

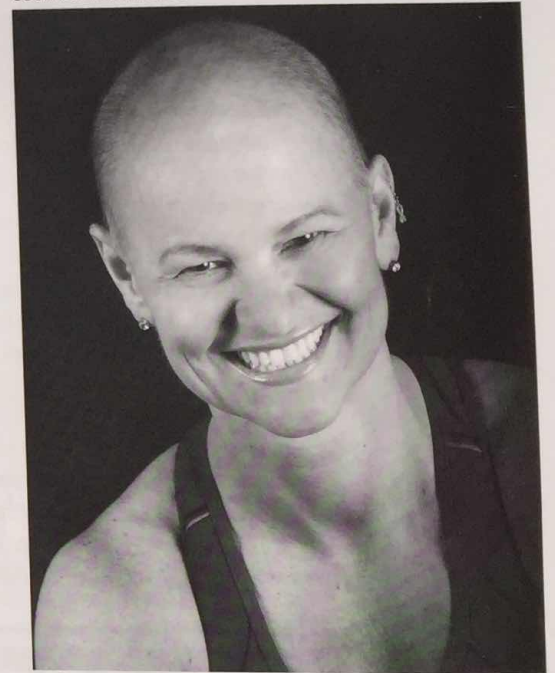
Tori (Pillinger) Robinson

Her life-threatening crash, 25 years ago, changed the finish line of international racing forever. **BY EDIE THYS MORGAN**

LORI ADAMSKI-PEEK



COURTESY TORI ROBINSON



Left: Pillinger on the GS course in January 1987 at the World Championships in Crans Montana, Switzerland, 11 months before the crash that made her a poster child for race-course safety. Above: Today, Robinson (her married name) is rebounding from cancer treatment.

Tough Mudder events are all about survival. The punishing 10- to 12-mile obstacle courses, designed by British Special Forces, bring even the most hardcore athletes to their often-bloody knees. So it was especially impressive when 45-year-old mother of two, Tori Robinson, with her recently replaced hip, finished the event on September 22 in Northstar, California. Just 360 days earlier, Robinson had embarked on six grueling months of chemotherapy and radiation for intractable carcinoma, an extremely aggressive form of breast cancer. Impressive, but not surprising from a woman whose very survival, 25 years ago, made her skiing's poster child for race-course safety.

Back then she was Tori Pillinger, a rising star on the U.S. Ski Team, and a top American prospect for the upcoming 1988 Olympics. In December 1987 the women's team arrived in the high Alpine village of Leukerbad, Switzerland, hoping to stop a Murphy's Law spiral of injuries that had already claimed six of the top athletes.

Instead, the spiral took a near-fatal turn. Pillinger, the national Super G champion who had burst onto the international scene a year earlier with a sixth-place World Cup finish in Val D'Isere, started 19th. By then she knew that some top racers had skied out on the final pitch. She thought she had cleared the trouble spot until she picked up speed in the last few gates and ran

a low line. While trying to recover, a bump knocked her feet out from under her and sent her airborne, sideways towards the steel finish post, at 50 miles per hour. "I remember having a really long time to think, 'Oh *\$#! I'm going to hit it.' Then I felt the post, I heard my femur break and my whole body shuddered."

Onlookers, at the finish line and at home on TV, recall a sickening scene as a helicopter whisked a crumpled Pillinger away. In nearby Sion, U.S. Ski Team surgeon Grady Jeeter operated for four hours to repair the right femur that was broken in eight places and protruded from the back of her leg. She broke her pelvis in four places, her L4 and S5 vertebrae and her left tibial plateau, tore up her left knee and injured her liver, spleen and kidneys. But she survived, and on December 18, her 21st birthday, Pillinger made the 33-hour journey back to the States, determined not only to ski, but to race again.

She got tantalizingly close—all the way to USST train-



After the 1987 accident, Pillinger recovered to rejoin the U.S. Ski Team and then raced on the pro circuit (above). Recurring issues with her back led her to retire from skiing in 1989.

ing camps—before having back trouble that would require yet more surgery if she wanted to continue to compete. On December 12, 1989, two years after the accident, Pillinger officially retired.

Her accident, and the indelible image it left with any who saw it, forever changed the standards of finish-line safety. Finish posts started to disappear, immediately in Leukerbad and more gradually elsewhere, though they do persist (just last year a young American ski racer shattered his femur in an eerily similar accident). They

are not prohibited by the FIS, but the current World Cup standard is to mark finish lines with vertical banners hung from an upper cable that runs between posts outside of the actual finish corral. The banners themselves are designed to tear away on impact.

"I am grateful that in 25 years nobody has died from hitting a finish post," says Pillinger, but it offers her no consolation for racers like Austrian Ulrike Maier, who died from other hazards. "Skiing is dangerous, and you can increase safety, but the physics of going 70 mph and hitting anything just aren't favorable."

Pillinger replaced the adrenaline fix of downhill racing with a career in emergency room nursing and a passion for whitewater kayaking. She replaced Pillinger with Robinson when she married fellow boater Marek Robinson. The Robinsons and their two daughters live on the American River in Coloma, California, and push their physical and mental boundaries through kayaking, martial arts, cycling, surfing and crazy endurance events.

After last year's challenges, Robinson looks forward to returning to a December 12 tradition. "I pay homage to the people who helped me through the 1987 crash, and I make sure I am skiing somewhere." Well, except for last winter, which she spent commuting to UC San Francisco's Infusion Center and monitoring her hemoglobin levels rather than the snowpack. Throughout the cancer ordeal, she never gave up her vision of spending this landmark anniversary skiing with friends and former teammates in her home town of Park City. "Last year, during chemo, my friends came to me. That's why this year is so big." ❄️

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