

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

My crash at the Olympic downhill in Nagano was completely different. Then, it seemed like I was flying through the air for an eternity. But this time, everything happened like lightning. At once I realized, one wrong move and you're dead! During a ski race, split seconds make the difference between victory and defeat, but now there was much, much more at stake.

I can still see every detail in my mind's eye: I'm riding my brand-new 114-horsepower motorcycle along the state highway in the Austrian town of Radstadt, not far from Salzburg. I see a column of cars slowing to a crawl ahead of me. Traffic slowdown? No problem! I simply accelerate, speed past a few cars, and smoothly scoot back into my lane. Again the coast is clear, so I get ready to move out again. There's nothing to it. I'm on a two-lane highway, the speed limit is 55 mph, and I just passed a traffic sign with a black arrow crossed out in red: no left turn. Then, all of a sudden there's a red Mercedes with a German license plate swerving to the left. This can't be! You're not allowed to make a left turn here! Everything else happens in slow motion: To my left, the traffic island, to my right, the Mercedes, and there seems to be less and less street left. I am in serious trouble. But I feel a flicker of hope: Hey, maybe I can still squeeze by. No, there's not enough room. There's only one chance left: yield to the left!

As a ski racer, my reaction time and reflexes have been finely honed. Time and again I am speeding down a crowded slope, and it's not a rare

event that tourists will challenge you to a close call. That's when I react instinctively to avoid a bad collision. It's this daily level of awareness that has prepared me to the nth degree for just such a situation. And I know what has to be done to contain the damage in a worst-case scenario. During my 1998 crash in Nagano, for instance, I worked out a strategy for impact while I was still in the air. To a ski racer that's second nature. In fact, skiing and riding a motorbike are quite similar in this regard: speed, a feel for the curves, the ability to react quickly . . .

What now? Hit the brakes? No, the distance is simply too short. I'll suffer a frontal collision smack into the side of the car. I don't want to end up on his hood, in the driver's door, or on the roof. How about with my backside into the sign on the traffic island, and go home in a wheelchair? No thanks! The car is by now at a right angle to the road, but the driver still hasn't seen me. He simply doesn't know I'm here! Damn! To my right, there's a light pole, next to it the blue metal "23.4 kilometers" sign, and a bit farther off, a rock wall. If I crash into that, it's all over. In my thoughts I'm already beyond, just as in skiing: You're at a gate, but you're already thinking about the next turn. I'm already shifting my weight to the right; now I accelerate and I'm about to pull up with my legs. That guy has got to see me by now! But no, the driver seems to have been looking at the oncoming lane, and never behind him. Now I am registering, but only subconsciously, the impact of 750 pounds of flesh and metal hurled against the frame of the car. My right calf takes the brunt, tibia and fibula are being torn apart. Yet I can't feel anything and I'm thinking, half crazed, "Now I'm a goner!" It still hasn't registered that the crash has already happened. It came as a total surprise!

I feel the motorcycle lifting away from me, and I am fighting it with every fiber of my body. Somehow, I want to get control over the 550-pound machine. I squeeze my thighs together with all my strength, so tightly that I dent the gas tank. And now I feel the seat being ripped out of its mounting brackets. I have to sustain an unbelievable amount of pressure in order not to fall over to the left and be thrust underneath the car. The seat gives way, and I take off, and just as in a ski crash, my body is

mobilizing enormous defensive forces. Every muscle is tense. I am catapulted sixty feet through the air and crash-land in a ditch on the opposite embankment, the motorcycle seat still clenched between my legs. The motorcycle is mowing down the weeds in the ditch and comes to rest in front of the bridge, just as though it had been parked there. The lights are still blinking. For an instant, I don't see anything, hear anything, feel anything. But only for an instant. Then I can sense the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. I'm still alive! What happened? Instinctively, I take my right leg into my hands, and I realize that my foot is dangling by little more than a few shreds of skin. It is Friday, August 24, 2001, 7:24 P.M. The race of my life has begun.

THEY ALL HATED ME

In the summer of 2001 I was unbeatable. No matter what I did, no one could hold a candle to me. And moreover (and this unnerved even me), I was getting better with each passing day! It was like a puzzle that was suddenly piecing itself together: the routine of four and a half years of World Cup experience, as well as the foundation that I had laid through the consistent, monotonous, but effective training with Heini Bergmüller at the Olympic Training Center. The incessant training had just about done me in, and I was so tired of it all that for the first time in my career, I was seriously questioning why I was putting myself through this torture. Just as the beautiful summer weather was arriving in Austria, I had to head off to Chile, into the South American winter. I was fed up with the whole business.

But when the going gets tiresome, somehow I am able to “flip the switch” and get back on track. And I was truly in my element in the snow. Suddenly, everything seemed easy. Routine, strength, technique: Everything fell into place. Everything, that is, until the last two days, when the “skiing school” at the castle in the Andes (which would have made a nice backdrop for a James Bond movie) had me so totally bored that I no longer maintained the necessary level of concentration. Until then, I had been ahead by one second or more during each training run, even the

times I was experimenting with equipment or technique. I probably could have whisked down the slope on the wooden planks from the ski museum. I was in better shape than I had ever been in my life. My ski trainer, Andreas Evers, claimed that the racing season could have started for me in August. Probably it would have been best that way. As it was, I had to find other diversions to keep myself in good spirits until winter came.

