

Profile of speed skier Mark Rupprecht

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Skiing in the Fast Lane

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By Claire Walter

Mark Rupprecht is on a fast track. The 21-year-old has hitched a tow rope to the back of a car, had a friend gun the engine, and skimmed over rain-slicked asphalt behind the speeding vehicle until the sparks flew from the metal edges and the street was P-texed. When the sunroof blew off the four-wheeled towboat, Mark ducked and crashed. “That put me in the emergency room,” he laughs, but he tried again, racing along dry pavement on in-line skates until the polyurethane wheels shredded. When the windshield on his old VW bug was out for six months, he wore ski goggles and drove with the wind in his face. He loves speed.

He has an outlet other than naughty-boy tricks. He has skied straight down gut-wrenchingly steep snowfields at velocities that you rarely catch even BMWs doing on Germany’s wide-open *Autobahns*. Yet Mark, who grew up in Littleton, looks normal, acts sane, and talks like a regular guy. He’s a clean-cut, with an engaging smile, athletic build, quick wit, and just enough grunge to his wardrobe to remain cool. It’s easy to be charmed by the congeniality spiced with mischief but no malice. At six-feet-one and 195 hard-body pounds, he’s shrugged off the inevitable scrapes and come back for more. Yet beneath that easy-going exterior beats the heart of the second-fastest skier in the United States and fourth-fastest in the world.

He achieved this rank by dropping into a bullet-proof tuck and blasting down the near-free-fall course in France. In the process, he dethroned world record holder Philippe Goitschel, the scion of a great French ski racing dynasty. Christine and Marielle Goitschel between them won three gold and two silver medals in the 1964 and ‘68 Olympics, and the family thinks Philippe is a rogue and a renegade for not skiing on the World Cup circuit. On April 14, 1995, at the world professional championships at Vars Les Chaux, France, Mark Rupprecht pointed his skis down a white speedway called the Kilometre Lancé. He rocketed into the 100-meter-long timed stretch with a sickening 95 percent gradient and hit 147.004 miles an hour. When he broke the beam at the bottom, Goitschel’s three-year-old record was history, presumably giving the Frenchman reason to think that he might have been better off on the World Cup after all.

In Europe generally and France in particular, speed skiing is a big deal. Competitors race the clock in heats that narrow the field to just 10 on the final day. Americans think in terms of miles per hour, but because it is dominated by the Europeans and nearly always run on Alpine tracks, speed skiing is timed in kilometers per hour. Mark replays the highlights of most glorious day in stream-of-consciousness fragments, often lapsing into the second person to wrap the listener into his triumph. “The sky was crystal blue,” he says. “You have to ski early, so there’s no time for a warm-up run. First, there were a few forerunners. Then one girl went off the top at

225 kilometers an hour. The previous [women's] record was 219, so we figured the course was fast. The first guy did 230. That was just two kilometers off the previous record. An Austrian nearly crashed, but we couldn't see it from the top. A guy named Charlie Roe did 232. At the end of the timing trap, I thought, 'Man, I'm really moving.' I knew I was fast. You can tell the difference between 235 and 245 kilometers an hour. That's getting to the point where you almost lose it. Then you're through the trap, and you stand up out of your tuck. When the wind hits you, your body is like a parachute. At the bottom, one of the Americans told me I broke the world record."

For a short precious time on that picture-perfect morning, Mark Rupprecht, barely old enough to buy a beer in Colorado, was indeed the world's fastest skier. Eventually, a California pro racer named Jeff Hamilton, a Frenchman and a Finn outgunned Mark, but Hamilton and Rupprecht were the top Americans on the evening's French sports news. Hamilton was the headliner because of his new record, but Rupprecht was cited as being the youngest ever to ski at such speeds. As a relative newcomer to speed skiing, he was more surprised at having held the record, even briefly, than at seeing it broken. But Mark certainly remains the fastest skier this state has thus far produced. "At 147 miles an hour, you're barely hanging on," he says, again smiling at the memory. "It's a really good rush."

Mark wants more than a fleeting hold on the record books. Hamilton's time cracked 145 miles an hour, a nice round American number. The next target is 150. Mark, who switches effortlessly between mile and kilometer thinking, believes it can be done. "For a long time, no one thought they'd ever break 200 [kilometers]," he notes. "Then it was 220, and 230. Jeff Hamilton did 241. As long as the equipment stays the same, who knows what the barrier will be."

Mark was a fine downhiller and good gate skier with a reasonable shot at the U.S. Ski Team's development squad when, at the age of 17, he signed up for a speed-skiing meet at Ski Cooper near Leadville. He hit 85 miles an hour on his first run, using his downhill boards. Someone lent him real speed-skiing gear, and a few runs later, he was clocked at 100 miles an hour, becoming the youngest American ever to hit that mark. "It was fun," he recalls. "In downhill, you go fast, but then you have to get back on a line and make some turns. You go off a jump, and you worry about air. Speed skiing is like drag racing on snow. It really hooked me." For him, 125 miles an hour, nearly twice as fast as we can legally drive on any highway in the state, "isn't a big deal anymore."

