

Moments of Excellence In a Speed Sport – Interview with a Downhill Speed Skier.

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Abstract:

This article presents an interview that was conducted with a successful Olympic downhill speed skier. It explores the speed skier's views about speed, risk, optimal regulation of movement, performance excellence, the role of the unconscious mind in speed disciplines, and mental links to excellence.

As expressed in the interview with the formula one motor car racing driver, speed seems to become an increasingly prevalent influence in many domains of our lives. Increased speed and stress has become a fact of life. Effective coping strategies to respond accordingly to these increased demands are discussed in leaders' circles around the globe.

The following interview aims to further shed light onto practical coping strategies that are developed and used by speed experts. The micro-world of speed skiing, a world where speed and stress is a dominant performance-related variable is used to pull out some lessons about how individuals can better function under other stressful high-speed conditions. The interview focuses on the ability to regulate movement in high speed situations. A successful Olympic downhill speed skier shares his ten years of experience in his field. He discusses his particular

path to excellence in a discipline where optimal mental functioning under high stress is crucial.

For those of you who are not familiar with the discipline of speed skiing, it should be explained that it is a special downhill skiing discipline. The goal of the athlete is to reach an ultimate high speed on skis and therefore get straight down a steep hill in an aerodynamic position over a distance of approximately 1.5 – 2 km. At the end of this distance the top speed is measured during a distance of 100 m. The world record currently is around 250 km/h. A small mistake in the regulation of movement at these advanced levels of speed can be life threatening.

Despite the obvious danger of the discipline, athletes increasingly take more risks to push boundaries and keep up with the best competitors in the field. In the search for new

speed records they are constantly pushing their comfort zone. Racing at the very edge at these speed levels requires athletes to mentally, emotionally and physically plan and regulate movement accordingly. These plans and strategies seem to be critical for them to get an excellent and safe performance. The special objectives and circumstances of this discipline create an environment where individuals get a sharp sense for exploring and building mental strategies to optimally regulate movement.

This case study can guide us to further understand mental practices in speed situations. Whereas a Formula 1 motorcar race driver is talking about the regulation of optimal movement in a time window of two minutes (needed for one lap) or for a two-hour race on competition day, the downhill speed skier is focussing all his mental strategies on a time window of around 14 to 18 seconds. The compression of the time window seems to force the individual to even more thoroughly plan and execute.

The interviewee elaborates on some of the specific elements of “Peak Moments in Sport” that are reported broadly in sport psychology literature by numerous authors. They can be summarized and structured as follows.

High level of joy and fulfilment.

Feeling of unity, connection & fusion with the environment.

Altered perception of time; active transformation of time and slow-motion.

Reduced ego and harmony.

Total absorption.

High level of performance.

Besides these accepted six core topics the interview with the speed skier offers further insights from a practitioner’s standpoint. He specifically mentions two additional phenomena that seem important in downhill skiing, namely:

Overriding instincts.

Applying consistent strategy.

Overriding instincts

The interviewee describes his experience of how he learned step by step to delegate the movement regulation to his autopilot, or in other words to his unconscious mind. In detail, he shares his personal relationship with fear and how he was able to actively learn to “have no fear”. He talks about replacing fear by “fun” through a conscious decision. Overriding the natural instinct of fear seems to be central to excelling at the highest levels of speed. Experiencing fear is human. It is a normal reaction of the organism. This human function was originally developed as a security function. The speed skier vividly describes the paradoxical nature of the feeling associated with this process and how this remains a career-long challenge. He describes authentically the process of how these insights evolved and how important these findings were for him to personally experience the shift from having control to allowing chaos - to let the movement happen - and feel right and full of control and power in the chaotic situation. He highlights the ability to allow the unconscious mind to lead the movement regulation - a state where the individual ego steps aside (or seems to simply be too slow). This is the moment where the power and the ability of the expertly trained unconscious mind are unleashed.

This description may remind us at moments in daily life where we use our abilities in the

autopilot mode while driving a bicycle or driving a car. The only difference is that the speed skier describes the conscious use of the autopilot mode in a life-threatening discipline where the special challenge is to allow the autopilot to take full control, despite the inherent danger of the situation. The fear of losing control normally is larger than the trust in the desired autopilot mode. To overcome the fear in these moments – or what he calls: “get larger than fear” – seems to be a key challenge in speed disciplines. To get larger than fear was his overall objective that took him years to cultivate. And by getting to that fearless alert state, the optimal movement in autopilot mode and the entrance into “the zone” followed automatically. His arguments sound reasonable, even logical and easy to relate to. But everyone that experiments in comparable challenging disciplines to get purposely into the zone is talking about the paradoxical nature of the phenomena. It seems that the more the athlete wants to get there the more the conscious mind refuses to let it happen.

