

Opinion: White is a champion with special fans

By Mike Wise, Washington Post

KRASNAYA POLYANA, Russia – What happens when the story you came to write doesn't become the story anymore? What happens when that story does a 180-degree turn in mid-air, then a 540 and finally a dizzying 1260, spinning your perception completely around?

I had heard Shaun White had become too big for his snowboard bindings. He didn't hang with other members of the close-knit Team USA community. His "people" shut down halfpipes at ski resorts so White could ride by himself. He wasn't the cool kid we once called the Flying Tomato anymore, a thatch of reddish-orange hair rising 22 feet off a wall of ice.

No, he was now the Descending Diva – S.W.E., Shaun White Enterprises, the \$15-mil-per-year action sports icon – the world's richest, most famous and now most isolated extreme star.

He needed to be put back in place, I thought. He needed to remember the, well, dudeliness that got him here.

Then the story forked. Maybe I should explain.

About an hour before White competed, I met a freckle-faced, St. Louis kid with a stars-and-stripes beanie and a little miniature flag named Ben Hughes, his mother Liz, and their friend, Kaitlyn Lyles. Turns out Ben and Kaitlyn are here because of the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Ben got a diagnosis of acute lymphoblastic leukemia at 6 years old. He underwent 2.5 years of radiation and chemotherapy. Before he finished his treatments at the end of 2012, he had

found two new inspirations in life: snowboarding and Shaun White. He loved both.

Kaitlyn learned of White while watching the 2010 Vancouver Games on television from her hospital bed at Sacred Heart Children's Hospital in Pensacola, Fla., where she underwent chemotherapy for osteosarcoma, a rare form of blood cancer.

"I was literally in that hospital room for all of February," she said. "Shaun White is what really got me through. I loved that even after he clinched the gold medal, he still went for it, trying tricks and refusing to coast when he won."

Kaitlyn playfully vowed not to leave Sochi before she was Mrs. Shaun White.

Read the whole story