Where does he get the guts-and-glory genes? He was born in Texas on New Years Day, 1974, the only son of a German-born computer analyst and a Scottish-born nurse who improbably met and married in West Texas. By the time Mark was in kindergarten, the family had moved to Colorado, and skis were under the Christmas tree. He started skiing just before his sixth birthday and soon was involved in junior racing programs at Winter Park.

But at an age where life itself is complicated enough, Mark's path got rough. Way rough. When he was 11, his mother was killed by teenagers joy-riding through a parking lot in a stolen car. Mark's father Hermann, whose voice still breaks when he speaks about the tragedy, lost his oil-company job shortly after he lost his wife. Hermann was hit with the double wallop of personal tragedy and financial problems, but ski racing helped Mark deal with his grief. He finished 17th overall out of a field of 106 racers in the Rocky Mountain Junior Olympics. But at the threshold of the big time, the funds for ski equipment, lift tickets, races, perhaps tuition at a private ski academy, simply weren't available.

While Hermann was looking for work (he ultimately landed a slot at the U.S. Mint in Denver), 14-year-old Mark, desperate to stay on the Winter Park squad, wrote letters explaining his situation to everyone he could think of. One landed in the right hands at the John Elway Foundation, set up by the Broncos star to help youngsters continue their sports careers. The foundation helped finance Mark's racing during the roughest years. He soon was Winter Park's only weekend racer with an FIS downhill license, but when he was 18, he switched to speed skiing. "It was an easy decision," he recalls, "because of the fun in it."

Mark often draws analogies between his sport and drag racing. Both are so fast that even minuscule mistakes can be costly, and both require training--fine tuning, if you will. Mark, who works out at the Lakewood Athletic Club, has leg-pressed 750 pounds, but he considers himself an upper-body weakling, because he's never bench-pressed over 220. He concentrates most on ab work, because besides legs of steel, speed skiers need amazing abdominal muscles to counter that body-as-a-parachute force.

"At those speeds, if you hit a bump, your chest comes up and the wind wants to push you farther back," he says. "The abdominals keep your body low." And that, at more than 140 miles an hour is where speed skiers need to be, for a small ripple in the course can throw the body back, at the very least cutting critical speed and at worst causing a crash. Speed skiers wear stretch suits, and when they fall, the friction of a long, fast slide can literally burn the fabric into their flesh. "A lot of people turn away when others crash," says Mark, "but I usually say, 'Hey, did you see that guy?' Other people's crashes don't faze me. I nearly crashed six runs in a row in another competition in France. I skipped the race and went to the beach. Then I was OK, but I know someday I'll crash. When I do, I hope it's at 100 miles an hour, not at 150. Speed skiers are like pilots. There are two kinds. Those who have crashed, and those who will."

Mark knows both. He learned to fly the year he took up speed skiing and now carries a 3.4 average in Metro State's pilot program. Speed skiers' get-ups actually resemble heavy rubberized spacesuits whose sole purpose is minimizing wind-resistance. In addition, they wear rubberized gloves and tapered, visored helmets. Mark's sports a sticker reading, "Caution: Close all windows after 140 miles per hour." For training runs, which are often at speeds in excess of 120 miles an hour, this is aerodynamic enough. For racing, competitors duct tape the joints between sleeves and gloves and between knees and boot tops. Mark skis on 240-centimeter Dynamics and garage-sale Salomon SX-91 boots, bolted forward. He also removed the flex-control and the heel knobs, and added a power strap for extra support. His home-made, double-angle poles without baskets are shaped so that he can push them against his hipbones to stabilize his low tuck. He extends his hands in front of his knees to punch through the air like a pointed arrowhead. The first great American speed skier, the late Steve McKinney, once described the position as "non-motion within motion."

Hermann and Mark Rupprecht share a tree-shaded split-level, furnished in bachelor-pad functional. The walls are hung with family photos and posters from important competitions Mark has skied in. But Hermann, who helped fund Mark's skiing by moonlighting at Winter Park, didn't see his son compete during his last seven winters as an Alpine racer and has never seen him speed skiing. Unless he can travel abroad when Mark is racing, he's not likely to either. Though there's a dynamite track in the mountains above Silverton, big-time speed skiing is unlikely to return to Colorado. Given liability and insurance constraints, speed skiing is not a

high-profile sport anywhere else in this country either. Then again, maybe it's easier for a parent not to watch his child on a course like the KM at Vars.

Does Hermann worry? It appears that he long ago accepted his son's daredevil tendencies, is proud of his accomplishments, and respects the way Mark has matured as an athlete. "He's not just fast, but he's smart," says Hermann. "He uses his brain and learns all the time. At his first World Championship [in 1994 in Vars], he came in 51st. The next time, he broke the world record. In another race at Les Arcs, France, the track was bad. Mark watched a German crash and get hauled off the mountain with a broken pelvis, so he slowed down and came in 28th. My wife was killed at 12 miles an hour. You just never know." As Hermann's words trail off, Mark excuses himself, hops into his '67 Volkswagen, turns out of the driveway, and heads off to work out and then to work his night job at Centennial Airport. His mind's eye again focuses on a 100-meter stretch of snow-covered mountainside in France. He wants to ski it faster than anyone else.

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