From the many interviews with highly experienced speed experts, I consider this description one of the most practical explanations of the power of the unconscious mind. It may remind us that at the limits of the conscious mind are the limits of the ego. It seems important to remember that optimal movement can only be achieved when the unconscious mind is trained up to the level of expertise that it will be able to fully take charge of the movement regulation. The interviewee experienced this powerful source in a situation when the conscious mind was pre-occupied – and literally was too slow to analyze, plan and regulate the appropriate movement.

And looking at a bigger picture this can happen in any discipline where movement has to be precisely executed. Perfect move-

ment regulation takes place when the unconscious mind dominantly takes charge of the movement regulation. The only prerequisite that has to be fulfilled is that the athlete has to be expertly trained in the execution of the movement. Only if the individual has achieved an expert level will the unconscious mind be able to expertly execute movement programs.

Applying consistent strategy

The interviewee further describes how he consistently managed to purposely get into “the zone”. He outlines a structured process that helped him to routinely duplicate high performance. His personal strategy has been developed and fine-tuned over hundreds of hours of training and competition and can be seen as a unique approach. However it may be worthwhile to reflect on this individual approach knowing that there may be alternative solutions.

His strategy seems to have its roots in identifying, managing and minimizing the risk that is inherently combined with speed disciplines. By “applying a consistent strategy”, he means to constantly follow the same preparation process prior to the execution of a run. By preparing himself consistently in the same manner for the upcoming performance he creates a powerful routine that allows him to increase his feeling of control. By following a precisely defined routine prior to the movement, the risk of making mistakes seems to get smaller and the satisfaction and the probability to get into “the zone” and experience “flow” increases.

What especially strikes me in this interview is the authentic style of his description. As a researcher it is impressive to experience athletes with such a high degree of personal reflection. It may even be that the high level of expertise in the mental game is supported

by the inherent danger of the discipline – or the more danger involved, the higher the degree of reflection becomes. Such sport activities may even have a positive impact on the development of a performer's reflective side of his personality. At least the shared philosophical insights such as “allowing the perfect run to happen – do not try” nurtures this assumption.

The added value of this interview – in my personal perspective – is derived from the fact that a highly experienced expert shares his insights and talks about (1) how he achieved high levels of excellence and (2) how he consolidated the process to consistently get there over a longer period in his career. The form of a qualitative interview is considered to be an ideal instrument that allows for capturing these authentic descriptions. By reflecting real, lived experiences, we can unleash the power of learning at its best.

By publishing such interviews, I always carry the hope in mind that the discussed strategies and moments of excellence may have an influence on the reader's perspective. My vision is that the findings are not limited to speed sports but rather can be seen as universally applicable to speed situations. I believe that the findings can be transferred and applied in any performance arena where speed and stress are the dominant performance related variables.

Gustav: Could you talk about speed in your particular sport? What does it feel like?

Speed skier: Speed skiing is not a timed sport. It is a sport where the speed is at the bottom of the track. The speed track is one hundred meters long and takes roughly two and a half seconds to go through the whole track. So you are dealing with speed in excess of over two hundred kilometers an

hour. We do not start there. We start with one hundred and sixty and then go up slowly. So there is a qualifying round each time and the faster you go ... the track takes around fourteen to eighteen seconds to go down this run and the beginning is easy, the first three to five seconds you just pick up speed and then you get to one hundred kilometers per hour to one hundred and fifty per hour and when you reach around one hundred and ninety per hour things start to get difficult - because things happen so fast that you stop reacting. You start switching to a mode of being in the speed. Not being able to put the fingers exactly what is going on. A lot of it is kind of "soft focus". So the speed is completely different.

Gustav: What does speed mean to you?

Speed skier: It scares the shit out of you. You know I was so terrified of scaring myself. It depends on how you focus when you are racing. It becomes - how fast can it go, how fast can I go? How much faster can I go? So, it is always of interest to become comfortable with speed. Once you are good at this, then speed becomes power. It became a total sense of power. When it was there I got the feeling that I could do anything. So it was a real shift, it was like the difference between acting confident and being confident. And I started to be confident being confident. So I decided to be confident at speed and then experience that shift.

Gustav: How did you get interested in speed sports?

Speed skier: Well, two ways. One, I always had a philosophy of trying anything once, when an opportunity came along. That was how I tried luge. I actually raced the luge a couple of years but I never tried bobsled. And then the second part was when I tried

speed skiing. I heard that it was a demonstration sport in the Olympics. And so my fear of the speed was put aside and the greater motivation was to compete at the Olympics. So I guess there is a third component with speed. I like to be larger than fear. So if I can become greater than fear, which is a great feeling. ...

Gustav: How did you learn to handle speed?

