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Vision to Win Gold

by Brian S. Boxer Wachler, MD

Three years ago I shook hands with Steve Holcomb who was forced to retire as the top U.S. Olympic bobsled driver due to becoming legally blind from a degenerative eye disease known as Keratoconus where the cornea (outer lens) herniates out. In February 2010 at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Steve walked away with a Gold medal, the first for the U.S. in bobsled in 62 years (last time that happened was when Harry Truman was president!) An incredible, miracle comeback of all comebacks. What happened in those three years?

Steve's Olympic team, coaches, and team doctor (Scott Stoll, MD) wouldn't let their best hope for Olympic gold stay retired. They refused to accept conventional wisdom. The recommendation from 10 other eye doctors was either 1) no idea what to do or 2) that Steve needed to have an invasive and painful cornea transplant. While a transplant surgery would have fixed the Keratoconus, the fragile new corneas would not be able to withstand the intense jarring and often violent nature of the bobsled sport (remember seeing all those bobsleds flip and crash during Olympics?). Also a transplant would have meant Steve being waylaid for two years for recovery - another career ender. The Olympic team and doctor researched who could fix his Keratoconus and allow him to get back in the bobsled again. Fortunately at that time, I was working on a non-surgical treatment for Keratoconus called C3-R, a process that uses vitamin applications and light to strengthen the cornea. Steve and his team took a chance on C3-R. The result: it treated his Keratoconus. Three months later I implanted a special type of contact lens behind his irises to further improve his eyesight which became 20/20.

With restored vision, Steve immediately came out of retirement, hopped in the sled, and began driving again. There was an initial adjustment period to his new vision and then he began to soar up the rankings. Like the Phoenix rising up from the ashes, Steve and his team were seemingly given a second chance. They started to ride their ominous black bobsled named "Night Train" to victory after victory on the circuit. People were starting to take notice. I'm sure

many were thinking, "who are those American guys?" The Germans had been the dominant country in bobsled for years. The top German bobsled driver Andre Lange was nicknamed "The Cannibal" to give you an idea of what he does to his competition -- figuratively of course. For the first time since anyone can remember, the U.S. seemed to have a real shot at becoming bobsled champions. Of course there were skeptics, "the U.S. just had a few lucky runs". The entire sports world sat up and took notice last year when Steve and his Night Train won the World Bobsled Championship in 2009 -- a U.S. first in 50 years. They beat the Germans and "The Cannibal". It seemed that the eaten were now eating the eaters. The U.S. were World Champions and it was undeniable they were a force with which to be reckoned.

Steve tells that as a young boy he dreamed of winning an Olympic Gold medal. I suppose many kids fantasize about that. Few follow through and map out a plan to achieve it. After going from retirement and Olympic medal hopes forever gone to World Champion and feeling the gold within his grasp, Steve with his new eyesight were hungry to make history. The German "Cannibal" had won Gold in the every one of the four Olympic bobsled events in which he raced. "The Cannibal" announced that this would be his final Olympics after which he would retire. He wanted to top his career off with Gold Medal #5 -- a flawless Olympic career. One person stood in his way - Steve Holcomb along with his blazing fast Night Train. At the Vancouver Olympics, my family and I were at the track to support Steve and the team. It was tense and exciting. Finally when Steve drove his team across the finish line winning the Gold, I was overcome with emotion, tears streaming down my face. Just writing this brings back some of those emotions.

Since then Steve and I have each received thousands upon thousands of emails, Facebook messages, and letters. We both realized our story (highly publicized to millions of people during and after the Olympics on TV) has become a source of inspiration to anyone with a challenge. This story is about more than getting a historic Gold medal in bobsled, which of course is incredible. It's also about "triumph overcoming adversity" which has been a source of inspiration to so many facing challenges of any kind in life, not solely medical. To honor Steve, I recently renamed the procedure the

"Holcomb C3-R" which is the first time a treatment for a disease has been named after the Olympic athlete who made it world famous. Steve and I shook hands again after doing media appearances together in Los Angeles a few weeks ago. After our handshake, I felt humbled and honored to have played a role with the comeback of a Gold medalist.