

The Ultimate Survivor

How team discipline and love for family helped a group of teammates survive the unimaginable

It is the eve of a Rugby World Cup qualifying match between the United States and Uruguay. I am enjoying a meal outdoors on a warm, South American spring day at a suburban Montevideo restaurant. At about this time of year, 34 years earlier, the man with whom I am sharing food, drink and rugby stories left Montevideo with his rugby team bound for a match in Santiago, Chile—a journey that would result in one of the most horrific experiences in the annals of sports-related travel. He is Nando Parrado. The story of the heroic survival of members of Nando's team after their plane crashed at 12,000 feet in the Andes has been chronicled in Piers Paul Read's best-selling book "Alive" and Frank Marshall's movie by the same name. But it is Nando's own book, "Miracle in the Andes," released earlier this year, that provides the backdrop to discussion of his survival.

For those unfamiliar with the story, the plane crash killed 16 of the 45 on board, including Nando's mother. Subsequently, 13 more died, including Nando's sister, Susy. Sixteen members of the party survived in unfathomable conditions for 72 days nourished (barely) by the liquid they could gather from melted snow and the flesh of their departed teammates. It was Parrado and his teammate, Roberto Canessa, who ultimately walked 70 miles in 10 days over the highest peaks in the Andes wearing rag-tag clothes and rugby boots, and led a rescue squad back to their teammates. Indeed, the pilot of the helicopter Nando directed back to the crash site continually challenged his directions—believing Nando's trek to have been "impossible."

Nando writes about how he was sustained by the love of, and the "searing need to be with," his father. Read's book "Alive" is a stirring documentary. Nando's book is an intensely personal journey about not just how they survived, but why.

In an age when we can't be that far away from a Starbucks opening at base

by Bob Latham

camp on Everest, and the line between billionaires and adventurers becomes blurred, it is important to realize that no one in Nando's party sought their status as survivors. He was, in his words, an "untested boy" of 22. Canessa had never even seen snow.

They did not have mountaineering experience, proper clothes or equipment, food or water. But Nando points out that they did have one thing going for them: they were a rugby team. They were used to being in close quarters;

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they were used to "breathing each other's sweat," relying upon each other and working towards a common goal.

Nando would eventually assume a leadership role in the group, whose numbers tragically diminished when an avalanche claimed the team's captain and seven others. Rather than being guided by his spiritual upbringing, Nando relied on more earthly motivations and experiences: life lessons he learned from his father, his knowledge of and support from his teammates, and the instincts developed from having trained and played a consummate team sport with them.

"The book makes it appear as if there was a lot of planning," says Nando. "And you might think that, because we had 14–15 hours per day to think about things. But I really had to rely on instinct." Those instincts perhaps best came into play in Nando's choice of Canessa as his partner for the rescue trek. "I needed to choose someone who could push me," Nando explains. Indeed the passage in his book describing his choice of Canessa is not unlike the analysis undertaken by rugby team

selectors each week as to who is going to take the pitch on Saturday.

There is one vignette in his book that perhaps reveals both the plight Nando was in and the discipline it took to survive it. A week after the crash, Nando had one piece of food left. This was before the group decision that they would have to overcome a societal taboo—a society far removed from their own circumstances—in order to survive. The one piece of food in his pocket was a chocolate-covered peanut. So, on that day, Nando sucked the chocolate off of the peanut. The next day he cut the peanut in half and ate one half. The following day he ate the second half.

Think about that the next time you get back from a dinner party and raid the refrigerator for a midnight sandwich.

"Your mind starts thinking of ways it can cheat your stomach," Nando says. Then, showing the perspective 34 years can bring, he jokes: "Now I know I could live for three months on a jar of Planters."

There is a great ease of manner about Nando Parrado, and he writes with a similar ease. He is contemplative, deliberate and casual. He is not a man who carries the burden of the past with him. He does not view himself as a hero. "I was frightened at all times," he admits.

"The ability to be truly alive and aware, to savor each moment of life with presence and gratitude—this was the gift the Andes gave us," writes Nando. It's a gift he shares in "Miracle in the Andes," a remarkably insightful story about survival, teammates, what parents mean in our lives, and how sports can serve as preparation for the most challenging moments of one's life. ■

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