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Vinko Bogataj and the Ecstasy of Defeat

By [Dave Seminara](#) - March 20, 2010

- Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sport ... the thrill of victory ... the agony of defeat ... the human drama of athletic competition, this is ABC's Wide World of Sports!

It took Vinko Bogataj just nine seconds to secure his place in American sports history; but 40 years after a memorable fall, most Americans still know him only as “that guy who crashed on ABC’s *Wide World of Sports*.” [Bogataj’s wild crash](#), which was featured on the show’s opening theme for nearly 30 years, made him an American icon, while cementing the catch phrase “the agony of defeat” in the American sporting lexicon, and shaping the public’s perception of ski jumping as a dangerous sport.

On a snowy, late winter day in March 1970, Vinko Bogataj, a 22-year old Slovene from what was then Yugoslavia, left the chain factory where he worked and piled into an aging Fiat Ficho along with three friends. As the young men set off on the long drive to Oberstdorf, West Germany, the site of a 120-meter ski flying competition, they could not have known that Vinko was about to become a sporting icon in a country they had never visited before.

Bogataj, the seventh child in a family of eight who grew up on a farm, was an accomplished ski jumper who had been competing internationally since he was 15. Still, jumping was more of an obsession than a profession; his career highlights included one \$200 payday, along with a few other modest wins which netted him a color television and a stove, amongst other things.

As Bogataj stood and peered down at the fresh snow atop Oberstdorf’s imposing 120-meter platform on the morning of March 7, 1970^[i], the small white beanie on the top of his ski hat fluttered in the stiff breeze. A fresh coat of snow and strong winds conspired to create trying conditions, and Vinko, who had fallen on his first jump of the day, understood that he had his work cut out for him on the second jump. “These days, they wouldn’t even compete in those conditions,” Bogataj says.

Vinko flew down the jump and for the first four seconds of the run, appeared to be in full control. Just a few feet from the end of the platform, however, Bogataj lost his balance, and placed his right hand on the track to try to brace his fall. But at that speed, he had no chance - his legs buckled and he catapulted dramatically off the right side of the jump, doing multiple summersaults right over and nearly into groups of officials, broadcasters, and spectators.

“One of those heads ducking in that video was me,” says Bud Palmer, now 88, who was broadcasting the event for ABC, which aired the event on tape delay, two weeks later on March 21. “I don’t remember what we said at the time, we were too busy ducking for

God's sake! He could have decimated people and cut their heads off."

Bogataj lay motionless in the snow for several excruciating seconds while everyone feared the worst. "My first thought was- oh my God - is he seriously hurt, is he mortally hurt?" recalls Doug Wilson, who was in Oberstdorf producing the show for ABC. Miraculously, he was not seriously hurt. "I could have gotten up, I didn't feel hurt, but they wouldn't let me," Bogataj remembers. "They insisted on carrying me off on a stretcher, which I wasn't happy about because my family was watching on TV," Bogataj recalls.

In the pre-cell phone era, Bogataj's family could do nothing but continue to watch TV and hope for an update on Vinko's condition. "Several hours later, they heard on TV that I was OK," Bogataj says. "They kept me in the hospital overnight, even though I just had a slight concussion."

Vinko's crash may have been the most dramatic fall of the day, but it wasn't the most serious. An East German named Horst Queck also crashed, and actually lost consciousness for several hours. Queck spent several days in a local hospital, but eventually recuperated.

After the fall, Vinko's life went back to normal, which for him meant driving a forklift at the factory by day, and creating art by night. His colleagues at work teased him a bit about the crash, but the incident was largely forgotten. He was already competing again later the same year, and although his international career was essentially over, he served as both an official and a coach, and continued to compete in regional competitions.

Unbeknownst to Bogataj, ABC began to use the footage from his crash to demonstrate "the agony of defeat" during its opening theme later that same year. "I knew right away that this was going to be something extraordinary on the air," Wilson recalls. "But we wouldn't have used it if he had been hurt."

The clip was shown every week on what was then the country's top sports program, which was a ratings juggernaut, in the pre-ESPN era. Most viewers had no idea who the skier was or whether he was seriously hurt, yet he came to define both the Wide World of Sports program and the concept of "the agony of defeat."

The clips used in Wide World's theme changed over the years, but Vinko's crash was the one constant. The very first "agony of defeat" clip was used in early 1970 and featured a trio of Irish hurlers colliding, but the scene was quickly displaced by Vinko's crash. "There were several times when people suggested that we update our agony of defeat clip, but I kept saying no," says Dennis Lewin, who was a producer for the show from 1966-96. The late Jim McKay is credited with scripting the phrases, "the thrill of victory" and "the agony of defeat," but it was Lewin who decided to pair the latter with Vinko's crash.

