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"Ferdie National": a Swiss legend

He is considered the greatest Swiss sportsman of all time. His ascent from poverty and his success as a racing cyclist made "Ferdie National" a sporting hero. A lovely book containing text and wonderful pictures documents the career of now 87-year-old Ferdie Kübler, and thus a piece of contemporary Swiss history. By Rolf Ribl

I was still a boy when I plucked up all my courage and wrote to the bicycle manufacturer Tebag asking for Ferdie Kübler's autograph. Shortly thereafter, I received in the post a picture of the "Eagle of Adliswil" at full speed, elegantly and personally signed "F. Kübler". I couldn't have been happier, and still possess the photo today.

Without a doubt, the cyclist with the distinctive nose is the most famous Swiss sportsman of the 20th Century – if not all time. When Swiss radio ran a competition to find the favourite sportsman of the century, Kübler finished far ahead of skier Bernhard Russi, Kübler's arch-rival Hugo Koblet and racing driver Clay Regazzoni. In the late Forties and early Fifties, Kübler won nearly all the major cycling races and tours.

But what lies behind the "Kübler phenomenon"? What drove the man who is still asked for his autograph to this day? The first aspect is the young man's rise from an impoverished and miserable childhood to become a celebrated sportsman and later a successful businessman. "We were five children and poor as church mice," he says about his early childhood. "I wanted to escape that poverty as quickly as possible." As a delivery boy for a bakery in Männedorf, he cycled up the Pfannenstil like a madman every day with 30 kilograms of bread on his back. As a delivery boy for the Barth jewelry shop in Zurich, he rode 42 kilometres to and from his home in Marthalen every evening and every morning on a ladies' bi-

cycle. His iron will, his pain-tolerance levels and complete obsession with cycle racing were part of his character. The French later dubbed him "le fou pédalant".

His impressive victories over the "greats" of the time – famous names like Coppi, Bartali, Koblet and Bobet – were the second as-



Ferdie Kübler was a great fighter with an iron will

pect of the Kübler phenomenon. Kübler won the Tour de Suisse no fewer than three times: in 1942, 1948 and 1951. In 1947, his 213-kilometre solo from Bellinzona to Sion in Valais, constantly pursued by Italian crack riders Bartali and Coppi, went down in the annals of the Tour's history, and it was this win that turned Kübler into a world-class athlete.

Things didn't go quite so smoothly on the Cols du Vars during the 1949 Tour de France. At the top of the mountain pass, Kübler was

3 minutes 50 ahead and therefore theoretically the leader, but he suffered tyre damage several times on the gravel road coming down. Having repaired his tyre the first time himself, he was convinced that his pump wasn't working properly. The image of a totally frustrated Kübler made all the papers. Although he was never really able to shake off the disappointment at losing that Tour de France, he was to achieve his greatest success in the very same competition a year later. "Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people wanted to see this Kübler make his way through Paris to the Parc des Princes," a Swiss journalist wrote.

In 1951 (Sepp Renggli's radio broadcast is still etched in my brain), Ferdie Kübler became the world champion. And yet he could

have picked up the title two years earlier, when he joined forces with Van Steenbergen and let the Belgian win simply to prevent Coppi from winning. Kübler finished third the following year, before triumphing in Varese in 1951: After eight-and-a-half gruelling hours in stifling temperatures, Kübler found himself up against three Italians at the finish. Fortunately, the Swiss cyclist was a strong sprinter, and was able to secure himself the rainbow jersey, to the delight of all his countrymen.

For almost two decades, "Ferdie National" earned his money as one of the world's best racing cyclists. Yet the transition into normal working life proved remarkably easy for the popular sportsman. The National insurance company used his portrait and distinctive nose on its posters for eight years, and he became a popular figurehead for the Kreditanstalt bank, which would later sponsor the Tour de Suisse for many years.

Martin Born, Hanspeter Born, Sepp Renggli:
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