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The mountain whisperer

He is a popular and much-admired figure. Bernhard Russi, the Swiss Olympic champion, is a legend and has belonged to the world's sporting elite for over forty years following his triumph in Sapporo, these days as a course designer.

By Remo Geisser



Award ceremony at the 1972 Winter Olympic Games in Sapporo. Bernhard Russi won gold, Switzerland's Roland Collombin (left) took silver and bronze went to Heinrich Messner from Austria

Downhill skiers are the heroes of winter sport. They race over snow and ice on their skis at speeds for which they would face hefty fines on Swiss motorways. Bernhard Russi was one of these athletes forty years ago, having been crowned world champion in 1970 and Olympic champion in 1972. On the piste, he combined audacity with grace and style. Nobody flew through the air as elegantly or took the turns as beautifully as Russi.

Today, he designs courses on which the world's best downhill skiers can gain immortality. These include the piste at the Olympic Games in Sochi. Work there began on a stormy day in spring 2006. A helicopter containing 20 passengers wound its way to the summit of the Rosa Peak, standing at over 2,300 metres above sea level. The wind gusted, buffeting the helicopter. Land here? Nyet, said the pilot. But Russi had travelled here specially to pay his first

visit to the mountain where the pistes for the 2014 Olympic Games would be created. He would not allow himself to be dissuaded. So, he climbed out into the storm on a ladder, scrambled down and then jumped. He found himself standing on a grassy area, waving and calling out until two mountaineers finally gathered up the courage to descend as well. The helicopter turned around, and the three men set about exploring the mountain. Their equipment consisted of a compass, a torch, a bottle of water and mobile phones for which no network existed as the three later discovered.

Russi has been a course designer since 1983. Marc Hodler, the then President of the International Ski Federation (FIS), called him one day and explained that the Canadians could not agree on which mountain to use for the alpine events at the 1988 Games. Why Russi? He was a trained

draughtsman and had voiced criticism of courses even during his time as a ski racer. During the 1980s, there was a shift towards constructing levelled, straightforward runs because they were deemed safer. Russi was critical of this trend. He still believes to this day that racing is safest when competitors constantly remain active on their skis by responding to bumps, for example. This is quite apart from the fact that it does not make particularly exciting television if all you see racing across your screen during coverage are skiers in the perfect squatting position. When Russi arrived in Calgary, the decision in favour of Mount Allen had already been made. The former Olympic champion persuaded the organisers to open up the steep summit of the mountain as well and to give the flat lower section a more attractive design by shifting earth. Russi created his first Olympic course. He has since designed all

the downhill runs for the Winter Olympic Games.

Subaru rather than Jaguar

But Russi is not just a course designer, he is a man of many talents. The 65-year-old is still the Swiss sports star with the highest level of public acceptance and the most sustainable advertising value. He began making his marketing plans towards the end of his career. From the outset, he sought partners who he deemed credible and he concluded long-term contracts with them. He was once offered the chance to take the bends in a Jaguar for an advertisement, but he felt that this kind of car did not really suit a mountain dweller from Andermatt. He opted instead for the Subaru, still mocked at the time as being the farmers' Porsche. The make established itself, thanks in no small part to Russi, and he has remained loyal to it, as he has to practically all his other partners. He does not have many, as he has always been mindful not to be omnipresent in advertising. However, as he aged and started to need glasses, his smiling face soon appeared on billboard posters for Visilab, a chain of opticians.

The media engagement of this native of the canton of Uri is also unmatched. Russi has to perform a delicate balancing act here as he works as a presenter on Swiss television and also writes as a columnist for the tabloid newspaper "Blick". He is also acclaimed as a celebrity by the media and is much sought-after for interviews. He retains remarkable composure in dealing with the media and always sets the limits himself. When a journalist asked him a year or so ago whether he could publish thirty lines by him in direct speech over the row going on at the time at Swiss Ski, Russi declined on the grounds that "it would be a column in disguise and I already write as a columnist for a media organisation". But he did not object to his opinion being published in indirect speech with two or three stand-out quotes. So, everyone was satisfied in the end.

Not simply seeking consensus

When asked how he designs his courses, Russi replies: "I talk with the mountain." What he means is that he tries to sense what the terrain offers and which layout would ensure the best spectacle. He firstly scrutinises the maps very closely. He then flies to the mountain, as he did in Sochi. The three men who dared to descend from the flying



helicopter in 2006 scrambled down from the summit. Making his way through forest, rocks and undergrowth, Russi looked for a route that could one day be turned into a ski run. He went around attaching coloured ribbons to trees to mark out potential paths. These were later transferred to maps by surveyors, and Russi corrected and refined the route until he was convinced that he had found what the mountain had told him. As the three men reached the area around the future finishing point, that was when the adventure began in earnest. Since there was no radio network, it was impossible to guide the helicopter to where they were. The group had to struggle down to the valley. At 3 o'clock in the morning, after 18 hours in the wilderness of Rosa Peak, they found their way back to their hotel.

The project was now underway. Russi visited the Sochi area over 20 times before the 2014 Olympic downhill piste was completed. "I have a dictatorial streak," he reveals. There is no sense in listening to every single objection from organisers or construction teams on the mountain, he says. The course designer imagines where the gates will later be positioned, how far the jumps will extend and at which point the course will pass between two rocks or over a ridge. The terrain is ideally so diverse that very little has to be altered with excavators.

