



THE AUSTRIAN PHYSIO

TO THE STARS

Klaus Isele

by: Jackie Hueftle

Though World Cup bouldering is growing exponentially in popularity with the yearly tour and the rise of superstar athletes like Anna Stöhr, Kilian Fischhuber, Dmitrii Sharafutdinov, Akiyo Noguchi, and Alex Puccio, the entourage you'd expect around a professional sports team - coaches, team managers, doctors and physical therapists - is present in bits and pieces, if at all.

Luckily the athlete support that is present at these events often reaches across country lines to help every athlete on

the tour and make sure the competition is really between who is climbing the best, not just who has the most support.

The Austrian Physio, Klaus Isele, is well known among the athletes as the man who fixes problems. For the past five years he has been traveling to competitions and lending his expertise to athletes in need. I'd seen him around—a young-looking guy with disheveled hair in an Austrian team shirt who showed up in Vail and in the foreground on the live feed at other events—but I'd never thought much about it until my good friend Joel Zerr, competing on the tour as the only American male in the first several comps of 2014, told me that Klaus was a physio who had fixed a nagging finger injury of his by: *"pulling on it really hard until it cracked"*.

Any climber who just read that probably cringed - I know I did when he told me - but it worked. **[IMPORTANT NOTE: We do NOT recommend trying this at home. Klaus has extensive experience**

with fingers and the proper way to yank them back into shape.] Months later, Joel says, the finger is still doing well: *"After he fixed it I could crimp without pain and don't get pain anymore during warm-ups. It's still tight sometimes but I think that's just scar tissue. Overall it feels great."*

Joel's injury was relatively minor compared to some Klaus has dealt with. Dutch competitor Jorg Verhoeven: *"When there's a really big problem, like somebody breaking something, he'll run over and see what he can do but he has to be cautious because there's a doctor at the venue as well who is supposed to be in charge. Sometimes the doctor is not there. Physios are most of the time the first to show up."*

For example, during a bouldering World Cup in Innsbruck in 2013, Sabine Bacher sustained a severe ankle break. Klaus gave immediate cooling and compression to prevent bleeding in the joint and allow the surgeon to operate on her within a few hours. If the bleeding had been bad the surgeon wouldn't have had good enough visibility to operate and would have had to wait to do the procedure.

Austrian Team Manager Heiko Wilhelm says that in addition to the physical treatment, Klaus gave Sabine important mental

support helped her through the initial stage of injury. The mental support is key, Heiko says, and a huge benefit Klaus provides by traveling with the team: *"If something serious happens there's always someone here the athletes trust in."*

Luckily for Sabine, her partner and World Cup competitor from the UK Stewart Watson is also a fantastic physio. After Klaus stabilized Sabine, Watson took great care of her through her travel, operation and recovery.

Klaus is quick to applaud Watson's abilities, and says he just saw Sabine at a regenerative training camp: *"Sabbi look stronger than ever and is still perfectly flexible in her foot joint after the re-op to take the screws out. Perfect work from my friend and colleague!"*

So what is Klaus' formal training? He is a Physiotherapist and Diplom Osteopath, or Doctor of Osteopathy. He is constantly in Vienna studying new methods and has taken courses in fascial osteopathy (a relatively new method) and cervical spine, among others. Klaus is a big believer on the hands-on method.

"There is a saying in my school about osteopaths," he remembers. "There are three finger osteopaths and ten finger osteopaths.

Only 2% of all D.O. in the States are ten finger osteopaths, and this is what I do—use my hands to fix things. The rest work like regular doctors, meaning they use only three fingers to apply injections.”

We asked him for some examples of common climber issues he can fix and how fast.

