

# What could I have done better after my alpine skiing career?

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December 2021: I'm speaking with my friend Mario about some recent physical problems (sore knee and painful plantar fascia), and looking for some advice. After my first hip surgery in 2007, we've always been in contact. I'm 55 years old, and I'm doing ok, even though hip and low back pain are my daily companions and have been so for a very long time. When I began alpine ski racing as an adolescent, I experienced some low back pain, but at that age you do not care about that: the pleasure to ski, to be competitive, to win ... these were my only goals.

## MY ALPINE SKIING CAREER

After a few successful years at the junior level, I joined the Swiss National Ski Team and made my World Cup debut at the age of 16 years in January 1983, had my first top 3 result a few months after and 1 year later I won my first downhill in Megève (France). At the age of 17 years, I won the downhill at the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo, and 1 year later I took the gold medal at 1985 World Championships in Bormio (Italy). My alpine skiing career was very intensive and very successful: besides other medals at the World Championships and Olympics, I won 26 World Cup races and two overall titles in 1985 and 1988, as well as four season titles in downhill, one in giant slalom and one in Super-G (figure 1).

## MY RETIREMENT FROM COMPETITIVE SPORT

In 1990, at the age of 24 years, I retired. At that time, I was still in top shape physically, and I could have continued my sporting career for many more years. I never had a serious injury. My only rehab experiences were in 1984–1985 (during the off seasons), where I easily recovered (within a few weeks) from two minor arthroscopic surgeries (knee and ankle). A few years before, imaging I had done showed that my symphysis pubis showed degenerative changes, but this was not a big deal for me (since it did not have any consequences on my performances).

After the spring of 1990, I felt no willingness to continue ski racing, to follow

the training plans day after day, the schedules, ... I noticed that I wanted to have time, quality time for myself, time to do what I wanted to do. I was mentally very tired, and at the same time, I was feeling empty. So, I stopped everything related to sporting activities (kind of 'from 100 to 0') and did some light fitness and recreational skiing. It was a release, a relief (I even would say a liberation) after so many years fully dedicated to my competitive career. I got married, became mom of two children and I did very little in the way of sport. My thinking at that time was that as a former top athlete I was still ok, and I could live off my career, but this proved to be wrong ...

## WAKE-UP CALL AROUND 40 YEARS

At the age of 38 years, I suddenly experienced a significant worsening of my health, with increased hip and low back pain, so that my activities of daily life were severely impaired. I tried to work through the pain, did some physical therapy but things just got worse (especially with my right hip: as an example, I could no longer get into my car and I was not able to lay on my back). So, I went to an orthopaedic specialist. My right hip pain was diagnosed

as 'acetabular dysplasia with activated hip joint osteoarthritis', and in 2007, I had a 'periacetabular osteotomy' surgery, which helped me for about 4–5 years. Because of increasing pain and functional limitations, I decided in 2011 together with my specialist to go for a total hip arthroplasty (THA). With physical therapy and controlled training for my hip and low back (where imaging again showed several degenerative changes), I was then able to regain good function in activities of daily living and some recreational sporting activities.

## WHAT I DO TODAY

I'm not where I wanted to be, but I'm working on it. Luckily everything is going well with my THA. I'm also undergoing physical therapy/chiropractic once a week for my low back/pelvis, I play tennis 2–3 times/week (and soon will begin to 'paddle'), I regularly ride my e-bike and go walking, and of course I go skiing sometimes in the winter. My goal is to be able to re-initiate and maintain regular gym training.

## THINKING BACK ON MY CAREER

Were these hip surgeries the price I had to pay for my career? No, I don't think so. I've no regrets, I would do everything exactly the same. I was always well prepared, physically and technically and I was almost never injured. We had good medical support, my hip/low back issues were ok with some physical therapy and



**Figure 1** 1988 Olympic Winter Games Calgary, 22 February, in action during the Super-G competition, where I won the silver medal (photo by IMAGO/WERK international, single license purchased by Sportfisiswiss).

Bellinzona, Switzerland

this did not hinder my performance. I was aware, however, that competitive sport was not healthy: so many hours and days spent in the gym, and moreover on the courses, where my body was exposed to high speed, sharp curves and jumps. Risk taking was a key component of my alpine skiing career: searching the limit(s) was part of my racing life, and I knew that my body and mind were prepared. I had the necessary physical and mental strength to withstand the challenges of the races. During these competitive years, I was not thinking about later in life: you fully live and love the passion and epinephrine of World Cup alpine skiing.

Observing how today's athletes are preparing, maybe I could have done a more adapted training for my hips and low back. At that time, we trained mostly with free weights and barbells, and we basically never used weight machines. We also did many other sports during the summer training, and we had also training

sessions in the wood or running on a river-bank. We trained hard, we were successful as a team, so for us it was good.

### THINKING BACK ON THE YEARS AFTER MY RETIREMENT

To stop almost every sporting activity was definitively my biggest mistake: I was naïve to think that as a former athlete, I would have preserved a decent physical condition. As mentioned before, after those intense World Cup years, my body and, moreover, my mind were just eager to rest (and this is what I did). Instead, I should have tried to keep up a regular physical activity, and to take care of my well-known weak spots (hips/low back). Although it is difficult to say, this could have delayed my hip surgeries, but, moreover, it would have been better for my quality of life. I downplayed the importance of physical and mental health as key components of my life after my competitive career. Therefore, I encourage every

athlete not to neglect her/his mind and body from the very beginning of retirement from competitive sport.

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