

DANGER: The Thrill of Flight, the Agony of Misperception

So how dangerous is ski jumping REALLY?

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The sport of ski jumping was given a huge black eye in the US by way of the lead-in to **ABC's Wide World of Sports** which, week after week for many years, showed an unusual fall by a world-class ski jumper. He was **Vinko Bogataj**, from what was then Yugoslavia, and it was his third jump of the day, on March 21, 1970, at Oberstdorf, Germany. The announcer in the video had just said "The Thrill of Victory" as they showed some joyous moment, and then his voice turned ominous as he intoned "**The Agony of Defeat**" just as Vinko did something extremely rare ... fell in the inrun, slid down, then tumbled off the takeoff.

Left unsaid was what happened to Vinko. A mild concussion. **Shamefully, ABC allowed millions of people believe, for all those years, that something too awful to show had befallen him.** Yes, Vinko was hauled to a hospital for observation, where he promptly phoned the ski club to confirm his competitor registration for the following year. **He returned to jumping, later to coaching, and indulged in his passion for painting (art, not houses) in his hometown of Lesce, Slovenia.** Unfortunately, his sport has struggled to survive in the US and Canada, and that video, repeated weekly for years, sure didn't help. People STILL think Vinko died or was seriously hurt. [**VIEW VINKO'S PAINTINGS**](#)

By the time of that incident, ski jumping was on the decline in North America, as people in snow-sports areas took up downhill, cross country, even snowmobiling. Ski jumping had been a popular spectator sport, as well as a recreational competitive sport for many young folks, but as a younger generation found other pursuits, numbers dropped. The final blow in many communities was the fear induced on the part of a lot of cities that had small jumps, as well as clubs that had their own facilities, because of the hysteria over the presumed death or maiming of that poor guy on Wide World of Sports. So jumps were torn down, clubs folded, and parents wouldn't let kids even think of trying it because of the perception that it's crazy ... and tragedy would surely be visited upon their kids. The spectre of litigation was at least as much a factor as the fear of injury itself, and insurance became unaffordable.

Meanwhile, in the rest of the snow-sports world, ski jumping and Nordic Combined, in which athletes must jump AND race cross-country, have thrived. Today, they're on a par with things like Formula 1 racing and professional soccer in terms of TV exposure, live attendance at events, sponsorship, sanctioning fees for World Cup tournaments, and endorsements and rock star status for top athletes.

The talent pool of youngsters in those countries is undreamed of here, but in countries where ski jumping is popular, there's no shortage of kids, facilities, coaching, and many levels of regular competition. And money for all that. So it's a high-participation sport. It's their equivalent of Little League. Are all the parents of all these kids exposing their youngsters to terrible risks? Hardly.

Injuries can happen in any activity in life. The prudent person, regardless of what sport they choose to pursue, learns that **risks are inherent in almost anything that involves motion, balance, and speed ... precisely the things that make such pursuits appealing.** People who are good at something often started young, had good coaching and proper equipment or facilities. They learned skills one by one, until they didn't have to think about what they were doing. They learned judgment, built confidence,

and learned incrementally. That's how you learn to drive a car, ride a bike, or master any activity which requires you to learn multiple skills that must be executed very quickly, often simultaneously. And they often involve learning things that aren't natural.

Gymnastics comes to mind when looking for a comparison to ski jumping. Good gymnasts start young, and learn incredible feats of body control, one move at a time, over many years and many repetitions in practice. Their routines often involve flipping and twisting, flying free, then gripping a bar or landing on a beam a few inches wide. In ski jumping, the free flight lasts much longer, and unlike in freestyle and acrobatic skiing, the object is to remain in flight, and fly as far as possible.

Flips and twists aren't part of ski jumping technique. Using one's body as a wing, with very subtle adjustments to body position, hands, and skis, is what it takes. That can be learned early, and some fairly young kids have developed the skills and confidence to fly from larger hills. And they do it safely. **Coaches won't let a kid without the skills and confidence ... and parental consent ... even attempt a bigger hill than they're capable of handling.** And it's no different than it is for a sport like gymnastics.

