Christian Walgram: fit for the job

First place winner in this year's Sports singles category, Christian Walgram, tells CPN Web Editor Deniz Dirim about the day he photographed Czech Ondrej Bank losing control during the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships.

Q: HOW DID YOU BEGIN IN SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY?

CW: I started photography as a small child of ten or 11 years, it was the time of analogue photography. It started as a hobby for me. After I graduated high school, I went to the Austrian army, stayed there for five years, but I still had photography as my biggest hobby and after these five years I decided to do something different. I heard GEPA pictures was searching for editors at the picture desk and I said 'OK, sports and photography, that's the combination I need'. And so I started at the picture desk at GEPA but after one and a half years editing great sports pictures, I was sure it was not the right place for me. I was sure I had to go outside to the venues to cover sports events. And after winning the World Press Photo award, I think it was not the worst idea!

Q: HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU HEARD YOU HAD WON A WORLD PRESS PHOTO AWARD?

CW: I was in France at the time; I was covering the Alpine Ski races in Chamonix. I was on the race course for the training session for the downhill races and one of my colleagues called me and told me that I won the prize because I didn't get the email because I was offline on the mountain. I couldn't believe it. And I asked him "Are you kidding?" And he told me, "No, you won the Sports category for World Press Photo." I was more than happy and really proud and satisfied.

Q: CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE DAY YOU SHOT THIS PICTURE?

CW: The day started early in the morning, as every day does in Alpine skiing. I talked to my colleagues – three guys were with me at the World Championships – and I said today the weather is beautiful, I'm going to the last jump because that's one of the greatest jumps in this course. I skied down the race course and it was not easy to get there because it was really icy. When I was at the spot and saw the start time – I think it was 10:30am or 11am – I saw that the light was great, with a little bit of backlight... it was really beautiful there! And then Ondrej Bank came and I was prefocusing a bit as I expected him to be close to the gate. But when he arrived to the bump I saw something was wrong with him. Just before the bump he was flying through the air, the snow was spreading, he lost his ski and at that moment I was sure that I had a really, really great picture.

Q: WHAT KIND OF PREPARATION GOES INTO COVERING THIS SPORT?

CW: The assignment was to cover the race and the spot in the race course I had to decide myself. We knew the course from the training sessions before. So I already knew good spots to shoot. And I decided because of the weather conditions and the light to go to that last jump. I prepared just as I do every day: in the morning I pack my gear, have a good breakfast and go up the hill. When I'm at the spot: I put up my gear, take some test photos and shoot the forerunners. Every race has three to six forerunners; I always shoot them to try something to different, to find the right angle. And then the race starts.

Q: WHAT GEAR DO YOU USE?

CW: We have to carry a lot gear with us. My backpack weighs about 20-22 kilos. I always carry two bodies with me and a long lens. You also need crampons and stuff like that. That's a lot. On that day I had two EOS-1D X bodies, the EF800mm f/5.6L IS USM, EF70-200mm, and I had the EF16-35mm with me too. Plus extenders, something to drink, rain covers and a monopod.

Biography: Christian Walgram

Christian Walgram was born in 1981. He was raised in Schoeder (near Murau - Upper Styria, Austria) where he attended the elementary school. After attending the secondary modern school in St. Peter am Kammersberg for 4 years Christian went to the BORG Murau where he graduated in 2000. After graduation he joined the Austrian Military Service for 5 years. Christian left the army and joined the team of the Austrian sports picture agency GEPA pictures in 2006.

Having worked at the picture desk for almost 3 years Christian decided on turning his passion into his career and changed sides - he began working as a staff-photographer for GEPA pictures in 2008 and has done so ever since. Since that time he covered lots of major sports events like Olympic Games, World Championships, Formula 1, Ski World Cup, Champions League and much more.

Christian is married, father of two girls and lives in Eggersdorf near Graz, Austria.