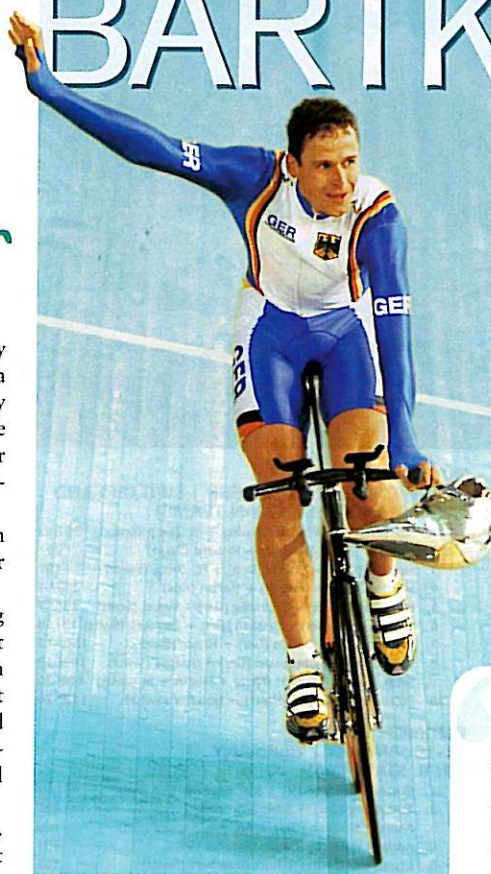


ROBERT BARTKO

Pursuing a Road Career

words: **Kathie Stove**



AT THE TOP OF HIS TRADE | Robert Bartko's pursuing record is pure class: two senior world championships, two Olympic gold medals... The Olympic record in the Individual (4:18.976 - achieved in qualifying) and the magic sub-four minute world record as part of the German team's incredible 3:59.781! Bartko's strength will be a valuable asset to the Telekom train (below) throughout the 2001 season.

(PHOTOS: Sport - The Library)

I am aware that I am starting an apprenticeship in a new profession. I want to learn [road racing] and hopefully take my chances later.

It's a good idea to start a new career in the land where you've only known success. But when Robert Bartko returned to Australia after becoming the most successful German athlete at the Sydney Olympics he hadn't counted on the intense heat of an Adelaide January. Robert left a freezing Berlin to compete in the Tour Down Under, and although he found the going tough, he appreciated that it was just the same for everyone in the race.

"Even the Australians say it's too hot," Robert said. "When it's so hot it doesn't matter if you've been living here for long or not: 40 degrees is 40 degrees."

At age 24 Robert had reached the pinnacle of his track cycling career by taking gold medals in the individual and team pursuits at the Sydney Games. He was part of the history-making team which cracked the magical four-minute barrier. And it wasn't his first success in Australia. He was also a member of the German squad which won the team pursuit gold at the junior world championships in Perth in 1993. (Australia's Brad McGee, who finished third to Bartko in Sydney, claimed the individual title in Perth.)

This year he's signed to race with the Deutsche Telekom team. The move to the road had been coming for some time. Robert considered road racing after competing unsuccessfully in the Atlanta Olympics. He opted to continue on the track because "it's not so easy to change over to the road if you don't have a name".

Four years later with two world championships and two Olympic gold medals Robert has more than "a name"! And one of his rewards was a two-year term riding alongside the Sydney road race gold medallist, Jan Ullrich.

When the offer came from Telekom Robert took it fast. It was an opportunity for him to fulfill his dreams - and with one of the world's top teams. That the team is German is a bonus. It allows him to stay with his local SC Berlin club, and long-time coach Uwe Freese, and help young riders there aim for a pro career.

Freese is one of the mentors who marked Robert's formative years. Another had been Detlef Hirsch, the coach at the Berlin Child & Youth Sport School. It was Hirsch who helped a 13-year-old Robert make the difficult transition from home in Potsdam to boarding school in Berlin in pursuit of a cycling career. But it was a shaky start. When he was nine Robert raced a school "mountain time trial" in Potsdam. "I remember it quite clearly. It seemed to me that I had climbed an enormous mountain and I was so out of breath when I arrived at the top."

A year ago Robert drove past the place and was astonished. "I can assure you it is no mountain. Today I would not even have to change gears to ride over it."

He now wants to be a mentor for young people. "I do what I can to support the young people in my club. I think we have a big problem in Germany with the xenophobia and right-wing extremism. I give my time for the next generation in the hope that they will occupy themselves with something other than violence."

Robert recently put these words into action. When he was named Berlin Sportsman of the Year for 2000, he presented five bicycles and spare parts to his club.

After school Robert joined the army as a way of continuing

cycling. The German Armed Forces provide amateur athletes with an opportunity to pursue their discipline as sports soldiers.

"I had a uniform and a rank. I was a normal soldier. My duty though was not to shoot or lie in the dirt but to ride my bike."

Now Robert has left the bonds of amateur life and in his first few months at Team Telekom he has been impressed with the level of planning and organisation, and pleasantly surprised at the good atmosphere and degree of camaraderie. He had ridden with some Telekom riders before but did not know many of them.

"We fit together well," he said about his new team-mates. "There have been one or two occasions where there were clashes as in any marriage. I think I've had a good start to the season."

The pursuit is a solitary race. One rider - or team of four - on each side of the track, racing the clock and only meeting if one catches the other. Robert knows that the world record team performance is worth a lot but... "the individual medal is a more beautiful medal for me because it was my own performance".

There is little isolation in a road racing environment and individuality now has to give way to the team. "Even as a track rider I had done some road racing but I am aware that I am starting an apprenticeship in a new profession. I want to learn and hopefully take my chances later."

His strength should be in time trials. At 186cm and 79kg, he says he is "too tall and too heavy to be a mountain rider". Like most road cyclists he would like to ride in the Tour de France "but we are a very strong team with a lot of good riders".

The word from the team is that Robert might find a place in the Tour de France once he gets used to the "rough professional atmosphere" during shorter races. And Robert's hard team work during the Tour Down Under showed that he is acclimatising fast. The team manager was impressed with his race instincts as well as his power and genuine speed - even in the heat.