Speed skier: My mother took my younger brother and me skiing for the first time when we were very young. We were six and seven years old. My brother pointed his skis straight down the hill and went. And I was very methodical. I went step by step. I went a little bit, felt comfortable with it, and went a little bit more, felt comfortable with it. And even in training for speed skiing, a lot of the guys move up very quickly to try to go faster and faster. I always wanted to become very comfortable at say hundred and seventy one hundred and eighty kilometers an hour. And once I got comfortable in training then I moved up. So many of the other teammates would start higher but I would go where I felt comfortable with speed and then move up. You know you go fast and eventually, you go fast so many times that you start to see more of what I was always looking for. So I went little by little and repetition.

Gustav: Could you let me come with you in such a moment and describe in as much detail as possible what you see, experience and feel?

Speed skier: It all starts at the start gate ... You pick the line you want to take. There is no timing right at the top as I mentioned. ... You make sure there is no crosswind. At that moment you are just thinking: calm down and relax, but also at the same time to

pump up, if that makes sense, you want to calm your mind down but your body wants to be tuned up, to be ready. When you leave, you want to explode out of the gate onto the course. At that moment you have to be very supple and strong at the same time, like a willow tree versus an oak tree. You have to be so strong that you are also soft. Now in that phase you want to ride a “flat ski” and it is very easy. You go from zero to one hundred in three seconds. A Ferrari can do it in four point two seconds. So you pick up speed very quickly. The mind just starts to race, it starts to go, the mind says: escape, escape; and you pick up speed. You know you are already three to four seconds into it. At about five to six seconds, things start to go so fast that you start to not see things anymore and it starts to wipe by in about eight or nine seconds. Then you are at about two hundred kilometers an hour. And at two hundred kilometers an hour, everything is a blur. You start to look as far down the course as you can; your heart is beating stronger and stronger, faster and faster. I forget if I am breathing or not when I'm going down the track. I am in a state where I do not know if I am breathing. But I can hear myself grunting and feel myself holding it all together. Riding a flat ski is very fast but very unstable. Flat ski is like this... You start to wander. At high speed they start to feel like spaghetti noodles. You can't feel it every once in a while. Mental toughness is everything because you have to hold your body in an aerodynamic position. But that is not a safe feeling, the aerodynamic, because you are looking at the world with your head down looking past your eyebrows. You are also looking at holding your hands together. If you separate your hands only a little bit it cuts your balance. You actually catch the wind and it turns you around and you feel like a parachute. And it completely spins you around. It is crucial to overcome instinct, and I mean true instinct, at this time.

You have to override instinct and I don't take that lightly, because the instinct is to throw your hands out to catch your balance. But you can't do that. You have to have the mental toughness to hold an aerodynamic tuck without actually having any instinct to grab your balance, if that makes sense. What happens is ... the question is: how do you overcome instincts? How do you not do it? How do you not have instincts to open your hands?

Gustav: Do you train that? Do you try to do that?

Speed skier: Oh yes. Everything I did was trying to overcome instincts. For example, when I was mountain biking, going down the hill, I would try not to have instincts to hold on the break. Or I would have this kind of training in free skiing. I went out in slalom skis and then went really fast. You know, these "things" are all over the place and you start to create a calmness of the mind although chaos is going on around you. And at two hundred kilometers an hour, everything is going so fast that you are overriding instincts. And it is the zone. The scientists call it "flow" or "the zone". And you actually pop into flow at this moment where it's all powerful, almost overwhelming. You cross first beam, you cross second beam. You know that you crossed it. You can't really see it but you know that you crossed it. You put your hands out and stand up. You get a blast to your chest and then slow down. When slowing down the adrenaline rush comes. This adrenaline rush is probably that addicted part of the speed sports. My feeling is that the release of the adrenaline happens after the event. The adrenaline rush hits me only after the event, not during it. People, who say it must be the adrenaline rush, may think it is during, but I do not believe that, ... I do not know, medically ... the rush comes after for me.

Gustav: You talked about flow and the zone? ... What button do you have to push to get into the zone?

Speed skier: I'm not sure there is a button to get into the zone. It is more of a doorway you find in the dark. The zone is ... I equate it to fun. Remember a time when you have laughed so hard, when things had been so funny, when you completely lost any sense of what was going on around you. You could not have possibly done that on purpose. If I said to you that I want you to laugh that same way and have that fun now, you couldn't do it. You can't press the button and do that deliberately. You cannot do that with the zone either. You can set yourself up into an environment, where you can mentally open the door. When the door is open and you know it is open, you actually pass through it. It is natural. Though, for me to get into the zone, I always had a pattern, a pre-race pattern. And then when things are going right down the track, that is a natural transition into the zone. So I always allow that to happen.

Gustav: Let us speak about a situation in training or competition, where you thought that entrance into the zone was just easy or natural, a situation that you never want to forget for your whole life. What was it like before the start? Can you describe it?