However, what the mountain allows is just one aspect. The course architect must also take account of what the FIS race directors want and what the rules stipulate. However, he is able to help determine these factors as

he holds a key position as chair of the International Ski Federation's alpine committee. His views and how he has implemented them in the mountains have significantly influenced downhill racing in recent years. Modern ski runs have jumps, technical sections and eye-catching features. The days of the "motorways" are long gone. "My philosophy has prevailed," remarks Russi.

The tight bends of Val-d'Isère

However, the course designer did not foresee the most striking change. When working on the design of the downhill piste for the 1992 Winter Olympics, the French skiing legend Jean-Claude Killy travelled with Russi in the cable car in Val-d'Isère up an incredibly steep mountainside and said: "I want to create a monumental run for downhill skiers here." Experts heard of Killy's plans and dismissed them as "impossible". But Russi began speaking to the mountain. The terrain at the "Face de Belvedere" is so steep that lots of tight bends had to be built.

The ski industry responded to this completely new type of slope with the construction of shorter, tapered skis. "From that point on, it was obvious that the modern racing ski would be a carving ski," says Russi. This development was extremely beneficial to both ski racers and amateur skiers because tapered skis allow much better control. However, this also resulted in top skiers approaching bends at increasing speeds and no longer being able to control the forces. This led to serious knee injuries, and the FIS ultimately had to amend the rules.

Bernhard Russi on the Sochi downhill piste at "Bear's brow"

Bernhard Russi advertising Visilab with Lolita Morena, Miss Switzerland from 1982 (left), and Xenia Tchoumitcheva, a Swiss model, economist and entrepreneur



But Russi saw other options. He believed that too many bends were designed in such a way that they could be taken on the edge of the skis, barely slowing the speed. He therefore argued for differentiation between sections that could be skied straight at high speed and technical sections. Speed should be reduced ahead of these with sharp corners. Russi constantly comes into dispute over such issues with the race directors and course planners who ultimately decide whether jumps are removed before a race or gates are relocated. "I understand these people," he says, "they lie in bed the evening before a race and wonder about how great the danger is to the athletes."

Two months before Sochi, the course designer said: "Everything depends on the next few weeks. If someone suffers a serious accident, they will try to reduce the risks on the Rosa Peak piste as much as possible." However, no serious crashes took place during the entire season, and the public got to see a spectacular downhill in Sochi. Steep sections, breath-taking jumps and fast bends. Russi later appeared in the finishing zone with a broad smile on his face. That was exactly how he had envisaged it.

When mountains have to rise

According to Russi, Sochi was a straightforward task because the mountain had so much to say. That is not always the case when people put forward Olympic projects. Various attempts were made in South Korea before Pyeongchang finally had its bid accepted for 2018. The previous efforts all failed on the

mountain for the downhill skiing. The course designer once had to explain to the team behind a bid that a 150-metre height difference was lacking and that the terrain was simply not interesting enough. "No problem!" said the Koreans, "we'll dig a 150-metre-deep hole and build a finishing zone arena at the bottom of it." And challenging terrain can be created with the help of excavators. A group faced the same problem in Quebec and proposed simply raising the height of the mountain by 150 metres. Both ideas were buried. Before Russi accepts a task, the International Ski Federation has to approve a project's Olympic suitability. The FIS and Russi both agree that no mountain will be accepted which has to be artificially increased in size.

However, the regulation is not very precise as it does not stipulate much more than the height difference. Russi therefore sometimes has to delve into his box of tricks. The terrain for the 1989 ski world championships in Vail, for example, was simply boring. The course architect therefore proposed the construction of a kind of bobsleigh run on the lower part of the piste which he called the "rattlesnake". The idea came to him at 3 o'clock in the afternoon up on the mountain. He then skied down into the valley and had a plaster model produced by an engineering firm. He made gates with toothpicks and even tiny skiers to display the size ratios. Russi presented his project at 8 o'clock in the evening. It was accepted. Vail thus had a much discussed and written-about attraction. But Russi himself concedes today that

the world championship course was still not really that spectacular.

The spectacle is important in this sport. When discussing the future, the course designer envisages more jumps and more extraordinary configurations for television, which he is always thinking about during construction. He mentions images of new sports, such as skicross and slopestyle, where athletes fly high through the air. This influences the viewing habits of the public, says Russi: "If we miss the boat, we will soon become boring." He is already working on the design of the course for the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. There is great anticipation about how he will implement aspects of what he saw in the freestyle disciplines in Sochi.

The Sochi course is already consigned to the past as far as Russi is concerned and probably a closed chapter for alpine skiing, too. The likelihood that a downhill event will be held on the spectacular piste ever again is very slim. The calendar is already very full, and the Russians lack the expertise and probably also the interest in holding World Cup races. The continued use of Olympic pistes is the exception. Of all the runs that Russi has ever designed for Winter Games, only the one for Norway in 1994 is regularly used in the World Cup. Jean-Claude Killy once said that Bernhard Russi was skiing's answer to Picasso. But the art he creates only exists fleetingly.

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