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Autor: Wey, Alain / Défago, Didier
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"I have great expectations in terms of speed!"

The World Downhill Skiing Championships will take place in Schladming, Austria, between 4 and 17 February 2013. Among the Swiss competing, Didier Défago has emerged as the new leader of the men's team after Didier Cuche's retirement and Beat Feuz's prolonged recovery from injury.

Interview by Alain Wey

No matter what anyone says, Swiss downhill skiing has been leaderless since the start of the season. Didier Cuche was just as important in his role as team leader as in terms of results and consistency. Much is now expected of competitors like Didier Défago, Carlo Janka and Beat Feuz, heir apparent in the overall 2012 World Cup rankings. However, the latter is ruled out of action for the entire season following inflammation of his left knee after an operation last spring. As for Carlo Janka, he has yet to find the form that saw him top the overall World Cup rankings and become Olympic champion in 2010. Injury problems have affected his confidence but things only need to click into place for the "iceman" to find his way back onto the podium. Due to these circumstances, the spotlight has now fallen on the senior member of the team, 35-year-old Didier Défago from Valais. The 2010 Olympic downhill champion has repeatedly proven his quality and is also familiar with the harsh reality of injuries. In September 2010, just six months after the Vancouver Olympic Games, he seriously damaged the cruciate ligament in his left knee and required an operation. His recovery forced him to miss the 2011 season. He nevertheless returned to the highest level by picking up his fourth World Cup victory in the Bormio downhill on 29 December 2011. 2013 is of course the year of the World Championships, which will take place from 4 to 17 February in Schladming, Austria.

"SWISS REVIEW": Like a good wine, you are improving with age, especially with the two victories in the downhill at Wengen and Kitzbühl in 2009.

DIDIER DÉFAGO: People say that I'm improving. Compared to last year when I was coming back from injury, my goal is now to enhance my performance. I have great expectations in terms of speed!

You must be excited about taking part in the World Championships. You have been compet-

ing in this event since 2001 and have yet to win a medal.

This is definitely a big opportunity that has evaded me. Schladming is a slope that suits me well as it is quite long and physically demanding. It's exactly the type of terrain that I love. Obviously, everything then depends on the weather conditions and the snow.

How will you manage the big day?

I'll use my experience but it's also a question of hitting form at the right time. Training and World Cup competitions have to be managed carefully to arrive with maximum energy. You simply have to keep yourself fresh for the World Championships.

What's life within the camp like without Didier Cuche? What is the new set-up like?

It's working really well. Everyone knows that there can be changes from one year to the next both in terms of trainers and competitors. New equipment has also been imposed on us even though our main ski brand suited us well. Had we kept it, it would have enabled us to get a better idea of our performance during training.

"It's hard to imagine doing anything else"

What strengths does the team possess now?

We are a small team capable of achieving good results. Everything is going well so far



Didier Défago does not see himself as our only great hope

but some team members are only just returning from injury, such as Marc Gisin and Patrick Küng. Our team has also shrunk. We are missing Beat Feuz. At least Carlo Janka is on his way back.

Do you feel as though you have taken over the role of leader within the team?

I don't want to take anyone's place. Everyone is different but it's certainly true that people are looking to me as a leader and for the moment I'm going with it.

You are now one of the few French-speaking Swiss on the men's team.

I am actually the only French-speaking Swiss. But I speak Swiss German fluently. It's been like this for some time. There were

two of us last year when we had Didier Cuche. Justin Murisier should have joined the team this season but unfortunately he suffered another injury.

At the age of 35, how do you see the rest of your career?

It would be wonderful if I could get through the Sochi Olympic Games season in 2014 injury-free. I could then bring my career to an end. For the moment, I'm concentrating on every season by trying to take full advantage of the opportunity to enjoy what I love doing. My goal is to have another two seasons. I'll be almost 37 years of age after Sochi. Even if I remain free of injury, my reflexes will not be the same.

"It's certainly true that people are looking to me as a leader and for the moment I'm going with it"

What are your memories of your gold medal in the downhill at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games?

It was incredible. It's hard to take it all in at the time. It took a while to sink in. An injury to my knee six months later gave me plenty of time for reflection. Those memories will remain with me forever. I was overcome with emotion on the evening of the medal ceremony when I saw my brother, who was also in Vancouver.

Apart from the Olympic gold medal, what were your sources of motivation when you were out injured?

I reflected on my victory at home in Wengen. Those are moments you want to relive. I realised that when standing in the finishing zones at some of the courses. I got such an adrenaline rush and experienced such nervous tension when a skier descended the piste that I knew I wanted to come back. The other thing is that I really enjoy what I do. You get the opportunity to travel a great deal and to see lots of countries. And when you're training, there are so many beautiful days and great conditions that you wouldn't change it for anything in the world. It's our life, our world, and it's hard to imagine doing anything else.

Who do you admire?

In sport generally, Roger Federer. I think many sportspeople would like to emulate him. He is extremely impressive in every re-

spect. In skiing, my idols were Pirmin Zurbriggen and the Norwegians Kjetil André Aamodt and Lasse Kjus, who always performed well at World Championships and Olympic Games.

What is your philosophy?

To take each day as it comes. To make the most of life and the present moment. When I'm at home, I manage to detach myself from skiing and to take advantage of the opportunity to spend time with my family. Then when I leave I'm completely focussed on what I'm doing again. I'm 100% committed even though I do not always achieve the results I want. When that happens, you have to be able to analyse your performance and to tell yourself that tomorrow is another day and will present new opportunities!



Didier Défago in action in the Super-G at Beaver Creek in 2010

DÉFAGO – THE INSIDE TRACK

Personal details. Born on 2 October 1977. Height: 1.84 m, weight: 89 kg. Trained as a draughtsman. Married to Sabine, two children: Alexane (aged 5) and Timéo (aged 3).

Early years. Started skiing at 18 months. Didier Défago grew up in the ski resort of Morgins in Valais, near to Portes du Soleil (Switzerland's largest ski area).

World Cup. Made his debut in 1997 in the giant slalom in Tignes. First podium finish with 2nd place in the Super-G at Val Gardena in 2002. He has achieved 13 podium finishes with four victories, including the double in the downhill at Wengen and Kitzbühl in 2009. Best overall ranking: 6th in 2005 and 2009.

Olympic Games. Gold in the downhill in Vancouver in 2010. He has taken part in the Olympic Games since Salt Lake City in 2002.

Wine. A passion of the Valais-born skier. A wine producer has created two blended wines in his honour called "Réserve du champion olympique".

Leisure time. Trout fishing in mountain rivers. Sport in general.

Music. "I enjoy listening to a little bit of everything, from French music, such as Jean-Jacques Goldman, etc., to hard rock like Metallica, AC/DC and Iron Maiden, as well as softer sounds like the violoncellist Nathalie Manser."