But let's get back to skiing ... and perceptions. People will dismiss the danger of normal downhill skiing or snowboarding because it's familiar. Ski jumping is exotic. They'll also dismiss the dangers of hockey, skateboarding, riding a bicycle, playing football, or a host of other things, because, well, everybody does those things. Not everybody ski jumps, and, well, you know ... "that guy who got maimed or killed on Wide World of Sports." Perception has become reality for those folks.

Serious injuries or worse occur in downhill skiing; not just in competition, but in recreational skiing, too (your webmaster spent years as a professional ski instructor, so this is a familiar topic). But **because people THINK ski jumping is horribly dangerous, any actual injury reported via news media or grapevine would get immediate attention by Nervous Nellies everywhere,** and become prima facie evidence of the horrible risks inherent in ski jumping. Have you seen the injuries that downhillers endure, and for which they are regarded as heroes when they recover after serious injuries?

So ... how do the risks of ski jumping compare to those inherent in more familiar snow sports? The International Ski Federation (FIS) keeps meticulous track of injuries in the snow sport disciplines it governs ... snowboard, freestyle, alpine, jumping, Nordic combined, and cross-country. They rate **SKI JUMPING as the SECOND-SAFEST** of all the snow-sport disciplines ... only cross-country is safer. You'll be quite surprised to find out what's the most dangerous. It's the thing parents would most likely let their kids try ... snowboarding ... despite the severe injury to top US boarder Kevin Pearce just before the 2010 Olympics.

Read the **FIS Injury Surveillance System (ISS) report** (2006-2018, lengthy PDF) [CLICK HERE](#)
This report reflects athletes in official FIS competition, and has breakdowns by disciplines

Injuries can happen to any athlete, in any sport. I'm going to give you the names of two world-class downhillers who have died as a result of crashes in 1994 and 2001. Both are women. I'll wager that very few of the folks reading this will be aware of these deaths, or know the names of the athletes. Yet the fear of injury from ski jumping is such that if there was a serious incident of any sort, it would cement this misperception in the minds of folks who still probably shudder at the thought of what they THINK happened to Vinko ... and especially if ... gasp ... a female jumper got hurt. But consider that

both [Ulrike Maier](#) and [Regine Cavagnoud](#) were world class athletes. Their deaths were tragic, but the sport of downhill skiing doesn't suffer from a misperception of some kind of danger that goes beyond reason and logic. And it isn't only racers who get hurt, sometimes severely or fatally.

A few years later, there were two celebrity deaths in recreational skiing accidents less than a week apart. Robert Kennedy's son [Michael Kennedy](#), an experienced skier, was tossing a football with family and friends as they made the last run of the day on New Year's Eve 1997. Lapse of judgment or attention, hit a tree. On January 6, 1998, [Sonny Bono](#), also experienced, intentionally skied off a groomed trail ... and he hit a tree. Both tragic, unfortunate accidents, but people kept right on skiing, and getting their kids started, too. There was no "Vinko panic" ... even though these were actual deaths of well known recreational skiers, well covered in the media.

Another famous athlete was critically injured on January 30, 1998. [Doak Walker](#), former star with the Detroit Lions, a member of the NFL Hall of Fame and former college star, for whom the annual award for outstanding college running back is named, died the following September 27 of those injuries. Ironically, his wife, the former [Skeeter Werner](#), was an Olympic racer. Her brother [Buddy Werner](#) was one of the greatest American racers; Buddy died in 1964 in an avalanche while filming a movie in Germany. He'd just retired from competition.

Canadian professional X-Games snowboarder [Sarah Burke](#) died in a tragic training accident in Utah in January 2012. She'd lobbied for inclusion of a women's event in the 2014 Olympics, and had been considered a medal favorite.

These folks were well known to the American public, their deaths were reported and mourned, but they didn't make a dent in the popularity of skiing ... or snowboarding. There was no big outcry about the danger of these sports, or any dropoff in the popularity of the sport among recreational skiers, nor great apprehension on the part of parents to have their kids start in either sport.

Accidents can happen doing anything, and to anybody. Ski jumping accidents don't happen disproportionately in comparison to other snow sports (actually LESS, according to statistics cited above) ... nor are injuries, when they occur, different in type or severity. But you don't just go "do it." You LEARN incrementally. The idea that people "get up the guts and give it a try" harks back to what jumping was like fifty years ago; it's a far more technical sport today, more regulated, and safer.

