Lake Tahoe bicyclist overcomes broken kneecap to compete in Tour of California race



Peter Stetina is eager to compete on his home turf in the Sierra Mountains on May 19. Photo/Provided

By Susan Wood

For professional cyclist Peter Stetina, the choice was a no-brainer – his leg or his life.

The rider, who is set to compete in South Lake Tahoe for the Amgen Tour of California on May 19, endured a near career-ending crash about a year ago. His rehabilitation is long and inspirational.

The 28-year-old athlete who splits his time between homes in Tahoe City and Santa Rosa remembers that time during the Tour of the Basque Country on April 6, 2015, like it was yesterday.

With only 1 kilometer to go in Stage 1, he came around a corner and hit a metal pole in the road at about 40mph with his right leg taking the full force.

“Anywhere else on my body, and I probably wouldn’t be here today,” he told *Lake Tahoe News.*

He shattered his kneecap, cracked his tibia, tore his ACL and broke five ribs. He was listed in critical condition in the hospital for 11 days and underwent four surgeries.

Beyond the physical challenges, Stetina was forced to overcome his condition with mind over matter.

“I had a lot of dark days initially in my recovery. I thought ‘whatever becomes of my cycling career, I want my leg use in everyday life’,” he said.

Still, Stetina admits he was hungry to return to the racing circuit after such the setback stalled one of the best cycling years he had had.

“I learned a lot about myself,” he said, referring to his will to survive and thrive.

For three months, he underwent two-hour physical therapy sessions five days a week.

His physical therapist, Dave Townsend, also got an education in Stetina’s will.

“I saw him pretty fresh. For me, I had my doubts about his return because I know the severity of the injury,” Townsend told *Lake Tahoe News* from his Santa Rosa home.

Stetina’s knee was held together by a multitude of screws. The duo worked on Stetina’s range of motion, and Townsend knew his therapy would hurt.

“He’s one of the toughest people I knew to take that kind of pain,” Townsend said, describing the pain threshold as “off the charts.”

“I had to bend his knee in many directions,” Townsend said.

At the time, the physical therapist knew how difficult it was, especially with the build-up of scar tissue following the surgeries, but admits “it’s the fastest I’ve ever gotten anybody back” to competition.

“It was 100 percent mental will. He was able to get his mind somewhere else. In a lot of ways, that makes him a great cyclist. I feel like he can push his body further now,” Townsend said. “I’d definitely put my money on Peter.”

Stetina, who started his cycling career at age 15 and made the pro tour in 2010, will have a chance to prove himself again. When he takes on the Sierra Nevada Mountains this year, it will be like home to the cyclist who considers himself a “mountain goat” climber.

This will be his third Tour of California, the other two in 2010 and 2014. In Tahoe, he gets an altitude boost. He regularly takes his Trek bike out on interval training from the West Shore with climbs on Mount Rose, Black Canyon and Alpine Meadows and enjoys the diversity of the landscape and scenery.

Stetina grew up in the mountains of Colorado, so the terrain here reminds him of his roots. He bought a house in Tahoe City

specifically to train.

“Tahoe is my power place – to breathe that thin mountain air is my mojo,” the team Trek-Segafredo rider said.

Stetina is at a place of peace these days despite knowing he’s uncertain about how long his knee will last the grueling nature of bicycle racing. He guessed he probably has at least five years to go.

Then what?

“When I was in my dark days in recovery, I had to think about what’s next,” he said, admitting he’d like to own a restaurant.

“To me, the only thing more competitive than cycling is the food industry, so I’m not so easy on myself,” he joked.

The two industries coincide, and he lives in the right place for the next chapter.

The Wine Country is indeed a foodie’s paradise.

“Sometimes I ride more so I can throw down another sandwich,” he said.

These multi-day rides like Amgen require cyclists to eat the equivalent to a Thanksgiving meal – between 3,500 to 7,000 calories a day to keep up their strength and stamina.

Amgen riders covering 800 miles over eight days will need that fuel more than ever since history will be made in Tahoe for the 11th annual event. Not only are 10 UCI WorldTour teams competing – a record – but the Tahoe leg encapsulating the men’s finish features a peak elevation of 8,600 feet – another record.

Stetina hopes to use the springtime event to go into the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro this summer. He expects to

find out in late June. The South American course is particularly mountainous, making Stetina keenly interested.

In the meantime, Amgen represents one of the majors for those in the cycling world. The ride showcases California's diversity of terrain from the Central Valley to the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. It starts May 15, finishes Stage 5 at Heavenly's California Base Lodge on May 19 and ends as an event three days later.

The women's race starts at Heavenly, encircles Lake Tahoe and runs through the South Shore, featuring a climb at Emerald Bay. It ends in the same place nearly a few hours apart.

Last year, the women's race brought out cycling enthusiasts to the expo and along the route.

Having the men's and women's races in tandem ups the ante for enthusiasm.



Rigorous physical therapy allowed Peter Stetina to be cycling competitively again. Photo/Provided

Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority Executive Director Carol Chaplin, herself a cyclist, believes the men's finish this year will add to the attendance potential.

Moreover, being an Olympic year may also boost the energy level among wannabes and spectators.

It's been an interesting relationship between the Amgen tour and Lake Tahoe weather. A few years ago, the ride was canceled because of snow.

The harsh weather can put the riders at risk of hypothermia and makes braking a challenge – but that's "the call of the race director."

The value of having the Tour here is already evident in the buildup to the event.

"It's huge exposure for our destination. If something (like weather) happens, we got a lot out of it beforehand," Chaplin said.

True. And if the race goes on as planned, Chaplin's team is ready for it, having hosted it in prior years.

"If we learned anything, it's in the actual support of the tour in law enforcement, activities and permitting process," she said.

Now there's a database where the event crew knows whom to call for what.

"We're able to anticipate what needs to be done easier and faster," she said.

The smoother operations have lent themselves to having more time to review the checklists of things to do.

And if Mother Nature decides to be difficult, the late starts help "even if there's a squall" in the morning.

Tahoe residents and visitors are a gutsy lot. They stood out in harsh, cold night temperatures wrapped in blankets waiting for the Olympic torch to come down the street in January 2002.

A little threat of an on and off Tahoe winter won't deter their fun.

For those wanting to see 300 tuned, top athletes compete in this grand, international cycling event, there are ideal viewing spots.

From 10:50am to 2pm, one can witness the women's race at Al Tahoe Boulevard and Highway 50 and where the major thoroughfare meets Highway 89. Spooner Summit, Lake Parkway and at the intersection of Pioneer Trail and Ski Run Boulevard also round out the list.

Places to see the men race from 3:15 to 3:45pm are mainly in the Meyers area off Highway 89. The race continues down Pioneer Trail to the California Base Lodge.

Officials warn of parking impacts. Restrictions run along Pioneer Trail from Stateline to Black Bart, Tamarack, Blackwood, Spruce, Montreal and Chonokis avenues. Also, Glenwood Way along with Rocky Point, Keller and Saddle roads as well as Al Tahoe and Ski Run boulevards will be affected.

Pure Amgen followers may opt for a VIP experience that ranges from a behind-the-scenes tour to a special car ride with a Tour jersey. Go **online** for more details.