Speed skier: I have two stories. The one is humorous and the other just happened on its own. You saw the videotape of the pig story? (Yes) So I do not have to tell you the details. This guy, pig, had distracted me so much that in the approach to the track, the mind was approaching that zone. Passing through that doorway to the zone, all of a sudden – the conscious mind said I am a pig, I am a pig and I started to think that. This was so funny. Now because that was happening within seconds, three or four seconds

that seemed like a lifetime, I was actually so humored at the fact that this was happening, that I started to laugh. The conscious mind was so occupied with the pig thing, which the unconscious mind was allowed to come forward with all the mental training that I had done to that point. When I got to the bottom of the track and I heard my speed, I was absolutely amazed. ... The more I started to think about what was so funny on the way down the track, the more I remembered the pig thing and I started to laugh again. I said to myself that I couldn't believe that. So I had actually been preoccupied by having so much fun on the way down the track that I had skipped into the zone. Another time I broke the national record and I wasn't even trying to break the record. I simply flipped into the zone and when I got to the bottom of the track, I had that feeling of extreme, complete power. I remember thinking I could be a world-class figure skater and I do not know how to figure skate. I remember thinking I could do anything. Because I had that feeling of anything is possible. Right now, I remember that feeling as you probably do when everything works so well, you feel so good. ... Before the start, I would sometimes get a premonition or a feeling that this would be a great run. I would have a physical anchor technique that I attached to that feeling. The physical anchor was an "ok" sign with my fingers and thumb. I used this anchor later when I needed an especially good run in a final. The anchor would often bring back the feeling of "this will be a great run".

Gustav: Could we focus on these one hundred meters, when the highest speed is taking place? Could you describe your feelings and thoughts shortly before that and during the zone?

Speed skier: Sensory overload ... The conscious mind doesn't handle it. I go into

autopilot here. ... There are a lot of things coming to my mind. A lot of factors play into that speed trap. Everything has to happen well up to that point. If everything happens well up to one hundred meters, if you reflect in your mind that everything has gone just right, this is the place to just allow it. You let it go through. Do not try. The second you try, it gets worse. So it is allowing the form to happen through the trap. If things have not gone well, if there have been some mistakes up to that point, it's kind of a salvage, some sort of placement so I know I won't make it any worse. ... You can't salvage a little bit and then make a correction for the next run.

Gustav: It's the ability to forget?

Speed skier: Oh yes. You know it has happened. The focus isn't on that but the focus then becomes, ok. I know this has happened, but what has to happen here. And it is the same kind of thing, allow but do not try.

Gustav: And what is the feeling in there?

Speed skier: Gustav, it is happening so fast, it is such a soft focus. Time has no meaning. It is pure chaos. Imagine the wind being so thick, you feel being dragged under water. Imagine the ski moving so violently, that it may disintegrate your bindings. They may just pop off because things happen so violently. And when I say chaos, I mean pure chaos is going on around you. When you are in a perfect aerodynamic tuck and you are sliding through the chaos, there are feelings but there is no feeling. It is this paradox.

Gustav: Could you describe what you mean with paradox?

Speed skier: Chinese call it Ying and Yang. The paradox of opposite is balance, matching, and harmony. Here, it is chaos with

flow. So much is happening. So much chaos is happening that you can get sucked into the chaos and get consumed by it. And at the same time, you are in such a quiet state mentally that, if you are in the zone, you are simply in that magic moment. You think it lasts forever. You know chaos surrounded by the zone. It is a definition of peak performance.

Gustav: Do you remember where your focus is in the zone? What do you really see?

Speed skier: In flow, there is no thought, as we know it. ... It is understanding or thought on a higher level. Everyday, we drive, order lunch. The definition of focus is what we look at in time. In a speed sport, there is no focus. You focus on an experience. You have a total sensory focus. With the feeling, you are allowing the sensation of the skis, not just what the skis are doing but what the wind is doing and what your hands are doing. If for any second you started to focus on any one thing like what are my hands doing - then the focus is taken off your feet. So you have distracted yourself from the total focus of the feel. Then you can bring the other senses. What do you see? Do you see one thing in particular? But when you start to focus on one thing you start to gravitate to that one thing. ... Then the other senses, what do you hear? So you do not focus, you focus on everything, it is a soft focus. So you turn into the soft focus. You are taking it all in and allowing it.

Gustav: You talked about experience, about letting it happen. How do you feel your body and your mind then, how do you feel yourself?

Speed skier: The feeling is almost as ... existential. Where you are actually outside of your body ... It is the feeling of not being in your body. But let me add this, this is a ...

this thing doesn't happen without hundreds of hours of physical and mental training and to me, mental training is the cornerstone, because I was able to experience the perfect run through visualization. I don't just mean seeing but having an experience of going down the track feeling the skis, allowing it to happen but also allowing the unconscious mind to create the perfect scenario. I use the phrase "being in harmony with perfection". And I always wanted to be in harmony with perfection. And what that means is the wind is a certain way, the shape of the mountain is a certain way, the body is a certain way and I am simply in harmony and flowing with them.

