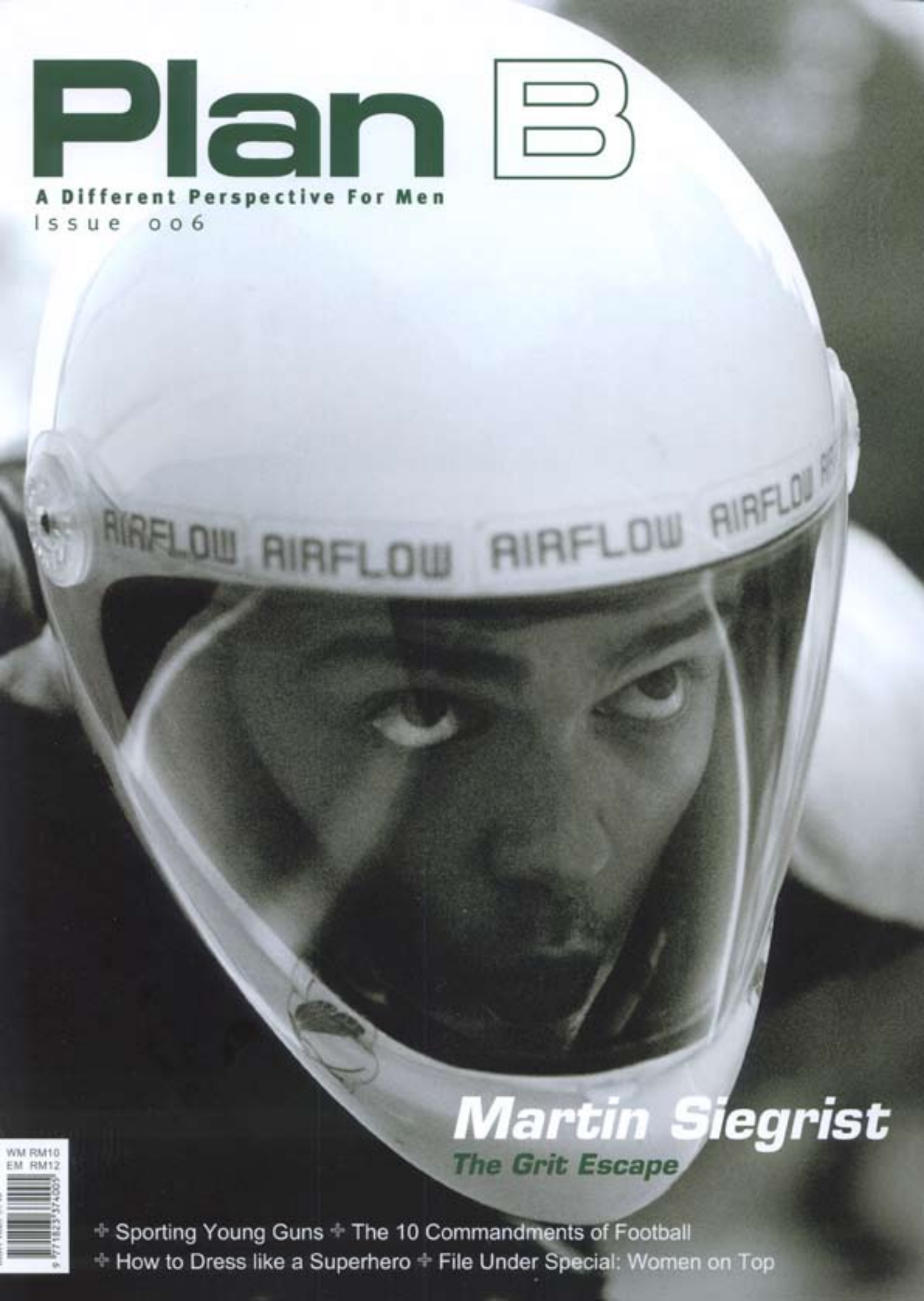


# Plan

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A Different Perspective For Men  
Issue 006



**Martin Siegrist**  
*The Grit Escape*

WM RM10  
EM RM12



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speed demon



# Downhill Daredevil

With plenty of speed and a touch of illegality, we go underground on a sharp descent with Martin Siegrist

WE SEEM TO HAVE SOMETHING OF A HARD-ON FOR all things that could cause us harm. It's not enough that we risk death every time we step off a curb out onto the road or stand under the jets of an electric shower; we also invent innumerable new ways to harm ourselves.