Klaus: “If I determine the athlete isn’t in any real danger I will do what I can before their next round or next competition so they can climb. About 80% of sprained ankles can be fixed well in one treatment - meaning they come in on crutches and walk out afterwards. In optimum cases tingling fingers can be cured in one treatment. Epicondylitis, aka elbow pain, can, depending on the case, usually be fixed in 1-2 treatments. Painful pulleys have a great chance of being helped in 1-3 treatments if the pulley has not broken. Doctors used to say it was a capsular problem always with fingers, and I’ve had that diagnosis and it is very frustrating because they just say rest, rest, rest. I think it can be better, and I’m studying so I can be more precise with the diagnosis and the treatment.”

Quick treatments sound like a climber’s dream come true, though as with everything there is a price.

Klaus: “In competition circumstances I have to react very quickly but make sure to treat safely. These fast treatments can be painful, but then the injury will heal much faster. I give patients their options, which are often less pain and slower healing, or more pain but a much faster fix. You have to know your patient and consider the worst case scenario before treatment, and the athlete has to be able to stand the pain. Then if they take care of the injury they can be pain free for a long time. In regular practice with more time it is easier to offer pain-free treatments.”

For athletes looking at a chance to continue competing, the pain is often worth it.

Verhoeven: “The most important part is when he helps with small emergencies. He has 5 minutes between boulder problems and he does what he can really quickly to help his climbers through the competition. Sometimes there’s nothing he can do, like if I have leg cramps it’s just because I drank too little water, and he can’t really make it go away.”

In a multi-round comp though, Verhoeven continues, the help of Klaus is invaluable: “Bouldering can be so destructive that you’re completely screwed up after a round, and if there’s a muscle that has been strained or something he can kinda fix it so you can climb the next day. Sometimes your body will just stop cooperating and he gets you back on track.”

I asked Jorg if there were any real “Wow!” moments he could remember.

Verhoeven: “It’s all the time like ‘Wow!’ because you’re in a nasty situation. Klaus’ main job is taking care of his athletes throughout the trip - before, during, and after their climbs. He massages them, and everybody has injuries and he treats them to prepare them for the competition and get them through their rounds.” Austrian champion Kilian Fischhuber says that everybody really does mean everybody: “When we see someone who’s injured, there are people who hesitate, and there’s Klaus. He doesn’t care

about fences and steps across borders. Sometimes we’ve told him to hold back and let other physios do their job. But behind all his acting there are good intentions. He’s grown fond of the competitors and so have we of him.”

Heiko adds that in his opinion Klaus’ presence makes the athletes more comfortable in general: “After each round of the comp athletes get a chance to relax when they get a massage or treatment by Klaus. Even when we are not competing, Klaus always has an open ear for all kinds of questions or physical complaints. He brings a lot of positive energy to the team, and it’s a better feeling for the athletes when they know there is a capable physio they can ask if they are having problems.”

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Klaus is quick to return the compliment: “I have learned so much from my good friend Heiko! When he is working there is no time out, no rest day, even during a long trip like three weeks in Asia. If there is no climbing happening he is all about what he can do for the good of the athletes. If I take my job 100% seriously, Heiko will double it to 200%! He also taught me the subtleties to human relationships and helped me learn to really understand people. He is definitely a big thinker.”



Photo: Heiko Wilhelm

Klaus once again lived up to his reputation at the 2013 Bouldering World Cup in Millau when Austrian Champion Anna Stöhr almost couldn’t start finals.

Klaus: “Anna performed well in the semifinals, but developed a pain that severely limited her walking. I found the problem zone was in her lower back. Knowing my athletes I knew she would not be one to treat with rough methods, and she was considering not starting in finals. This was a lot of pressure for me as Anna is the one for total World Cup victory! I treated her very gently and she was able to compete, and she won!”

Anna’s partner Fischhuber has had similar experiences, and says: “Thanks for the support Klaus, some medals of mine are yours as well.”

Two of the best bouldering competitors the world has ever seen and many others agree: a physio is extremely beneficial. Unfortunately, most teams don’t have one. The Austrians are clearly very lucky, both in having a physio at all and having that physio be Klaus. I asked Heiko how Klaus got started with the Austrian Climbing Team.