Gustav: Synchronized?

Speed skier: Completely synchronized. ... First, you have to learn to drive and then you have to learn how not to drive. It is much too fast. You have to delegate (laughing).

Gustav: What can you say about the energy level being in the zone?

Speed skier: The energy level is interesting. Thought is energy. Materials are energy. Everything at its basic level is energy. The zone is the very essence of thought and performance at its most perfect level. I cannot give you a black and white answer because I would do a process before I started. It's a five-point process. ... Because I say: get there early, so you reduce stress. When stress is low, it is a great time to visualize what you want to remember. ... And then I say the fourth one is the decision to have fun. The opposite of stress is fun. If there is too much mismanaged stress, the performance and results go down, so the opposite of stress is fun. If fun is present the performance and results go up. There is a step between the visualization and the fun and I call it the "O-technique". I would actually

imagine myself ... maybe two or three minutes before the run, I would close my eyes and imagine myself going out of my body. I would go up into outer space. I would see the earth. I would feel myself fly. So I would have my eyes closed. You know what the other athletes look like. But I would be imagining myself floating over the earth. I would look up and I would see energy in the universe, and I would feel a swirl of energy, going like this. I was not pushing, it was happening. I allowed it to happen. It was harmony in perfection. I see this "O", almost like a tornado, screwing up and right through the top of my head, right through the whole body. The whole body was getting fully filled up like a gas-tank of energy and I felt a lot of vibration. I fueled up, fueled up and then I started to wrap myself around it. I started to do back flips, spinning. I started to fly around the earth and then I started to come back into my body and then I was at the race, ok. That is bizarre. Not many people understand that, but what I wanted is to fill myself up with energy, and then I made the decision to have fun. ... I am just having fun. I'm not going to push. I'm not going to try. On the way down, at the second part, the energy is synchronized. It feels like wave patterns of music. If you hear a tone that is here ... iii ...and a tone that is there ... eee... If you put these together it goes ...ieieieieie. It is not synchronized. You would hear this. But if these tones are the same ... iii ... iii... like this, the tones are the same and synchronized. That is the energy that I want to feel. And I promise you, there aren't many athletes that do this in speed skiing.

Gustav: That is very interesting to hear from you.

Speed skier: I had something interesting happen. I don't know if that has something to do with your thesis. But it shows the

foundations of my philosophy that I took forward to make the Olympic team. I watched other athletes and what they had to go through to reach quality. I watched what they did politically to screw themselves to not get on the team. They pissed off the coach or someone in the association. So I started to get a philosophy that I had to be the best in my country. If I am number one, no one argues. I picked who I wanted to be my mentors, because if the coach was over here and I did not like that coach, I went over there. And with that philosophy, I realized that the responsibility was mine. And I had them because I started at a late age. I had the maturity to go ... If that is the case I'm not going to go where the coach wants me to go, I asked myself: what is next? I went to the library and researched. And I split it up into different areas. I researched aerodynamics, I researched waxes, drag coefficients and I searched documents and papers and books on these topics. I made myself a student of these. Then I applied the strategy. I was not just looking haphazardly at these but everyday I would receive feedback from experiences and then I started to have a complete knowledge. That same research went with mental training. When I talk about things that I used in my mental training - like the "O-techniques" - this was a result of looking at various types of research. I realized when there is energy out there, how can I access it and then allow it. I'm so ... it was that responsibility that I took, that is the foundation of speed sports. That comes from the circle that started ten years ago. All of this was based on years of applied focus of feeding the unconscious-conscious mind with information. Then the information was there in the bubble and could be used when needed. Another thing there was a real trust, a self-trust that I knew that I had the capability and it was in my unconscious mind and I knew that sometimes my conscious mind would get in the

way because it's a voice. "What about this? Why do you not do it this way? Why can't this happen and why can this happen?" Any of the cans or cannot happen will get into your way of the allowing.

Gustav: Could we go back to the perception of the environment? Could you tell me about this in high speed? How do you perceive the environment?

Speed skier: How do you perceive the environment? There is space that you notice on the way down. And it is interesting. The conscious mind perceives it ... and then it is long gone (laughs). The second I start to realize: I catch an edge. That was like two seconds ago. And I always have a perception that is on two levels. One is the conscious, in which things are happening. I notice the wind, I notice this and that. ... I might see that. I'm drifting to the right. I might pick a different line. I might hit a bump that I did not realize was there. The conscious mind has realized it, but it is already gone. The other perception is the sensory one. If I experience it right, I can see myself passing through the doorway into the zone. If I can feel myself passing through, then I just ride it, it is just like standing in the river and just being with the current. And that would be the second way to perceive.

Gustav: What do you see, hear, and feel? What is it?