And so, in the summer of 2001, after my third overall World Cup victory, I granted myself the first true luxury of my life: a “custom bike,” which I had ordered from Peter Penz, a motorcycle fabrication specialist in Upper Austria, to my exact specifications. It wasn’t cheap, but I felt that my Penz SP 14 Performance with its gleaming red metallic paint was worth the 36,000 euros I had to fork out. A 114-horsepower engine, the seat almost four feet away from the handlebars. The enormous wheel base, the massive fork, and the low clearance gave me that unique roadster sensation when riding it. During the three months it was being built, time and again I would drive up to Altheim in order to personally check up on its progress. I was counting the days until I could launch my new toy. A few days after my metallic dream finally stood in my parents’ garage in Reitdorf, I had to take off for Chile to attend the three-week snow camp. Throughout that time I was like a child, looking forward to being reunited with my new red girlfriend.

When I returned to Austria, I was greeted by beautiful late summer weather. I decided to take the first ride on my new bike up into the mountains to my conditioning workout. I know the 21-mile ride from Flachau to Obertauern, which sits 5,700 feet above sea level, by heart. I could almost drive the steep switchbacks blindfolded. Almost every day that I don’t ski I drive up there and spend eight to ten hours at the Olympic Training Center before Heini, my trainer, lets me go again.

My workout on that fateful August 24 was almost like a walk in the park. Because I had just recently returned from South America, six time zones away, my slave driver Heini let me sleep in for once. When I arrived at the center, I had to offer up my finger for a blood sample. Every day, my blood levels were tested before I started my routine of mounting

my stationary workout bike and pedaling at a constant heart rate of 105 to 110 beats per minute. Half an hour of monotonous pumping the pedals. I can do this as reliably as a metronome. I feel like a good little boy who always eats his spinach, which is probably why my coach likes me so much. If my lactate count, which is an indication of the level of exertion, is correct on top of this, then Heini is the happiest dad—I mean trainer—in the world. The nurse pricked my ear, and put the blood sample into the small apparatus on the table next to me for analysis. Lactate 1.5. Heini was euphoric. “Unbelievable, the shape you’re in!” Another thirty minutes of biking. “This sure gets old,” I was thinking to myself as I leafed through the newspaper that always sits on the fiberglass stand attached to the bicycle. That’s when I discovered that there would be a soccer match in Flachau at eight that night. “Well, that works out nicely,” I thought to myself, and called Andy Evers, my ski trainer, and my brother Alex while I was still biking. “Let’s go to the game, and afterward we can go out for a beer.” After all, I had earned it with my obedient training behavior. I was looking forward to the evening.

When I stepped outside, the sun was already setting behind the mountain, so beautiful it was almost kitsch, like a postcard. How quickly everything was to change. In front of the training center complex my buddies from Obertauern were waiting for me. They wanted me to join them for a barbecue. “Sorry, I’ve made other plans.” If only I had gone to the grill fest! Why on earth did I want to take in yet another sporting event that evening?

I started my Penz, and everyone’s jaw dropped. That melodic roar of the engine; none of them had seen such a bike before. I proudly made a loop in the parking lot and rode off into the warm summer night. Nice and easy. I was planning on a leisurely ride down the mountain, since I didn’t want to overwork the fully chromed S&S engine during its first 500 miles. I was dressed for biking, including, thank God, a sturdy Harley-Davidson leather jacket. My workout equipment was stored in my special hard-sided backpack, which can be used as a sledding saucer in the wintertime. That backpack would save my life in a few minutes.

While I was meandering down the switchbacks of the mountain pass, I thought about the ski training in Chile and about my top form. I marveled at how easily it all came to me. Nothing could stop me now!

DOC, PLEASE SAVE MY LEG!

A few moments later, my world had turned upside down. I was lying in a ditch, holding my thigh. The people arriving at the accident site saw a grim picture: The bones were protruding from my shredded blue jeans, blood was everywhere, and a foot was dangling from where it didn't seem to belong. One of my sneakers must have been torn off; I could see only the mangled sock. This did not look good! My lower leg was attached by no more than a few shreds of skin and tissue. I was slipping into shock. What did I feel at that moment? It's impossible to describe. The pain wasn't really that bad, but I knew that I had been clobbered.

I needed to take control over this disastrous situation. The first thing I checked was if I could still wiggle my toes. I thought, if that still works, then at least a few nerve and muscle fibers have remained intact. Great, it works. I suddenly felt relieved, because I knew that my spinal cord had probably not been compromised. From the adjacent property, a little old man arrived who wanted to help me. It was Engelbert Erlbacher, an 87-year-old herbalist who is known throughout the Pongau region.

The next thing I registered was the presence of two motorcyclists who had stopped right away. I yelled as hard as I could, "Call a doctor! Call a doctor! An ambulance! A helicopter! My leg is off, but I still need it for work!" Only later did I realize that it was at that moment that I first thought about skiing. I started cursing: "It's illegal to make a left turn here. Why did that jerk try to turn there?" One of my two biker colleagues concurred: "I was in line right behind you and saw the whole thing; it really wasn't your fault!" At that point, I started worrying about my face. I had registered a lamp pole in the background, and now I had a dreadful suspicion. "I must have struck that pole and ripped off my nose and part of my face in the process!" What made things worse was that so