

Tom Guagliardi

The Fighter

Tom Guagliardi was one of six children growing up in his childhood home in Toronto. It was a tight fit sometimes, but that didn't stop him and his brothers from clearing all the furniture out of the living room on Saturday afternoons to make a homemade wrestling ring. Then, when the television lit up with the bright lights of the stadium and two men poised to fight for victory, the Guagliardi boys transformed into the greatest wrestler they knew—their own grandfather. “We would good-naturedly beat the crap out of each other, scaring our mother in the process,” Tom laughs today. “Friends from the neighborhood would sometimes come over and get involved; it was like a ritual.”

Tom's grandfather, a former drill sergeant, professional football player, and worldwide heavyweight wrestling champion, was a mountain of a man in every sense of the word, and Tom was determined from his earliest years to emulate him. When, at four years old, Tom came home and asked his parents to sign him up for soccer and hockey teams, it was his grandfather who paid his registration fees. His grandfather taught him how to fold his clothes every night, make his bed every morning, respect his mother, and stand up for his family. He taught him manners, discipline, humility, work ethic, and perseverance. “I learned all my life lessons from him, and to this day, he's my hero,” Tom says. “Most important, he taught me to accept defeat externally, but not internally. With grace, you accept that you may have lost the round, but not the match. You analyze what went wrong, and you strive for perfection, always. That's what it means to be a fighter.”

Through his extensive and varied career, Tom has worked to be for others what his grandfather was for him: a true catalyst, promoting the success and development of individuals and companies alike. “I can sit back

and smile when a person I've mentored moves on to bigger and better things, or when a company I've supported goes through a successful transition,” he explains. “Great mentors and coaches change lives, and that's what I've always aimed to do—protecting, leading, and bringing people with me into successful outcomes.”

The fibers of his character, as competitive and relentless as they are nurturing and gentle, were forged in the shadow cast by the most life-changing event of his life—the sudden death of his father. His mother and two older siblings had gone out on errands, coming home to find his father deceased on the floor beside Tom, a sleeping baby. To those who knew his father, the event was a tragedy cast in a painful, negative light that would haunt them their whole lives. But Tom would come to think of the event differently—as a catalyst for future positivity and personal growth.

Tom's father had been a paratrooper in the US Army, but the family had since moved to Canada and fallen on hard times. As a very young boy, he was raised with the help of a foster mother until age four, when his mother remarried a friend of his father's who had lost his own wife suddenly. The man had two daughters just a little younger than Tom, and given the impact of loss, blending the two families proved especially difficult.

As a result, Tom was a contradiction—a troublemaker who also sought to break up fights instead of start them. As well, the stern nature of his stepfather led him to the feeling that his efforts and accomplishments were never good enough. “In one of the first soccer game I played when I was four years old, I scored three goals and was smacked in the head for not scoring six,” he remembers. “I think I was born with an innate aversion to anything other than first place, so my stepfather's demands didn't teach me excellence.



Rather, they gave me a firm resolve down the road to never treat my own wife and children that way. But I also realized down the road that it wasn't a problem with me; it was just his personality."

Despite the challenging dynamic between the two, Tom deeply loves and appreciates his stepfather, recognizing that his childhood experiences shaped him in school, business, and sports. "It's like they say in the movies," he remarks. "Get busy living, or get busy dying. Always being in trouble like that was like a fire licking at my heels, and I remember one pivotal moment in my life where I flipped the coin of perception and began to see everything in a positive way, instead of a negative way. Instead of thinking I couldn't do anything right, I began seeing it as, I won't stop till I get it right. That shift was pivotal in defining my work ethic and my worldview."

Just as Tom's stepfather was demanding of Tom, he was also demanding of himself, working construction all day and then handling a side venture in the evenings doing carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work for a list of clients, all to provide for his family. As a boy, Tom often went along to help, serving as the cleaner when he was too young to assist with the actual labor. "The blue collar work ethic is strong in all my siblings, and even my own three daughters demonstrate it," he remarks. "They're all exceptional students and athletes. One of them was an excellent soccer player. Another was an excellent soccer player and competitive swimmer. The other was an Olympic-level gymnast, who had this incredible self-awareness, mental calm, and inner gauge of work and success. All three girls measured their progress not by the medals they won, but in quiet internal inventories of what they had done well, what they could improve on, and where they were in relation to their goals. I'd say that's very characteristic of our family and how we work toward success."

As a kid, Tom reserved most of his effort for sports and invested less than he should have in school. The soccer team he played on stuck together from the time they were only four, and the same group of kids would play on the same team through adolescence. When the kids weren't busy doing chores for their families, they were practicing in the park. They played before, during, and after school, until it was too dark to see. Tom's youth soccer team became one of the best in

Canada and traveled all over the United States, playing in a worldwide tournament in Philadelphia and the Bicentennial Tournament in DC. To everyone's surprise, they beat most of the European teams as well, and Tom landed a spot on a semi-pro team when he was only 15.

That was the year he got his first job as well, working on the railroad for the summer. He gave his mother a portion of his earnings and then saved the rest, having learned strict austerity from his grandfather's example. By the time he started high school, he had nearly six thousand dollars in the bank, which allowed him to pay the \$750-per-year tuition for the small and selective Catholic high school he had gained admittance to. "As well as demanding top-level academic performance, the school also supported its students in becoming top-level athletes," Tom says. "They groomed you to be a success in the world, either with your brain or your body."

