

King of the Hill

For eight and a half years, through blizzards and rain, in sickness and in health, Rainer Hertrich never missed a day of skiing. A bum ticker may have ended his streak in January, but it didn't dampen his spirit.

STORY BY DEVON O'NEIL | PHOTOS BY DANIEL ROOT



Rainer Hertrich by his summer skiing home, Oregon's Mount Hood

The first time I skied with Rainer Hertrich, on a blustery day at Copper Mountain in 2005, he said something that stuck with me. I had asked him about his world-record streak—at that point, really only just getting started—of skiing every day for two straight years. He unleashed a gaping smile and replied, **“I ain’t gonna get rich, but I sure am happy!”**



Plenty of Hertrich's 2,993 straight ski days included a run at the Moz on Copper Mountain.

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The world could learn a thing or two from Hertrich, a Copper snowcat driver whose continuous skiing streak finally ended this past January when an irregular heartbeat put him in intensive care—just a week shy of 3,000 consecutive days. He would’ve been eight days shy, but he snuck up for one final run on the day his doctor had told him to report to the hospital. The doctor’s order also included a clause along the lines of: “You could go into cardiac arrest if you ski even one more run.” Hertrich, 50 years old at the time, figured it was worth the risk to keep the streak alive.

When I caught up with him again in mid-April, his streak was long gone. But the spirit that propelled it was delightfully intact. Hertrich’s eyes still welled up with tears whenever he thought about the forced curtailment of his record run, but true to his optimist’s personality, he joked and grinned as though it had never ended. “I’m sad that a physical ailment caused me to quit, instead of just deciding I was finished,” he said. “But I’m still a ski bum, as I always have been.”

Hertrich, a native of Düsseldorf, Germany, who has worked at Copper for 30 years, was in the process of having his consecutive-days feat certified by Guinness as of this writing. He certainly didn’t leave much to chance, having kept

daily logs of his vertical descent along with notes on each day’s action. The day I skied with him in April just happened to be the day he passed 100 million vertical feet since the start of his streak (as well as his 45th consecutive ski day since his “broken heart” hiatus). Consider: Skiers make a big deal out of notching 1 million feet in a year; Hertrich averaged 1 million *per month*, with a high of 13.5 million in a year.

Of course, you’d be expected to rack up the vertical if you skied every day for most of your 40s. To preserve his streak, which began on November 1, 2003, and ended on January 10, 2012, Hertrich skied in Summit County each fall, winter, and spring; rode his motorcycle to Oregon in June and skied at Mount Hood for three months while grooming at night; then flew to South America and continued skiing in the Andes before finally returning to Colorado in October and starting the cycle all over again. He became famous for skiing a predawn run in Oregon before his flight to the Southern Hemisphere, just to be sure he wouldn’t miss a day. With admirers ranging from fellow ski bums to World Cup racers who bumped into him around the world, Hertrich developed a following unto himself.

“His streak is beyond the realm of normal comprehension,” attests “T-Bar Tommy” Larkin,

a famous Breckenridge ski bum who has notched multiple 200-day seasons of his own. “It’s so hard to ski 50 days in a row, or 100 days in a row. But 2,993 days in a row? My God. To change countries, to change hemispheres and never miss a day, that’s almost a military move. It takes so much precision. I have a lot of respect for the guy.”

After the heart arrhythmia sidelined him, Hertrich took 40 days off from skiing. He went to the beach and soaked in the warmth, which he’d missed all those years while chasing an endless winter. “It was a nice break to see the ocean again

and have my toes in the sand, so to speak,” he says, “even though I didn’t take my shoes off because my feet are still healing from all this.”

In compiling his streak, Hertrich was aided by a handful of modest sponsors, including K2, which supplied him with skis. He plowed through 16 pairs over the eight-plus years and spent roughly \$100,000 of his own money to keep the record going. He skied through broken ribs and a separated shoulder, as well as logistical barriers that were impossible to predict.

“I’d say the closest call was when I got lost in Santiago, Chile,” Hertrich recalls. “I couldn’t get out of town because I couldn’t tell where the mountains were, because it was really overcast. I was in a part of town that I’d never seen, so it took me almost all day to get out. And then I hadn’t made it to Portillo yet, and it was late enough that I knew I couldn’t get a lift ticket, so I just parked the car and hiked up the hillside and did a run.”



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hat experience highlights a technical point: Hertrich's only requirement for a day to count toward the streak was, "Put your skis on and ski." One day during his first summer, he spent three hours skiing back and forth on a patch of snow atop Wolf Creek Pass. Vertical drop: seven feet. Some people asked if he was going through a midlife crisis. "If I am," he'd respond, "then bring it on."

He sacrificed relationships and sophistication to live how he wanted, minimizing distractions in the name of a simple, unprecedented goal. Forgetting for a moment all the frostbite and aching muscles he endured, perhaps his greatest

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challenge was living in a tent in the forest each summer in Oregon, a place notable for its rain. "But it never really bothered me," Hertrich says, "because I'd get off work at midnight, go to sleep, and wake up and go skiing." **CSM**