



Gerolsteiner's mechanics look on as the squad's gear is snapped up by enthusiastic punters

GOING, GOING, GONE...

It was to be a closing-down sale with a difference. Flagellated by doping scandals, shunned by sponsors, the Gerolsteiner team was going out of business, and manager Hans-Michael Holczer cut his losses by selling off the squad's possessions. **Patrick Müller** reports

Photography by **Patrick Müller** unless stated

This isn't the first time that Hans-Michael Holczer's had his photo taken here, in this grey, sterile stockroom, where bikes hang from the ceiling like pigs in a slaughterhouse. Once, he would smile into the lens and laugh that big booming laugh, because the future lay before him, and the future looked good both for Holczer and his Gerolsteiner team. That was then. Everything has changed. Now it's all for sale. Everything must go. Over. Finito.

Thick cloud cloaks the tiny village of Gùltstein. Home to 3,400 people, it lies in the heart of the south-west corner of Germany known here as Schwabenland, or Swabia in English. It's just gone nine in the morning and there's a chill in the air. The Cranach Straße is an unremarkable residential street which for one day only has morphed into a fairground-cum-flea-market-cum-bike fair. Cars from all over Germany line the kerbs, but they've also come from

Holland, Switzerland... The only thing you can usually buy in this neighbourhood is potatoes. Today, though, as we've said, everything's changed. There are racing socks for four euros and used carbon time trial bikes for €3,800. A professional cycling team is being stripped bare and its spare parts put up for sale. And so is one man's dream.

"I'm just about OK," says Holczer. "I'll live."

Then he poses for photos, stony-faced, raising a carbon Specialized bike high above his strapping shoulders. He doesn't exactly look sad, but he's not happy either. He'll tell us later that, watching it all, he felt no emotion. The cameras click and flashbulbs momentarily light the sky like an electric storm. After 30 seconds, Holczer puts the bike down and asks the photographers – or is he telling them? – "That's enough, OK?"

Yeah, that's enough. Holczer disappears into the workshop, then finds himself pinned against a radiator, answering the



Long before the sale started at 9am, a queue of prospective buyers snaked down the street

Klaas-Jan van der Weij/Sportstichting



Gerolsteiner's garage sale gave fans the chance to own the very time trial bikes used by the team's heroes – and villains



A fan clutches a little piece of German cycling history – one of the Gerolsteiner team's Specialized road bike frames

Same old questions. Yes, he says, he knew this event would create plenty of interest. “No,” he replies when someone fancifully enquires whether this is like watching the last 10 years flash before his eyes. And no, he doesn't see why he shouldn't be here. It's his business, they're his assets, and he organised this sale.

This has been coming. For months, Holczer has been knocking on the doors of potential sponsors, peddling his wares. In vain. Times weren't and aren't good for cycling, yet the 54-year-old former maths teacher seemed to have an advantage over others in the same predicament: credibility. Gerolsteiner and doping – “black” and “white” seemed to have more in common. For years, those friendly little chaps with the mineral water

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company for sponsors were the poor, heroic counterpoint to T-Mobile and their multi-million dollar paymasters. If T-Mobile was star academy, Gerolsteiner was charm school.

With one or two exceptions, they'd never ridden well in the Tour de France. Until this year. The fastest hotel room in the Tour belonged to Bernhard Kohl and Stefan Schumacher – the chimney sweep-turned-King of the Mountains, and the follicly-challenged, yellow jersey-wearing, double stage-winning Mekon lookalike with a penchant for big nights out. Success came on them like a curse. And then, a couple of months later, came the results of their dope tests.

“Anyone who's been around this business and kept their eyes open can't really be surprised,” says Jörg Boos. The 56-year-old bike nut was one of around 60 punters who were waiting in the Cranach Straße half an

hour before the tills opened. He hasn't bought anything. “Just looking,” he says. “I just want to know what goes into a pro bike team...”

A lot of stuff, is the answer. Massage tables for 80 euros, racing mitts for 10 euros, skinsuits for 80 to 100 euros. It could be any old warehouse sale. Sort of. Lightweight race bikes dangle from the walls. There are boxes everywhere. Brake pads, pedals and handlebars are strewn across a giant table. A cycling fan's nirvana. Debit cards are accepted, but not credit cards. There are no guarantees nor warranties – not for products which got here via some of the continent's most demanding races. Fingers are pressed into the walls of carbon frames, checking for flex, then passed longingly over the black and blue paintwork

and stickers identifying the previous owner. And in the middle of it all stands Hans-Michael Holczer, giving interviews.

Once or twice he has to interrupt himself. Two young men with the tall, lean physique for riding bikes shuffle by. Holczer stops mid-sentence. His voice gets louder, gruffer. “Oi! Kids!” he shouts. “Keep your hands off that shit!” Then he gets back to his garage sale. “Ronny, bring me my glasses cloth. Renate, shut the door – this isn't a portaloo!”

Renate is Holczer's wife. Ronny is Ronny Scholz, his son-in-law, and until a couple of weeks ago one of the mainstays of his squad. Gerolsteiner always was a “family team”. Holczer started managing the RSV Öschelbronn amateur team, which would later grow into Gerolsteiner, back in 1976. Fittingly, this morning he's enlisted members and friends of the club to serve coffee and cake.

The queues at the tills are growing longer. Heinrich Haussler's road bike goes for €2,900 – without the wheels. The buyer doesn't want to be named, but says he could also have bought Stefan Schumacher's or Bernhard Kohl's. So why didn't he? Because the frames were the wrong size, and he wants a bike from the 2008 season. He says he'll keep following cycling, scandals and all. “The riders still suffer,” he says.

Holczer says if all else fails, he “could always go back to school”. For now he says he's on holiday, though in the future, we might see him back in cycling. Just not on the pro scene. “I'm thinking more of corporate events and leisure cycling.” He tells us again that today he felt no emotion. Then he adds, “Of course, that's partly a defence mechanism.”

A photographer arrives and asks for one last picture. With the bikes in the background, like pigs in a slaughterhouse, for a big press agency. “Okay,” sighs Holczer. “We were there just a minute ago, but we can go back...”

And off he goes. 📍



As Gerolsteiner's equipment heads out of the door, Holczer says he has no plans to return to professional cycling