Thanks to these standards, Tom received a number of scholarship offers to pursue higher education in other countries, but he decided to stay in Toronto to attend York University. He deferred his education to play soccer and met Barbara, the woman who would become his incredibly supportive and inspiring wife. Soon thereafter, he was injured and returned to school, where he at first studied to become a physical education teacher. But when he learned the bleak job prospects for the profession, he decided to switch and major in science instead, transferring to Ryerson University to earn a degree in public health. During that time, he interned at the regional health department for eight months to gain field experience, which prepared him to accept a job with the Health Department upon graduating.

For the next six years, Tom worked as a public health inspector specializing in STDs for six years, rapidly rising up the ranks until he hit a roadblock and would have to wait for others to retire before advancing further. "Through that time, everyone I worked with kept offering me sales jobs," he recalls. "I had never thought of myself as a salesman, but when I talked to Barbara about it, she pointed out that I can talk easily with anyone, and that I'd be a natural. With that, I decided to try switching careers in the hopes that I'd be able to provide more for my family."

Tom was offered a job at 3M, and his first foray into business turned into a 15-year stint

accented with breakout moments of success. For each of the first several years he was there, he was given the company's Gold Disk Award for top salesperson. Then he won its Everest Award, given to the top salesperson globally. At 32, he became the youngest person in the company to take on a business portfolio when he was given the worst case in the whole corporation. If he didn't turn it around in six months, the business would be shut down, and Tom would be out of a job.

Tom was nervous at first, but he quickly learned that there's much more to learn from a bad business than from a good business. With the encouragement of his brother-in-law, a successful CEO, he let his instincts guide him, as well as several great mentors and teachers. At the end of the six-month period, the President of the company said he had done a great job and gave him another six months to continue his efforts, selling off land and unprofitable contracts and trimming up the business. After the first year, he had stopped the bleeding. After the second year, the business was profitable. After the third year, 3M was able to sell it, and by working his magic on the divestiture team, Tom was able to fetch a price 50 percent higher than the number his colleagues were willing to settle for.

From that moment forward, the firm gave him bigger and bigger businesses to run, culminating in a highly profitable pharmaceutical company. "People called me the Sunset Kid because they knew that, when I came in, I'd clean things up," he reports. "It meant some people would have to go, and things were going to be shaped differently. I was good at it, but there came a point where I needed a change. I was gone all the time, and even though I was doing good things for the corporation, I was tired of being the bearer of bad news for many people."

When Tom got a call from Cedara Software, one of the first developers of 3D software imaging for brain surgery, he decided to take the opportunity, which would allow him a global business experience. Tom, Barbara, and their daughters move from London to Toronto, where Tom was put in charge of a global portfolio that spanned the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Within thirteen months, he helped grow the company from 80 to 440 employees, but he wasn't optimistic about the firm's ethics and prospects. When 3M asked him to come back and run several businesses, he saw it as a parachute

and agreed. A year and a half later, after completing his tasks there, he dove into the distribution world by becoming VP of Sales for a company called Digital Storage, growing it to a nice size before selling it. He then became the VP of Sales for a manufacturing company before taking the helm of Digitek as President in 2008. He led the company as it grew from \$90 million to \$150 million in annual revenue, and as the team grew from 40 to 110 employees.

That growth revolved around the creation of core values and culture. "I want to go into a building and feel that the energy and culture is palpable," Tom says. "People undervalue culture because they think it's something you can just change with a nice company Christmas party. But it's so much deeper. It's everything—how you treat people each day, how honest and open you are about what's going on. It's no different from raising a child. What you want, you have to show. You have to live it and demonstrate it every single day, and show that you care about the things that matter to your employees. It's about details and knowing each person as a person."

In assembling Digitek's cultural identity, he put integrity at the very foundation, followed by respect and partnership. Innovation marks the last key principle, with a premium placed on execution of good ideas. "I live by the motto of excellence and execution," Tom says. "I lead as I coached soccer and hockey, with an emphasis on teaching and understanding that different people achieve on different levels. If we were short-staffed in the warehouse, I pack boxes so they could be shipped on time. You help each other out, just like you do in a family."

Outside of work, Tom and Barbara's life together over the years has been a mirror image of these values and worldviews. When their daughters were children, Barbara hung signs in their bedroom to remind them how to live good lives—phrases like *Attitude is everything* and *Because nice matters*. Everyday, Tom stops and asks himself, "What have I done to enhance someone's life today?" Even if it's as small as holding the door open for someone at the mall, he understands the power of positivity in a world where so many people tend to focus on the opposite. He plays hockey on a traveling team and can still hold his own, even alongside players half his age. He's done charitable work for muscular dystrophy research, with paralyzed veterans, and through the

Knights of Columbus. Barbara, on the other hand, decided to learn how to play the harp several years ago. “We’ve never said no to each other, so I encouraged her to do it,” Tom recounts. “She took lessons from a world-renowned harpist, and now she plays in hospitals for cancer patients and their families. Hers is the music that flows out from behind a curtain or in the waiting room, bringing peace and humanity in the direst of circumstances. She’s a real-life hero to me, and I would not be half the person I am today if not for her.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Tom ranks enjoying the journey as the most important thing, and notes the value of persistence. “Understand that where you start is not where you’re going to end up,” he says. “Do the best you can at the job you have, and be open to learning all you can. Kids now are under so much pressure these days to get into college, but entering the business world is different. You can take your time, listen, and learn. Don’t invest so much of your life in your job that the rest of your life becomes secondary.”

Beyond that, Tom’s success springs from the source. As his grandfather taught him, character is built from the very first attempt, the very first stroke, the very first breath. “The way you’re shaped when you’re young determines the

way you develop, like the way you shape your business determines the way the business develops,” he affirms. “The tiniest detail at the beginning changes everything if you’re not paying attention. It’s like building a house—if it’s off a quarter-inch on one end, it’ll be off three feet on the other. That’s why we’re fighters—for family, for success, for the positive.”

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).



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