Speed skier: You do not see, hear, and feel anything in particular. You simply have ... a feeling if it was right. And when I say feeling like the textures, were the texture's right, not just under the skis but hands, wind, everything. What you see correctly, generally speaking. There is nothing in particular. When I start to see or feel anything in particular, it becomes a distraction.

Gustav: And what was the relationship between you as an athlete and the environment?

Speed skier: Oh, harmony. The relationship ... the ultimate goal was harmony. When it went well, it was in total synchronization and in harmony with the environment. But that happened once every ten runs maybe. That didn't happen every time. I think in training, I have always tried to check in, but I would focus on one thing and the other, trying to see what the feeling was like, when something felt right in training, I would always have the feeling that this is exactly what it should feel like to ride an exact ski. In training, I often had poorer runs than the rest of the guys on the team. But on race days I always had better runs. I was always number one on the national team. And that would absolutely mystify everybody in the team. How can you train so poorly and then have such great runs. I was always focusing on one thing and then the other to try and find that one thing right and then anchor that feeling.

Gustav: Can we talk about limits? What would you say is the fastest you can go on skis? What is it dependent on?

Speed skier: Our limits are ... I guess three directions. The limits are, if you have never gone that fast before when you go. Let's say the fastest I went was two hundred and five kilometers an hour and if I would go two hundred and twenty five kilometers per hour, I would be in an area I have never been before. So my limitation would be ... a comfort zone. Where I may be within this comfort zone where I have never been before. ... The other limitation would be on equipment. Some guys in teams have annual racing budgets of five hundred thousand dollars. I have no money from the federation. I have twenty to twenty five thousand

dollars just to race. I felt that I had technological limitations. The third thing would be what happened in the past. ... If I think of the Olympics, I thought that I would have to have a singular perfect run and the top guys would have to make mistakes to allow me to win. So I had that limitation on myself.

Gustav: How fast would you like to go? What would be your approach to get there?

Speed skier: I always measured my results not on the speed but how much faster I went than the other person. On a small track, the maximum speed would be one hundred and seventy kilometers per hour. I would want to go seventy-one, right, because everybody else would be lower. ... It was interesting, though, when I started to go over two hundred kilometers an hour regularly and it went well. I started to remember how much fun it really was to go that fast and so the speed was actually irrespective, not related to that experience of power in the zone. If I had that, I would always want to go back to that, more than to speed.

Gustav: How far do you think the people in this sport can push the limit? I mean, you could use a larger track ... What do you think the limits are?

Speed skier: I do not think that there are any limits. I know there are people who have jumped out of planes. They have gone one hundred and eighty miles an hour. I don't know, around three hundred kilometers an hour. I don't know how fast they will become, but there is a guy in the States that just went one hundred and fifty miles per hour. ... He did that in a none-sanction race but in a sanction environment, if that makes sense. But there were not many competitors. Not many people could have influenced a higher world record. ... There are no limits.

Gustav: What is it? Is it exploring?

Speed skier: Yes, eventually exploring. Somebody comes up with new technology. One day it will be warmer, a sunnier day Someone might have the wind behind him or her just at the right moment and they were in harmony with perfection for that day. A few years later, same track, and they break it by half a kilometer per hour. And they may have the new limit.

Gustav: I would like to go back to the speed zone and talk about time. Would you tell me what time is for you in the highest speed moment?

Speed skier: The faster you go, the more time slows down. Didn't Einstein theorize that time stands still at the speed of light? (Laughter) There is no time. There is no time. The brain is so complex. So many things can flash through your mind at one time, which is beyond comprehension. That really, truly is. ... I was parachuting once, when the main parachute came out, I started to realize I had a mal-function. I had to get my reserve chute out. There was tremendous roar from the main chute, all tangled up in its ropes, very, very loud. When I pulled the cord, I let the main chute go. When I pulled this cord again, the reserve chute started to come out, but when the main chute went away and the reserve chute hadn't come out, there was maybe a second or two, but there was no sound. I was back into free fall, in that second I had - you heard the expression the life flashes before your eyes, I had that and I have never experienced that since or before. And it was like there were maybe eight or nine experiences throughout my childhood and my younger days where I saw and felt. I remember a day when I was six or seven years old and walking around on hard wood with socks on. I could feel that slippery feeling on hard wood, you know that

feeling you get in the end of your fingers ... and I smelt what was in the kitchen and that happened like ... (uh) ... and there was another thought, riding a bicycle ... (uh) ... and another thought, another thought and another. It was like ... pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, like that. That was so complex, that was beyond comprehension. How did I have that, not only just a vision but also an experience where I smelt, saw ... I had all five senses of what that was like. How does that work, so when you talk about time ... Right now you and I have an experience of time ... We feel the sunshine on my left and your right shoulder. We hear the music. We feel the carpet under our feet, you know, and that is happening under time, as we know it. If a meteor started to crash into that window time would change completely, because all the sudden we would hear that initial crack into the window and then we would feel ourselves almost like slow motion. Time has no meaning in speed sports ... In fact it is almost like exploring ... when you explore a dimension of time you don't get the chance to visit that often. And you wander around in yourself and ...