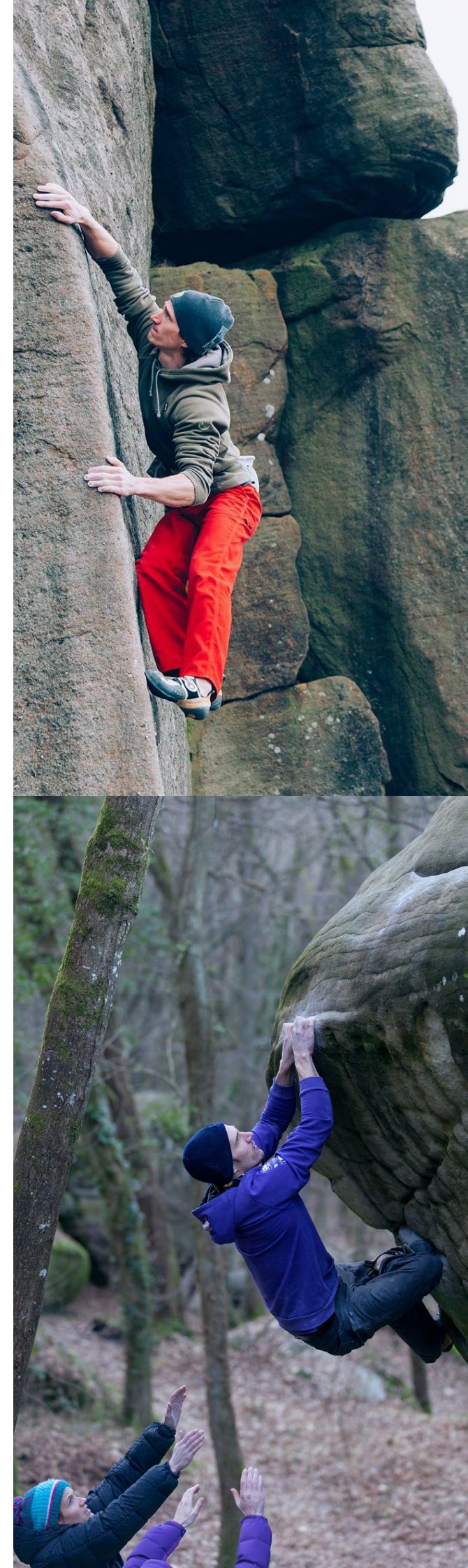
Heiko: “When we got the money to hire a physio I talked to some of the athletes. Many knew Klaus as a good friend and a good physio, so I asked him if he could imagine becoming the team physio. From the beginning he was highly euphoric, because Klaus isn’t just a physio, he is a passionate climber and a friend with whom you can have a lot of fun.”

Verhoeven, who often travels and climbs with his partner Katha Saurwein and the Austrian Climbing Team, expressed similar sentiments: “Klaus is someone who is incredibly psyched. If he didn’t do his job he could be out there amongst the rest of the completely psyched boulderers. You can get him motivated for anything. He is the one who is the most tired with jet lag, family, work, etc... and he’s the one who wants to do the most stuff. We may think we want to sit around the hotel room but he’s always wanting to do things - let’s go here, let’s go there. He’ll never be bored.”

Heiko continues: “The fresh fly-fisher daddy, passionate, smart multipitch climber, Klaus, is funny, helpful, unpunctual (but I changed him a bit), likes whiskey, and sometimes feels like a kid. We are all very happy having Klaus on our team!”

And what does Klaus say to all of this? He admits that he does like to fool around, but that when it comes to work he’s 100% serious, and he’s never been late to a treatment. I asked him for the best compliment he’s ever gotten.

Klaus: “The best compliment I ever got came from Alex Puccio. It was in Paris at the after party, and she said: ‘Klaus, you can kind of dance!’;-)”



Photos: Heiko Wilhelm