OK, let's start wrapping this up. Due to several factors, the sport of ski jumping has gotten some positive media attention in North America in the last few years. One big reason, somewhat below the radar until recently, has been the efforts of women to finally be included in the Olympics. Their legal effort initially failed, as they weren't able to jump in Vancouver. But hats off to these athletes for their courage and skill on the hills, and in fighting one of the the most entrenched old-boy establishments on earth, the IOC. **They didn't ask to be included because they're women ... they asked not to be EXCLUDED for that very same reason.**

In the spring of 2011, the IOC announced that they would be included in the 2014 Olympics ... and FIS has introduced a women's World Cup for the 2012 season. We are proud to announce that US athlete Sarah Hendrickson won the first-ever event in that series! She placed 2nd in the 2013 World Cup series, but won the 2013 World Championship title at the famed Holmenkollen in Oslo NOR.

On another positive note, **the phenomenal success of the US Nordic Combined team** burst into the public consciousness with the amazing finish in the Olympic NH/10K NC event, where Johnny Spillane took the silver medal, Todd Lodwick finished 4th, and Billy Demong placed 6th. They also took silver in the team relay event. And to top it all off, Demong took gold and Spillane grabbed another silver in the LH/10K individual competition. **Never a US medal in 84 years of Olympic competition in this event, then four of 'em in Vancouver.** Because NC involves jumping, there are some kids who are going to see skiers flying through the air ... and they'll want to try it. Here's how it starts: [KID VIDEO](#)

NOTE ADDED MARCH 2015: American Sarah Hendrickson suffered a severe knee injury in August of 2013 when she out-jumped a large hill in Oberstdorf Germany (flew too far, landed where it was flattening out). She had surgery and intensive rehab and made the US team for the Sochi Olympics in early 2014, but still was not up to her usual competitive caliber. She struggled early on in the 2015 season, but returned to top form late in the season, finishing 2nd at the 2015 Holmenkollen, the final event of the year. And in the last two events of the season, she had the LONGEST jump of each competition! As the saying goes, "Wait 'til NEXT year!"

Other jumpers, and skiers in other disciplines, skaters, hockey players, football players, and athletes in all sports suffer injuries ... and often come back better than ever. These stories may stop some folks from participating, or parents from letting their kids try, but they serve as inspiration and motivation to others. Think about Lindsey Vonn throughout her long and stellar career, and Picabo Street some years back ... their crashes were legendary, their recoveries heroic. But if any such injuries had happened in ski jumping, the coverage in the US media would have been overwhelmingly negative, and the impact on the sport would have been severe. WHY? It's purely irrational.

FINALLY, HERE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT POINT ... If your kid, or the son or daughter of a friend or relative expresses an interest in ski jumping, look at it realistically. **It is NOT the wild and crazy daredevil sport that's been ingrained in the American mind.** If you live near a jumping facility, they'll have coaches and a junior program.

Beginners start on VERY small jumps. Think about when you were a kid. When you got your first pair of skis, and hadn't even figured out yet how to turn or stop, didn't you and the other kids build up a little jump in someone's sloped back yard and try to see how far you could jump? **Kids are HARD WIRED to do this ... and to want to do it!** Start young, start small, start with coaching and parental supervision. It's a great sport, it takes years to work your way up to big jumps, and to perfect the necessary skills; parental confidence will come along with the development of your young athlete.

Ski jumping and Nordic combined will never be mass participation sports here in the USA, but I'd like to think that perhaps in the future it might be just a bit easier to recruit kids to try it, and get THEIR PARENTS to even consider and allow it. It won't be for everybody, but it's rewarding and exciting for those whose tiny taste of flight makes them want to continue. Thanks for your time, and if you've never seen ski jumping live, visit www.SkiJumpingUSA.com, and look at our Regional Clubs page and our Schedule page, and find someplace where you can see it in person. It's amazing!

Also see: USANordic.com (jumping & Nordic Combined) & AmericanSkiJumping.com (history)