In the past, this bent leant towards machines – rocket cars, jet packs, drag racing – in which we would strap ourselves into these metal contraptions and hurl ourselves into gravity's swiftly crushing path. But today, decades on from the daredevil heights of Evel Knievel, technology has smoothed away the danger, introduced crumple zones, survival shells and re-inflating tyres. Even F1, that perennial muscle for self-abuse, bears little more risk than Sunday's trip to the supermarket.

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But some Luddite core within us leads to reject progress and throw out that shelter and security to go at it alone and exposed: base jumping, free-climbing, and kite surfing pit man and most notably, his flesh, against Nature's cruel legions. We revel in launching ourselves into the path of danger, the self-obsessed generation's personal Homeric Odyssey, while an audience watches with a revolutionary bloodlust.

Yet it fascinates. To the point where there are magazines, TV shows and a whole sponsorship industry built around this sub-culture. Malaysia is no exception. The Asian X Games (courtesy of ESPN) has shown what support there is for the sports locally, attracting audiences of 10,000 to watch a mixture of imported and local in-line skaters, skateboarders and BMXers fling themselves around an amphitheatre in the name of entertainment.

And while you wonder at the point of it all, as a spectator sport, it certainly beats 90 minutes of soccer boredom, watching as 22 sweating Neanderthals argue over the one ball.

Then, just as we get to grips with one rendition shredding genre, a new sub-species is thrown up, pushing limits even further, clawing its way back from the mainstream. And for a while, all will be good. Practitioners will feel exclusive, their sport regarded as renegade or terrorist, viewed with disbelief by the armchair hugging masses. But eventually there will be a civil war conditions between those who want the sport to remain underground and those who want to exploit its commercial potential. It's just the way of things.

And one of the sports at the cusp of this battle is Downhill Skateboarding, the art of flinging yourself down a precipitous mountain trail. And in its hot seat: 2004 Downhill Skateboarding World Champion, Martin Siegrist.

### Gravity grail

For the consummate purveyor of this sport, the essence of Downhill Skateboarding is summed up in the near mythic quest for the perfect road; the elusive mixture of slopes, turns and drops that Martin describes as "a virus", adding, "I'm totally addicted." And this 'disease' got the better of him when he saw the incredible peaks and troughs of the Bukit Tinggi trail right here in Pahang, Malaysia.

"It's not the fastest road but it's one of the best. The first turn is hard and then some smooth turns where you need to take your speed with you for the next flat section, and then you drop down steep and then it comes over a hill to the next turn. This road is like a roller-coaster." In other words: it's a white knuckle ride.

For those of you who are not so hip as to already know its intricacies, downhill skateboarding is the flip side of freestyle skateboarding. The boards are long – up to a metre in length – and designed for speed rather than tricks. Combinations of wheels and 'trucks' (the axles)

give the board its speed, stability and its slide (ability to corner). As its name suggests, races take place on tarred roads with especially steep slopes and corners with race lengths varying from one to three kilometres.

Racers usually compete in groups of four, making it a tactical sport like F1 where racers must know the course as well as their competitors in order to win. But like most underground sports, the biggest part of the action takes place away from the organised competitions: in fact, it could be taking place on a road near you.

It was actually Martin's love of bouldering and free climbing (he's also an accomplished free mountain biker) that brought him to Malaysia. A Swiss acquaintance enlisted his help to build a state-of-the-art climbing wall here, in the process giving him 'access' to our roads.

We would pay good RINGGIT to see the expressions on the faces of Bukit Tinggi motorists if they had caught sight of a leather-clad Mad Max-clone wearing a futuristic pseudo-Darth Vader mask overtake them on a piece of wheeled wood navigating hairpin bends while hurtling downhill at breakneck speeds of up to 80km/h. Good, good money.

### Race against the machine

Martin's current other favourite road is at Mt. Ventoux, famed for its role in the annual Tour de France competition. For downhill skaters, he claims it is paradise. "The north side is about 20 km of black tar and very, very fast," he drools.

