work-- dealing with a committee, making sure that they're-- first, obviously, comfortable with the risk they're facing and the risk that they're going to be taking. But you've got to be willing to take some risk in order to succeed in the long run-- so certainly, two elements that I had to transpose from what I've seen and live in speed skating with what I see and live now as an investment consultant.

LOK MA: Another area that I think is worth touching on, which you've already mentioned, is coping mentally with uncertainty. Again, we've talked about how people crash out, winners and losers. They swap places and so on. Watching the Olympics, you see athletes introduced as strong favourites or world champions.

And two seconds later, their dream is dashed. No chance of Olympic glory, not for at least another four years, if ever-- which, of course, adds to the drama for people like me watching, but must be extremely hard to take. So how do skaters build up the sort of mentality to take on those kinds of setbacks?

DANY LEMAY: No, it's something that always amazed me when I watched the Olympics. Obviously, from my vantage point-- I mean, I have some good friends that have been great athletes at the Olympics as well. And it's always fascinating how, to your point, they may be competing on a Monday.

And they have a huge disappointment. And on the Wednesday, they're back on track to compete for, potentially, a medal in another event. And yes. I mean, that's really where mental strength is key. And obviously, in life, we all have our ups and down.

And it's the same thing in business. You can't outperform every year. And you've got to make sure that you rebound from things that maybe don't go your way in the short term. But that's where, I think, for those athletes, similar to how I have seen my own career here, it's truly having a long-term mindset.

And I know that with our clients, they often have that kind of long-term time horizon. And always keep that in mind. And yes. I mean, you've got to go through the downs that you may have in the short term. But that's how you succeed.

And sports is full of story of athletes who did not succeed at first or struggle at their first Olympics, and came up at the second or third time around, and won medals. And for me, that's a great metaphor for what we have to go through in life. And I think that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has been the prime example as to how you can't really overcome difficulties and coming up on the right track.

LOK MA: Yeah, and I think there's different types of-- not failure, but not getting the success you want. There is the kind of, "I've done all the right stuff. And it didn't work out"-- versus, "There are things I could have avoided."

And I think that might bring some kind of solace as well. Look, Dany. I would happily carry on talking for hours on this. But I think it's probably time to reluctantly start wrapping up this episode.

I hope we've managed to give people a sense of speed skating as a sport. As a final thought, say our listeners are interested in trying out the sport-- assuming they can already stay more or less upright in a pair of skates, and especially have mastered turning left, which I think is far more important than turning right in this case. How does one get into the actual racing part of it?

DANY LEMAY: Yes. I mean, there's an increasing number of speed skating clubs in various countries all around the world. And fun fact-- I mean, people would not think that intuitively. But it's actually easier to learn to skate on speed skates-- because of the long blades-- than you would have on either figure skating or hockey skates.

So it's sometimes, especially as an adult, an easier way to learn to skate. And for kids-- I mean, it's just a fun way to get to learn their balance and have fun on the ice. So I certainly encourage all the listeners to try it out one day.

LOK MA: So thank you very much, Dany, for coming on and telling us about speed skating and your own personal story as well.

DANY LEMAY: Thanks for having me.

LOK MA: We wish you, of course, the very best of luck with future Winter Games as well. As a follow-up to this episode, one request I'd like to make to our listeners is to let me know about your own passions outside of work that you pursue at a very high, semi-professional standard that you then combine with your day job as a finance professional. I'm relatively easy to find on LinkedIn.

So please do drop me a private message if you're willing to share. In the meantime, I hope you enjoyed listening to my chat with Dany. And do take care until next time.

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