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The self-evident success of Beat Feuz

A few years ago, it seemed unlikely that Beat Feuz would one day win gold at the Ski World Championships. It now seems almost as if he was destined to be downhill world champion. Feuz is looking to win an Olympic medal in February.

BENJAMIN STEFFEN

There are many tales surrounding Beat Feuz and his past, some with an element of tragedy to them. He has suffered constant injury, but has always bounced back. There are legendary stories about him, yet there are always people who will hear and be struck by them for the first time. They are surprised to learn that Feuz is still a ski racer, despite countless operations on his left knee. He was once at risk of needing a transtibial amputation and had to have his knee flushed out five times under general anaesthetic in autumn 2012. This period marked such a major turning point that Feuz now divides his career into two parts – up to 2012, and after his comeback at the end of 2013.

Beat Feuz has been downhill world champion since last February after an incredible turnaround. When asked, however, Feuz denies that this has changed his life – perhaps more people recognise him now than before, but otherwise, everything is still the same. Although there were times when there was nothing to suggest that Feuz would one day rise to the top again, least of all at the World Championships, his new status is looked upon with a peculiar sense that it was a matter of course. World champion? Suddenly everyone knew it would happen all along.

Great intuition on the snow

Feuz grew up in the Emmental valley in Schangnau that had the only ski lift in the area which his grandfather had helped to build 60 years ago. The lower section of the lift was situated on the land of Rudolf Heinrich Feuz,

who ran the farm on which his grandson would later grow up. Beat was born in February 1987, and of course began skiing at just short of two years of age, but nobody suspected that this was the beginning of the natural course of events that would lead little Beat to a career on the world stage.



World Championship pose: the Emmental skier in St. Moritz last March.
Photo: Keystone

Feuz is credited with possessing great intuition on the snow without anybody being able to explain what this really means. Feuz just took part in a race and won, an influential trainer from his junior days once explained – it is as simple as that.

The perception of his incredible talent became more firmly entrenched when Feuz gained a reputation for not putting in enough effort rather than working too hard. Several companions from the various levels recall that he steered away from weight training, preferring to stay in his hotel room munching on sweets. When Feuz turned up as junior world champion for training with World Cup skiers, the coach Sepp Brunner told him not to bother coming back unless he lost ten kilos. And years earlier when the fastest boys in the Emmental valley did fitness training in the autumn, Feuz mainly showed up

when a games afternoon with a snack was scheduled.

Broken ankles

They are wonderful tales, probably not overly embellished, but nevertheless just stories from the past. Feuz would not have become world champion had he done the bare minimum. There were countless times when he could have given up, demoralised by injuries and setbacks. At just nine years of age, he broke both ankles while freeskiing and did not take part in a single race due to injury between April 2007 and October 2009, or in the 2012/13 season. Most people would probably have understood if Feuz had quit the sport – but this is perhaps the other side of this self-evident success. Feuz never seriously considered giving up as long as his body allowed him to continue. It is as though he owes it to his natural ability to continue striving for gold.

Feuz is leading a different life now to that before the major setback in autumn 2012. He trains less, for example, not for an easier life but as a precautionary measure for the sake of his body. Whereas his peers train five days in a row in preparation for the season, he takes a break on the third day. He adopts a cautious and measured approach – it is not all light-hearted. He has given up on the biggest goal in ski-racing – becoming the overall World Cup winner. In the 2011/12 season, he missed out on this feat by 25 points. He suffered a knee injury just under a month before the end of the season, “I twisted it and the next day the knee was swollen,” he explained. Feuz nevertheless re-



fused to have it examined more closely because he knew the doctors would have advised him to immediately refrain from taking part in more races. Feuz raced another ten times. He stood on the podium on three occasions, and ended the season in second place behind the overall winner Marcel Hirscher. This revealed a further aspect of Feuz's self-evident success – he fought for his opportunity knowing what he had put his body through and its limitations.

A Swiss Abroad in Austria

Today, Feuz knows that his body can no longer endure the strain of taking part in almost every race of the winter season. He focuses on victory at prestigious venues, like Wengen and Kitzbühel, in World Championship races and Olympic Games. He has become a one-day specialist and a maverick in some respects, not to mention a Swiss Abroad. He lives in Austria in

Aldrans, a small town near Innsbruck, in the native country of his Austrian partner Katrin Triendl, who was also once a ski racer but now works as a physiotherapist.

The Austrians seem to like him and he has been spared the notorious skiing rivalry between Austria and Switzerland. A restaurant in the region has even named a cordon bleu dish – containing Emmentaler cheese – after him. Feuz encourages his girlfriend to say that he is not Austrian, but instead comes from the Emmentaler valley – he has deep roots in Schangnau, the origin of all his self-evident success. This winter again he will set off from Austria to win medals for Switzerland. The Winter Olympic Games are being held in South Korea in February.

Preparations had gone well up to the start of autumn, which can't always be taken for granted with Feuz. Something has always got in the way in recent years. There have even been times when he has only been able to

Will Beat Feuz hit top form again this season? "There are no guarantees that I'll be fast," the downhill skier says modestly.

Photo: Keystone

take part in a handful of World Cup races. "There are no guarantees," he said in an interview in September. He was referring to his health, but added: "And there are no guarantees that I'll be fast either." It is as though he wanted to refute the widely-held view that he would obviously hit form, reaching top speed, just like that.

If he is standing on the podium after the Olympic downhill race on 11 February 2018, there will be fewer people hearing and being struck by his story for the first time. Most will say they knew it would happen all along.

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