It's also a haven for police cars, which, when considering the illegality of most of Martin's 'training' locations, is something of an occupational hazard. He has a few tales of his encounters with cops but one of his favourite is this:

"Once while I was driving up this road (in Mt. Ventoux), I had my leather suit in the front of the car and I was changing my board wheels at the back. We passed a police car along the way so I waited an hour until I thought the coast was clear. So I started going down on my board, passed a bus, caravan, motorcycle and a few cars when suddenly I noticed a car passing me. Then I saw blue lights on top of this car and I thought, 'Oh shit.'"

Despite Martin's protestations that what he was doing was a recognised sport and his claims of being "a world champion" at it, the three policemen impounded his beloved 'vehicle'. He did however get it back after a visit to the local station and a lecture on road safety by the police chief. But not before he autographed photos they found of him on the Net competing in Paris and threatened to destroy his board if they ever found him 'practising' in the area again.

Not all these escapades end on such a genial note though. In Stuttgart, Martin and a friend were nearly shot at while trying to escape from police they believe were chasing a rogue BMX rider. They had been skating down a four-lane highway: "We tried to run away by jumping through some bushes, up a cycle lane and up a hill and then





“Once in Stuttgart, my friend and I were skating down a four-lane highway and we were almost shot at while trying to escape from the police who (we think) were chasing a rogue BMX rider.”

suddenly we hear “Stop or I’m shooting!” They had to order a special car to take us to the station because they were too lazy to tidy up the backseat of their Mercedes,” he says with a laugh.

It is clear he doesn’t take these brushes with the law too seriously, seeing them as a trade-off between his hijacking of the roads and the authorities’ need to police him and others like him. What can they do after all?

### Risky business

If this sounds like Martin has a death wish, don’t be fooled. Martin is remarkably risk averse. “For me it’s about knowing what I can do: I push my limits hard,” he professes. “Sometimes it’s too hard and I crash and have the feeling that maybe next time I should do it a bit slower.”

And it’s not just the courses that are dangerous; riders can get really physical too.

“I’m one of the more careful riders. In South Africa (at the Downhill Gravity Challenge, Dec 2004) I competed in three races and I ended up in 4th place because I was not aggressive enough. In the last race, the guys in front were wobbling down the road. I was afraid of pushing too hard, I may lose, but I’m healthy and have no broken bones.”

It’s a practical approach to a sport that is potentially fatal although Martin does rationalise away the danger as most extreme sportsman are wont to do. “Dangerous is when your level of skill does not match the road that you want to skate. So maybe the road is too steep and you build up speed too quickly to take the turn. For me the most dangerous things are cars and motorbikes going uphill as I go down.”

The key factor here is braking. While cars and even cycles have pneumatic devices that slow them down, downhill skaters have only one option: using their feet. That’s Plan A. And Plan B – the only other way – is to bail out and trust that the tarmac won’t shatter too many of your bones. “Basically,” he says, “If you are worried about getting to the bottom then there’s something wrong.”

It’s a philosophy that’s kept him largely free of injury. “It’s funny,” he jokes, “I’ve crashed and hit the back of my head a few times on the same corner on my favourite hill in Basel (Switzerland). If you fall forwards you can somehow try to save yourself. The worse that has ever happened to me is whiplash.”

The best, however, in terms of what speeds he has reached is, he claims, 100 km/h, although this was measured using a car. The fastest officially-timed speed (at the World Championship) is around 91 km/h. “It’s (the car) not very accurate but now I have a GPS for measuring my speed. I can measure the distance, time, everything.”

### Fast forward

With speeds like that it’s no wonder that downhill boarders need such hi-tech kit. While boarders not so obsessed with speed may opt for just pads and a helmet, Martin belongs to the group that wears leather suits, specially-made aerodynamic helmets, and now, transmitters with GPS to measure speed.

And his boards are custom made, self-designed and produced by his main sponsor, Airflow Boards. “There’s much more technology in downhill skateboards. It’s like a Fiat Uno compared to a Ferrari. My board is a bit more than a metre long. The trucks are wider, the wheels are bigger and the bearings are faster.”

There is so much involved in making them that Martin doesn’t think there are any commercial applications for his boards. “It uses high-density foam for the core, arvon for making it lift, glass fibre with aluminium powder to make it nice and shiny. The shape is designed on CAD (software) and then machined. (It has to be)

extremely precise. One board takes around one or two days."