Gustav: Interesting, do you have an example of that?

Speed skier: Yes, that pig story. Where I was so consumed by that pig thing, how ridiculous that may have been. But there is another time when, I was going down the track and it was a light rain. I had never seen rain before on a track. I saw a little raindrop on my vision and it started to shake, violently and it started go faster and it went ... like that. And I thought, wow. I was totally into this thing. When I tell this story and re-live it, it is like it happened over a course of one to two minutes. That might happen in half a second that I saw it shake and I saw it clear what it did and I saw where it went ... it had nothing to do with my actual concept

of time. But time is an interesting thing ... that is a playground.

Gustav: What happens to time in speed sports?

Speed skier: Time slows down. If I had to define it, time simply slows down ... and that the awesome power of the brain starts to come forward in speed sports and it starts to redefine time.

Gustav: You have a lot of experience and I feel you have a lot of knowledge. How would you explain that phenomena? What is your approach?

Speed skier: The only way I can explain it is that the ... The neurons in the brain are connected in so many different ways, that they can slow down time because it can have a process of perceiving a situation that we do not often use, because we do not have to. There is a part of the brain ... I think it is called "Amygdala". It goes back to that fight or flight reaction which is in the third base of the brain ...

Gustav: The very old one...

Speed skier: Yes, the original part of the brain, the reptilian part of the brain. And sure, there is that part of the brain where you can actually visit again and then have this complex computer, bio computer that actually has an experience, because we experience things in time, as we know it that lasted for seconds. Another ten seconds just passed and we have experience through that. But when things happen fast, when speed happens, the brain processes differently then we are used to. And that is my way to look at this.

Gustav: In the last section of the interview I would like to talk about risk and security.

Can you tell me about your perception of security in such situations? What does this mean to you in your particular sport?

Speed skier: Risk is what turns me on to be larger than fear. And I believe fear and risk are inherently combined. I have always been the kind of person that will look at risk, realize how much risk there is, and try ... when I say I identify risk and then I try to minimize the risk. I try to bring it into a package. Let's say the risk is the size of this room ... That is a lot of risk, but there is a way to identify as much risk is possible and then bring it into a shape of a basketball. So you minimize, minimize, minimize and so you are actually able to handle as much of the risk as possible.

Gustav: Now you know... but how can you affect a scenario or set yourself in a pattern to deal with the risk?

Speed skier: So again there are two quick paths to the risk. I would see how much of the risk I can physically manage and for how much of the risk I can put a pattern together prior to leading into the risk that will allow me to go straight through the middle of it, bypass it or deal with it on the way. I believe it is very strategic to deal with risk this way. I believe ... I once asked people what makes successful people successful. We asked this around the room. Some people said, they are happy, they are rich, they are tenacious, and they are committed. You know these are all right answers. There is no wrong answer to this question, but to me successful people apply consistent strategy ... another three very important words: apply consistent strategy. Are you applying something over and over and over again till you become very good at it? And is it a strategy, something where you can minimize the risk? Have you taken all the important elements, and brought it right down to a manageable

area and then went forward? And then when you are going forward, like on the race day, the race run, the negotiation, anything ... especially with speed. That is when you've got the foundation of having applied consistent strategy. And then you allow. This is ... When you had to qualify ... this is a very defining moment where you pass through strategy to application (laughter). You go from planning to doing. I believe that the further you run away from risk the larger it gets. The closer you run to risk, the smaller it gets.

Gustav: How would you explain this in an example in speed skiing?

Speed skier: Right. I know the studies, which I could give you, where it came from. There are studies that say that 80% of what we worry about isn't worth worrying about. It will never come to pass. Fifteen percent of that balance is worth worrying about but you can't change it. There is nothing to do to change it. Five percent is something to worry about, but you are able to deal with it when you are in the middle of it anyway. You have no choice, because you have to live through it. So really, five percent of everything out there is worth worrying about because ... within speed skiing, the risk was there but it was never the focus. Peak performance happens when stress is minimized, so risk is always linked with stress and with managing stress. When this unmanaged stress occurs, that's when you shouldn't be racing ... I once had an injury and I had to go to a race in Italy. I was so worried about it. The doctor said: "If you fall again you kill yourself" (laughter). I thought: Great. And it was the worst result I have ever had in my life - ever. It is obvious, the risk was so great, that it became the focus.

Gustav: And how do you handle risk in such a situation?

