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**Didier Cuche: "Never give up!"** A knee injury in January put an end to downhill skier Didier Cuche's ski season. Now he is preparing to gain a place on the team for the Winter Olympics in Turin in February 2006. "Swiss Review" meets a dedicated athlete and a straight-talking fighter.

By Alain Wey



Didier Cuche, a fighter on skis? Four injuries have kept this skier from Les Bugnenets/NE confined to his sickbed, and every time he had to find new strength to return to the skiing spotlight. Last January in Adelboden he pulled a ligament in his right knee during training for the giant slalom. But no sooner had he started scoring one good result after another and managed to gain a place among the top three for his two last giant slaloms, than his season came to an abrupt end and a difficult phase of operations and rehabilitation began: another testing time for the silver medallist at Nagano, as well as a new phase of self-discovery. "Swiss Review" caught up with Cuche in Saint-Blaise/NE before the start of the ski season.

"Once more I've learnt a lot, from good times and bad. Working with a mental coach has borne fruit. You learn to put things into perspective and focus on the essential, so you can respond appropriately rather than just losing your head or getting too excited." Didier Cuche is confident. In July he started skiing again, after five months of physiotherapy. "Physically I'm not yet in top condition, and I believe it might take another year until I'm fully fit. I won't be able to perform to the best of my ability at the start of the season. My general physical condition is good. I

have a good feeling for the snow and I feel fine, but because of my leg I'm way below my usual form." So will the skier from Neuchâtel be a starter at the Winter Olympics in Turin? That depends on his performance. He will need to finish at least once among the first seven in his favourite disciplines, or twice among the first ten.

Although last season was a difficult one for the Swiss ski team, Didier Cuche believes they did not do too badly. "Didier Defago had a very good season, ending up sixth in the overall World Cup rankings. Bruno Kernen just missed a medal. Four Swiss skiers missed a place on the podium by less than half a second at the World Ski Championships, ending up in places ranging from fifth to twelfth. It was evident very early on that the women's team were having trouble dealing with critical attacks from the press. In my opinion they were demoralised. Ridiculing athletes merely shows ignorance. Sure, they produced no results. But even if we had won two medals the problem would have been the same. There are too few of us to compete effectively with the world's elite. And that begs the eternal question: where are the up-and-coming talents? We have to follow the example set by Ski Valais and its president

Pirmin Zurbriggen, i.e. we must seek funding and collaborate with schools in order to offer junior ski talents suitable training opportunities (Project SUS/Schneesport und Schule)."

In this context the National Swiss Ski Academy opened its doors in Brig this autumn. According to Didier Cuche, this form of sports education has been neglected since the heyday of Swiss skiing in the 1980s. Unlike Austria, there is no close interaction between schools and elite sports. Says Cuche, "This is where Ski Valais set a precedent which should be adopted all over Switzerland. When Swiss go to Austria to combine sport and education because it's four times cheaper there than here, you have to wonder. The obstacles are huge, but the will is there!"

Talking of young talents. Cuche mentions Dimitri Cuche ("who has made solid progress over the past three years and will be competing in the European Cup"), Marc Berto, Daniel Albrecht, Marc Gini and Olivier Brand. "There's a small group of up-and-coming talents, but as yet no critical mass. The efforts of Ski Valais may well pay off in five to six years' time!"



#### DIDIER CUCHE: THE FACTS

**Vital statistics.** Didier Cuche, from Neuchâtel, age 31, height 1.74 m, weight 90 kg.

**Qualifications.** Federally certified butcher

**Successes.** In the Ski World Cup rankings: 3rd in 2002, 5th in 2003, and 13th in 2004. Silver medal in the Super-G at the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan.

**Other sports.** Golf, motorcycling, water skiing, climbing, mountain biking, football, volleyball, rollerblading, ice hockey, surfing. **Motto.** "Never give up!"