Few other riders are as involved in the production process as Martin, preferring to buy boards off the rack from companies (like Airflow) or Lash Longboards. But with customised technology aimed at slicing off nano-seconds to give you an edge over your rivals, comes extra costs, especially as the media has been slow to pick up on the sport, something that sponsorship depends on.

"Most people don't even know that there are races. TV and media coverage is very low. You even have to pay to have something on TV." So, money is a constant issue. And race organisers are hardly rich themselves. "In the World Championships I won 500 Euros but that's not even enough money to pay for a helmet or a leather suit or even for the air ticket. But I'm not into the sport for money."

Sponsors like Airflow and Globe Shoes keep Martin afloat but it's a tough life of small government handouts, sleeping rough during competitions and worrying about where the next rent will come from. "I can't do have a job where I work on Saturdays when I have races on the weekend. That's no solution."

So competitors learn to hustle. "At first, the money doesn't come so you always have to organise everything and that takes a lot of time. You have to find sponsors that are willing to pay you something and most of the time it's only a few hundred Swiss Francs (SF). I was very lucky; the government of my Canton paid me SF1000 to race in South Africa. With that and some other money from sponsors I was able to pay maybe three-quarters of all the expenses."

And they learn to live by the seat of their pants. "In downhill skateboarding no one gets to stay in hotels. You either sleep in a car or a tent or with friends. When I was in South Africa, I was very lucky; I had friends who had a room for me for three weeks."



“I'm always looking for that perfect road, one steep enough yet comfortable enough for me to hit 120km/h. Maybe the Karak Highway?”

### Downhill Skateboarding (or 'Luge') Speak

So you can talk the talk...

**Bacon** Very rough, hazardous road surface conditions.

**Banana** A luge rider who wipes out often.

**Chucking bale** Hitting the hay bales (used on tracks as barriers) hard enough to move them.

**Draft** Using the pocket of air behind pilots as a high-speed racing strategy.

**Drop a hill** Ride a luge course.

**Flame** Urethane luge wheels actually catching fire as a result of high speed.

**Flesh wing** Extending an arm during a run for balance.

**Pilot** Luge rider.

**Puke a wheel** To blow up or 'melt' a wheel. See "Flame".

**Push-off apron** Area between the starting line and the beginning of the road course where pilots use their hands to develop downhill momentum.

**Rafting** Recovery after an unplanned stop requiring frantic pushing with the hands.

**Seat pan or belly pan** Part of luge that holds body of pilot, usually includes any handholds.

**Scrambled eggs** Bad road surface. Not as bad as "Bacon".

**Screaming mimis** Unhealthy sounds from a luge during a run.

**Spew** A blown wheel (See "Puke a wheel").

**Wad** To crash in a large group.

**Wobbs** The luge shudders and wobbles at higher speeds.

### At the top of downhill

At 25, perhaps Martin still has the luxury of relative youth to keep his adrenalin pumping at the expense of other things, but currently, only about 300-400 other guys share the same philosophy. And the racing calendar is concentrated during the summer months. "If you only race downhill, there are only about five races a year," says Martin. Nobody said this was a glamorous sport.

But it is one that drives a self-proclaimed "serious racer" like Martin to wake up at 5am to 'ride' empty roads. "I'm always looking for that perfect road," he repeats. "I would like to find a road steep yet comfortable enough for me to hit 120km/h. Maybe the Karak Highway?" he laughs.

Martin may have entered the world of downhill racing because he wanted to emulate skaters he watched on TV during an X-Games event in 1996, but right now, he is at the pinnacle (besides his world title, he is also ranked #3 by the sports governing body, International Gravity Sports Association) and looking to blaze new trails.

EXTREME SPORTS TRULY SEEMS TO AWAKE SOME primeval urge in us; one that forces us out of the caves and induces us into warfare and conflict. We feel compelled to extend ourselves ever further, to try everything there is to try, to put it all to the test; to make sure that nothing, even physics, can threaten our position at the top of the food chain.

So, who are we to stop other hairless apes donning rubberised suits and pieces of fibre board as they throw themselves at things, off things and down things? Let them explore these throwback chromosomes; the rest of us can quietly get on with developing the gene pool while we keep watching covetously. ■