Speed skier: How do you handle risk in speed sport? You have a strategy. You have a strong foundation of preparation. You apply a pattern prior to every run. When I say a pattern, I mean the four point preparation plan: Get there early. That was my previous pattern, every time it was the same. And so I was ... imagining a bowling ball ... and it had a trough ten meters down ... and if I took that bowling ball and I just allowed it to roll down it would ... always have the same speed, the same direction and follow the same momentum, every time. A pattern is like that. If you are standing at the start of that track, you are like a bowling ball. If you exit, you set the pattern up. Momentum can carry through. That's the way to minimize risk. And that pattern can be set up on race days also. You know, it is the idea to start with this pattern.

Gustav: Can we now talk about the mental preparation? What is your general mental strategy to approach an important race, one hour before, one day before, one week before?

Speed skier: Well, this was my actual strategy. And when I started racing it was ... it was a four-part plan. I needed to minimize risk concerning money, because I needed money. Second were the physical things, all the race runs, training physical things and eating right. Third were the technical things, doing research, understand aerodynamics and all that. Fourth was the mental preparation. I had these four areas and I always made sure that every day, I would check mark off these things. I also had a philosophy of doing what the competition is not willing to do. I spent two hours a day ... visualizing ... and I took that as an average of just visualizing speed runs every day. That to me was that drop into the basket every day. Every day the drop went in, whether it was large or small, as long as it

went into your unconscious. I fed it always and I never evaluated or judged myself if it was enough today or if it was too little today as long as I did it that day, which was the consistent part of it. That was months and weeks leading up to a race and the race season. In the season, I would actually stop my visualization program and do it just in the morning and night, because I was just too busy throughout the day, waxing skis for the race run. Then at the day of the race, it was simply that point where I allowed and then went through a pattern and I always had the same pattern.

Gustav: Are there other things that I did not mention that you think are important concerning speed? Just things that you think we did not discuss so far?

Speed skier: Well I thought a lot about what speed is to me and it isn't something that I am drawn towards. I am drawn towards being more powerful as the speed. I am drawn towards the zone. I am drawn towards a satisfying experience. Speed was simply a means to the end and the end was satisfaction, knowing that I could accomplish that. That is one of my driving needs. So speed wasn't the attractive part.

Gustav: Satisfaction in the experience?

Speed skier: Yes and satisfaction in the experience too, because "flow" when you are in that zone, ah ... that is a drug, that was a drug. And it is a good thing that it is not available (laughter). This is something that you should do more research on: the speed demon concept here, because there is a conception that people just ... want to go fast, whatever. That is power and there is something spiritual they are looking for. And some of the guys at a racecourse can't wait to go fast and they become really mad. Deep inside, I was going to die, if I did not do this

and this or this and I started to have these feelings and anxiety. It wasn't until I had more and more experience and was more comfortable with speed that I started to say ok. I feel comfortable with this, I can't wait to go faster and faster. I still didn't say that to myself. I said to myself: "I want to win. I want to go faster than ever before. I want to be in the zone. I want to be in harmony with perfection".

Gustav: Thank you very much for the interview. Your examples and descriptions are clear and easy to understand and to relate to. I hope that some of your statements may help others to find their way towards the optimal experience and finally to the optimal performance.

Speed skiing makes the downhill look like ice fishing. In a speed-skiing race, athletes tuck and hurtle straight down a smooth, steep kilometer-long course, competing to log the highest speed within the 100-meter timing zone. It's been called the fastest non-motorized sport in the world, and it's probably an accurate description. (There's also speed skydiving, which I do not consider a sport.) Speed skiing was a demonstration sport at the 1992 Albertville Games. During that demonstration, French speed skier Nicholas Bochatay died after crashing into a grooming machine during a practice run. That was apparently all the International Olympic Committee needed to know about speed skiing, and the sport hasn't been seen at an Olympics since then.

Advertisement. At high speed, it's all a blur. And some day you might be surprised when someone else decides to join you and splits away from the speeding group. I have a sweet memory of something like that happening to me once on a road trip where we visited several ski areas. This involves being at a resort for 11-13 weeks with a group of like-minded people all working towards the same goal. You'll qualify for your Level 1 first, then move on to tackle Level 2 on the same course. An organized ski instructor course from a company such as *insert local snow sports resort* typically includes: Flights (if needed). Airport transfers. Moments of Excellence In a Speed Sport

Interview with a Downhill Speed Skier. January 2009. Gustav Weder. Switzerland. Dr. Gustav Weder has a M.Sc. in human kinetics from the federal institute of technology in Zurich, Switzerland, an M.A. in sport psychology and business administration from Ottawa University, Canada as well as a Ph.D. in social science from the University of Goettingen, Germany. He is a former double Olympic gold medallist and five-time world champion as a bobsleigh pilot. It explores the speed skier's views about speed, risk, optimal regulation of movement, performance excellence, the role of the unconscious mind in speed disciplines, and mental links to excellence. Read more. Article.