

Pain sees career gain in playing team game

THE CANADIAN WAY

Broken bone prompts epiphany for skeleton sledder

BY JOE O'CONNOR

Jeff Pain says he wasn't a total jerk before he met Richard Monette, but then he wasn't the most popular slider on the World Cup skeleton circuit either. Pain was, well, a pain to be around a few years back — a veteran rider with a secretive side, a big ego and a chest-thumping attitude that didn't win him many friends among his Canadian teammates, even as he was winning races.

"He wasn't liked that much," said Monette, Pain's life coach-

cum-sports psychologist. "He was all: 'I'll be back, Terminator-style.' Jeff honestly thought that this was the way he had to be to win, and that's one of the clichés you see out there in sports — the no-pain-no-gain-all-intensity-all-the-time personality that brings medals.

"It's kind of an American way of thinking."

Pain, who clinched his second consecutive World Cup crown with a gold-medal slide in Altenberg, Germany last week, was born in the U.S.A. His father, an accountant, was working in Anchorage, Alaska, when Pain entered the picture in 1970. His family moved to Calgary before his second birthday, but somewhere, somehow, Pain honed a Stars and Stripes-style competitive streak that was not conducive to the sport he excelled at most.

Skeleton is a death wish on

ice. Competitors sprint for 50 metres before flopping down on a fibreglass sled and firing down an icy track — full of S-shaped turns and hairpin bends — at speeds of up to 130 kilometres an hour. They are head-first all the while, and steer by shifting their body weight.

In this high-risk endeavour it is custom among teammates to share whatever knowledge they have: about a particular track, a specific steering technique, or a line one should take to make the trip as fast as possible. But to Pain, knowledge was something he preferred to keep to himself.

"Sharing information was always a big thing with Jeff," Monette said. "At one point, four or five years ago, Jeff felt the transfer of information between him and his teammates was not really fair.

"His perspective was he'd been sliding for a long time and

he knew a lot and he wasn't really open to sharing, and he felt that when he did share he didn't get much in return."

Pain's private ways prevented him from becoming bosom buddies with fellow national team members Duff Gibson and Paul Boehm while they traipsed around the World Cup circuit for 10 to 12 weeks each winter.

But Pain had an epiphany after he broke a bone in his foot at the 2003 Canadian team trials. The fracture came after what had been a breakout season in 2002-03, when Pain won his first two World Cup races plus a world championship.

The time away afforded Pain an opportunity to think about who he was, and who he wanted to be. And with Monette's help he began to realize that the secretive guy — with his secretive-guy neuroses and suspicions and sour relations — wasn't him.

"Part of his goal in life was to become a person that would be liked, and that would be perceived as a leader," Monette said. "The moment he started living this goal, he started sliding better."

Pain's new perspective, and the one he will bring with him to Turin — where the gold-medal favourite will have Monette's number at the ready should he feel the need to chat with his guru — was to lighten up and let his inner-Canadian good guy come out.

And these days, Pain, Boehm and Gibson gab about everything skeleton-related, from runners to sleds to training techniques to the starting push. "I haven't radically altered my lifestyle," Pain said. "I'm just a little bit freer, I was very closed as a competitor, I wouldn't share or talk to my teammates that much ...

"[Sharing] has helped me to have a bit more energy to spend on the competition rather than trying to keep a secret, or keep everything to myself. It takes a lot of energy to do that."

And it doesn't make you any friends.

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