But while the public clearly loved the Wide World theme, the U.S. Ski Federation lodged a formal protest with ABC for its repeated use of the crash footage. "The Ski Federation hated it for years and years," says Lewin. "They felt it was harming the growth of their sport, because so many people were seeing Vinko crash that it was scaring people off from taking up ski jumping."

Some in the U.S. ski jumping community still believe that ABC's repeated use of the crash did irreparable damage to the sport. "ABC created a monster by creating a perception they never corrected," says Ken Anderson, a former ski jumper who is the founder of the site, [Ski Jumping USA](#). "The clip had a huge role in the downward spiral of the sport in the U.S. It made it impossible to recruit kids. Parents wouldn't let them try it, and facilities were being eliminated because people were worried about liability." No U.S. ski jumper has ever won an Olympic medal, and the U.S. jumpers at the 2010 Games had to essentially pay their own way, with no significant support from the U.S. Ski Federation.

Anderson started his website in order to counter the perception that ski jumping is a dangerous sport. "The truth is that according to the Federation of International Skiing, jumping is the second safest of the Nordic disciplines," Anderson says. "Snowboarding is the most dangerous, and only cross country is safer than jumping."

Nonetheless, no one in the world of ski jumping blames Bogataj, and ABC understood that removing him from the show was a non-starter. In 1981, Wilson and Lewin were preparing for Wide World's 20th anniversary program and decided to fly Vinko over to appear at the event. "We put him up at the Waldorf Astoria, and sat him in the front row at the show, but he had no idea that he'd become a folk hero in the U.S.," Wilson recalls.

During the gala event, Jim McKay [introduced a video segment](#) on Vinko's life which carried the instrumental theme from *St. Elmo's Fire*, with McKay's narration offering both a question and a response. "Do you know this man? Probably not, he doesn't even own a credit card."

"Before McKay could even finish introducing him, the place went nuts," Wilson remembers. The event was a who's who of American sports, with Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, Peggy Fleming, Nadia Comaneci, and the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team all in attendance. And yet, Vinko was clearly the crowd favorite.

"We had the greatest athletes of the last 20 years together in one room, but the biggest ovation of the night, by far, was for Vinko Bogataj," Lewin says. Bogataj was also a favorite amongst the athletes, several of whom requested autographs. "Before the evening was out, Muhammad Ali came over to Vinko Bogataj, and *Muhammad* asked *Vinko* for *his* autograph," Wilson says, recalling the surreal moment.

How did an obscure Slovenian ski jumper, unknown even in his home country, capture the hearts of a nation? "You have to remember how big Wide World was then," Lewin notes. "Families would gather together to watch it, and we repeated Vinko's clip over and over

again, so it became a part of people's lives.”

Americans love a winner, but can also relate to failure and disappointment just as readily. “Vinko was taken into the hearts of the nation, and it became part of our culture,” Wilson explains. “We’re inundated with great wins in sports, but people also love a glorious loser.” The sporting public also simply loves a good crash. Even today, network coverage of ski events at the Olympics tends to show only Americans, medal contenders, and those who crash.

Despite his folk hero status in the U.S., Vinko’s life in Slovenia never changed, and he declined attempts to cash in on his celebrity. After working in the chain factory for 20 years, he toiled as a truck driver for a time before retreating to his first love: painting. He traveled to Pittsburgh in 2007 at the invitation of a Slovenian-American group to display his work in a gallery, and, on the same trip, got another standing ovation while throwing out the first pitch at a Pittsburgh Pirates game. Bogataj’s landscapes reveal the beauty of his native land and the soul of a man wise enough to see beauty in all things: even defeat.

Vinko will celebrate the 40th anniversary of his first appearance on ABC by working as a starter at a ski jumping competition in Planica, Slovenia. He still competes in the occasional senior jumping competition and maintains that he was never afraid to jump, even after his disastrous crash. Bogataj is also still very much a part of our popular culture, even after the demise of Wide World of Sports - Charlie Steiner recently referred to The Aughts as “The Vinko Bogataj Decade,” and the hit TV show Scrubs featured an actor who played the role of Vinko lying injured in a hospital.^[ii]

Bogataj has no issues with his place in American sports history: he hasn’t spent the last 40 years agonizing about being the “agony of defeat” guy. He only hopes Americans can draw one lesson from his experience: “every time you fall, you have to get back up.”

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^[i] Vinko’s jump aired on ABC on tape delay on March 21, 1970, but my sources believe that the event actually occurred on March 7, 1970 and was broadcast two weeks later.

^[ii] Internet accounts and bio’s which claim that Vinko himself appeared in Scrubs are false.

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