



Ulli Steiner: perfect colleague

Jeremy Baumberg

Cite this: *Soft Matter*, 2024, 20, 4174

DOI: 10.1039/d4sm90067g

rsc.li/soft-matter-journal

I have known Ulli since I moved to Cambridge in 2007, and you could not wish for a more steadfast colleague. He was always the person I could depend on to say “why not?”. Nothing fazed him. For any sort of science collaboration, he would unfailingly and enthusiastically put me right on what I hadn’t quite thought about. And he was up for every opportunity to bring together and socialise with students. My highlight was always our joint Winter schools that he helped bring to fruition, where both our groups shared a week of science, brainstorming, careers, and (of course) skiing. Often he would seemingly recruit talented students who just happened to be awesome skiers. Not that they were ever, however, quite up to the elegance and capability of Ulli on a ski slope, but they would further his wish to escape into the landscape and feel the rush of being alive. I remember many conversations we had where Ulli was skiing backwards down the mountain (naturally off-piste), and there were many scrapes that he got me into, knowing just about how much I could take. That was also

his way with students, where he challenged them, but saw how much they could take, and nurtured them graciously. Ulli was fully aware of the significant burdens and hurdles for many researchers in science, particularly from their different backgrounds, and found many ways to support them. He also instituted the scheme for avoiding evening career talks becoming dominated by a few people – anyone who asked anything had to drink a shot, which rapidly relaxed their contributions and opened the space for everyone else. He has a memorable talk on the physics of skiing, which covered more technical scope than I thought possible.



Ulli is a gifted collaborator, and able to bring together interdisciplinary teams from industry and academia to explore novel ideas. This is mainly because he evidently enjoyed these activities, especially since the science came with enthusiastic social interactions. I was one of the beneficiaries of this largesse, and learnt a huge amount of new physics and chemistry between Ulli’s guidance and my ridiculous questions – this was a wonderful experience, and many new pieces of science emerged. More importantly, it forged many of our young researchers into voracious explorers across many institutions and companies around the world. The only thing that Ulli could not take was administration, particularly inane and unwanted paper-shuffling, and his policy of ignoring it sometimes led to bliss. Sometimes not. My main memory is someone who always had time for me, a rare and crucial spur to great science and creative life.

NanoPhotonics Centre, Cavendish Laboratory,
Department of Physics, JJ Thompson Avenue,
University of Cambridge, Cambridge, CB3 0HE, UK