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This dude has one serious mission

By Anne Marie Anderson

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It is puking outside and Chris Klug is grabbing his single plank as he heads out to charge it on the freshies.

Lost?

Don't let the slacker vocabulary fool you. Klug, 29, spouts Gen-X mottos like "think fast thoughts" but this U.S. champion snowboarder is a viable medal contender in the parallel giant slalom Thursday and Friday and one very serious dude.

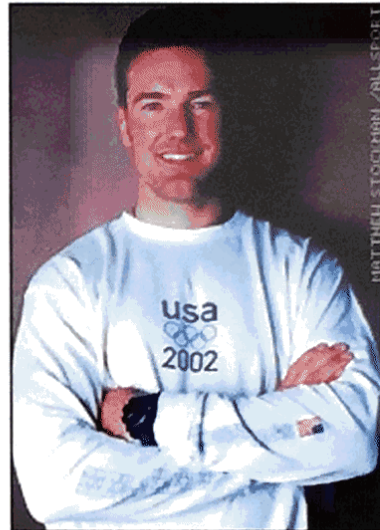
He took his first run on skis at age 2, fell in love with boarding at 11 and, upon his high school graduation, turned down a college football scholarship to join the international snowboarding tour. In 1998, Klug finished a disappointing sixth place in his first Olympics, but it is the tale behind the gnarly scar on his abdomen that he says keeps life in perspective.

It was the "what me worry?" attitude of the snowboard/skateboard set that allowed Klug to ignore a doctor's 1993 diagnosis of primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC), a rare liver disease, discovered during a routine physical. PSC, the cause of which is unknown, creates scarring of the bile ducts inside and outside the liver eventually damaging the organ to the point where a transplant is necessary.

"When they first told me," he says, "I thought 'yeah right buddy, I feel like a million bucks. I'm out kicking butt on the World Cup circuit and loving life. I don't think you've got the right guy here.'"

But when the test results were confirmed the then 21-year-old was put on the waiting list for a new liver. Yet except for occasional flu-like symptoms, Klug remained largely asymptomatic for six years.

On Nov. 1, 1999, the happy-go-lucky Aspen Cowboy (as his friends call him) was fanny-slapped into reality. Klug was driving along a mountain road on his way to a training camp in Utah when he heard that Chicago Bears running back great Walter Payton died of PSC while waiting for a transplant.



After Walter Payton died of the same disease, Chris Klug says, "I went 'wow' Hercules just went down. What does that mean for me?"

"I went 'wow' Hercules just went down. What does that mean for me?" he recalls. "I pulled the car off the road and started crying. I was really scared for the first time."

In April of 2000 as he was in Los Angeles preparing for his annual spring surfing vacation in Maui, Klug felt a stabbing pain in his side. He canceled the trip and headed back to Colorado where doctors discovered his bile ducts had shut down. Klug was upgraded to urgent status on the waiting list, given a pager to wear and told to stay close to home.

The next three agonizing months were filled with doubt. Klug's family tried to keep the admittedly high-maintenance patient occupied but as 30 days of waiting became 60 and then 90, hopes began to wane. He knew the odds were stacked against him. Sixteen people die every day on the waiting list.

"There would be times that he would be convinced that this was never going to happen," his father, Warren Klug, remembers, "that things were never going to work out and he'd be lucky to be alive at Christmastime."

The faith-filled family also was painfully aware that in order to receive the liver he desperately needed, another family would suffer a terrible tragedy.

"That is a hard prayer," recalls Chris' mother, Kathy, with tears in her eyes, "I remember praying 'God you know what Christopher needs and we are ready ... just let some Mom or Dad say 'yes.' "

When Kathy Klug heard on the radio July 26 that a 13-year-old boy was on life support in Denver she caught her breath. The boy, who had suffered a gunshot wound to the head, was pronounced brain dead the following day. On July 27, the distraught parents said "yes" to the ultimate question.

Despite Klug's rapidly deteriorating condition -- he had lost 28 pounds since May -- he continued to work out as he waited for a donor. He was lifting weights when he received the call that a liver had become available. Weak and jaundiced, he flew to Denver immediately for surgery. He had known for three months that he would be lucky if this day arrived but when the moment came the cocky bravado of youth escaped him. As he was being wheeled in to the operating room on July 28, he grabbed his mother's hand and asked, "Am I ready for this?"

Kathy Klug said the only thing a mother can. "Your whole life has gotten you ready for this. Dream your dream. You'll wake up."

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— Kathy Klug, about waiting for a liver to save her son's life

Six hours later he did. Klug woke with 35 staples in his stomach and a certainty about life he says he had been lacking in prior months, "I just knew things were going to work out." Four days later he was out of the hospital and began a recovery that was by all accounts remarkable. Within a week he was able to ride a stationary bike and lift light weights. In less than two months, Klug was back on his snowboard and by November he was once again riding the rails on the World Cup circuit.

As his life was returning to normal, Klug felt silently nagged by some unfinished business in Denver. Although organ donations are anonymous, the recipients are encouraged to write to the donor family. The usually personable Klug had spent months searching for the right words.

"It is a hard thing to do to write someone a letter for saving your life and sharing the gift of life with you," he says. Finally in January 2001, six months after anonymous parents said "yes", Klug put pen to paper and poured out in simple prose how perfect his life had become.

"I'm in Europe doing my favorite thing in the world, snowboarding," he wrote, "and I thank you every day for your gift of life. You have given me a second chance to pursue my dreams."

Finally he was ready to move on. The next day, Klug won his first post-operative World Cup race in Kronplatz, Italy. Since then, the Aspen Cowboy has been charging it hard on the circuit and promoting donor awareness. His Olympic event falls on National Donor Awareness Day, but he only needs to touch his stomach to remember the gift strangers gave him. Klug sports an enormous scar across his midsection, which he has been known to pass off as a shark attack to the curious beachgoer. It's a constant reminder of perspective.

"I feel sometimes like 'hey if I can beat liver disease and I can cheat death then I can certainly beat this guy next to me on the race course.' "

Especially if he thinks fast thoughts.

Anne Marie Anderson is a producer for ESPN.