

The truth about pain: It's in your head

By David Epstein, Sports Illustrated

Cross-country skiing around a wide, icy curve, Petra Majdič slid off the course during a warmup for last year's Olympic women's individual sprint at Whistler Olympic Park outside Vancouver. She fell 10 feet into a craggy creek bed, her chest hitting rocks. The impact snapped her ski poles and splintered the tip of one ski.

When volunteers rushed to her aid, she screamed at them to take her to the start of the qualifying heats, which began in 20 minutes. Her coach, Ivan Hudac, and her sports psychologist, Matej Tušak, told her she could attempt to ski, and if the pain was too great, she could drop out. And so she tried. Majdič completed the 1.4-kilometer course, finishing 19th of 30 qualifiers, before collapsing and screaming in pain. She still had three more rounds of races to go.

Majdič, a 31-year-old from Slovenia, had come into the one-day competition as the favorite. She was expected to win several medals in Vancouver. Four years earlier an equipment mishap—she used cold-weather skis on an unexpectedly warm day—had kept her from a medal in Turin. Now her Olympic dream would come down to how much pain she could tolerate over the next five hours.

After the qualifier, Majdič was taken to an on-site medical tent for an ultrasound. If her ribs were broken, she wouldn't continue. The excruciating pain from snapped ribs can stop even the toughest athletes, and perhaps no sport puts more strain on the body's core than cross-country skiing. If it was only pain, though, maybe Majdič could go. For the last two decades she had spent hour after hour trudging through snowy

woods, her legs and lungs burning, forging a relationship with pain. "The beautiful things in life are born from pain," she says. "For example, a child is born from great pain. In summer, in autumn, in winter, I struggle with pain, so my pain level is really [high]." In 2008, when her boyfriend of six years couldn't understand her obsessive training any longer, she chose skiing, her first love, and that too hurt. Now, in Vancouver, she couldn't give in to "just pain." With the quarterfinal heat less than 90 minutes away, doctors didn't have much time to assess her condition. On the ultrasound, nothing appeared to be broken. It's just pain, the team doctor told her.

Majdič won her quarterfinal race, but afterward, ashen and hunched, she told Hudac she couldn't go on. It felt, as Majdič later put it, "like when somebody would all the time give you a knife" in your chest.

"She had a crisis," said Tušak. "We tested her, and she could not go five meters up a hill and turn around. She could not sit, so she was lying down, and when she stood up she was [hunched over]. But doctors told us nothing is broken, and I told Ivan, if nothing is broken, we go on. If we let her quit, she will be mad at us. This is her last chance to get a medal."

So Majdič continued. For the semifinals, her coaches again told her just to try. She finished fourth out of five in her heat but, based on time, qualified for the six-woman final.

During the 20 minutes between the semifinal and final, the pain got still worse. Majdič could hear a gruesome click, click in her chest—her ribs moving. "That's when I know it was something serious," Majdič says. She couldn't take an injection of painkiller, though, because it would numb the muscles she needed to race. Tušak talked to her about Kerri Strug, the U.S. gymnast famous for her gold-medal-clinching vault on an injured ankle at the 1996 Olympics, and about

Majdič's 22 years of sacrifice. He reminded her that her arms and legs were still working. He talked to her about the pain she was feeling. He convinced her that it was in her head.

"I had a great team—coach, doctor, a [ski] service team," Majdič says. "You have to understand, these are people who are coming from the same [country] as I do. We were just always poor in the cross-country skiing world. Now for four years when I'm on top, we are showing the world, don't joke with small nations because we can beat you!"

In the final Majdič started outside but pushed through and finished third, fending off Anna Olsson of Sweden for the bronze. Five hours of pain had ended in Slovenia's first medal in cross-country skiing.

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