“The elite tiers of research are similar to elite sports”

by Janine Braun

Dominique Gisin won the gold medal at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. After retiring from athletics, she reached new heights by earning a pilot’s license, working with the next generation of young athletes and studying physics at ETH Zurich.

As an alpine skier and Olympic gold medallist, Dominique Gisin knows what it’s like to always push your boundaries. We sat down with her to learn about why she took the leap from the ski slopes to the physics lecture hall and what motivates her to support ETH Zurich philanthropically today.

Olympic medallist, pilot and physicist – you’ve had a very impressive career so far. What drives you?

DOMINIQUE GISIN: As an athlete, you learn early on that professional sports aren’t your final career destination. I have a wide range of interests, and if I hadn’t grown up in such a sports-loving family, I would have pursued an academic career. A friend of mine got me into aviation when I couldn’t train due to injuries.

You achieved the pinnacle of your craft as a skier. What were the biggest challenges you faced on this path, and how did you overcome them?

Nine knee operations, countless physical therapy appointments and then having to start your training from scratch to climb to the top again. What helped me was my love for the sport – my passion was simply greater than the

challenges I faced. As long as I had the feeling that I could improve, it wasn't yet over for me.

How has your athletic career influenced you off the slope?

It taught me persistence and how to endure. I often found myself in situations where I no longer believed I could succeed. Standing on the podium in Sochi with a gold medal was an experience that gave me enormous strength, which I still carry with me to this day. When taking exams, I always wore the watch that my sponsor gave me when I won the Olympics. It reminded me that I had already overcome totally different kinds of challenges.

How would you compare teamwork in sports to teamwork in academia?

Skiing is a solo sport that's done in teams. It's a special setup that can lead to absurd situations. After winning my first World Cup, I had to comfort a competitor, who was staying in the same room. It's a balancing act just like in academia: the competition is fierce, but you're not going to make it alone. In my eyes, the elite tiers of research are similar to elite sports. You have the greatest chance of success when the best people work well together.

You later traded in your skis for pens and paper in the lecture hall. Why?

No one believes me when I say this, but it's true: Sports were my worst subject at school. I was always good with numbers though, and I credit my former physics teacher for my fascination with the field. But between the international competitions, training and press conferences, I didn't have enough time to study. On the day that I officially retired from professional athletics, I submitted my application to study at ETH. I wanted to study physics in Zurich, and there was only one school that I was considering.

Are there any moments from your time at ETH that still stick with you today?

Yes, too many to name! The outstanding instructors and the high level of the lectures were particularly impressive – Professor Günther Dissertori and Professor Rahul Pandharipande, just to give two examples. It was only once I started studying at ETH that I realized how much cutting-edge research is conducted there. I fondly recall the guest lecture by Nobel Prize winner Kip Thorne, which further fuelled my interest in astrophysics.

Today you support ETH Zurich philanthropically. Why?

ETH was my gateway to a fascinating world, and it really put a spell on me. For me it was a great privilege that I, as an almost 30-year-old former pro athlete, was granted admission and was able to explore the world of science and follow the latest advances in research. I find it important to keep admissions accessible in this way, also by having low fees and scholarships. This increases the odds for scientific advancement.

Many young athletes see you as a role model. Do you have any advice for young people who are pursuing an athletic or an academic career?

Find out what you're most passionate about! That doesn't mean that everything will come easily afterwards – potentially the opposite. I strongly believe that eventually you'll reap the rewards. And I think that also holds true for my story.

About Dominique Gisin

Dominique Gisin, who originally hails from Engelberg, was among the world's top alpine skiers from 2007 to 2015. She won several world cups in the downhill and Super-G disciplines. She reached the peak of her career in 2014 with her gold medal victory at the Winter Olympics in Sochi. After retiring from professional skiing, she studied physics at ETH and graduated in 2022. In 2023, she welcomed her first daughter.

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