Jan Miskovic’s name is well-known in model-making, hydro-racing, professional photography and ophthalmic optics market! In fact, this energetic Slovak has a record-high degree of myopia: measured at -108 diopters. Despite his visual disability, however, he is a true phenomenon who lives life to the fullest and has even made his disability a motivating factor for his artistic creativity.

At first contact, this jovial Slovak almost comes across as a cartoon character or some kind prankster, with good reason: Jan Miskovic’s impressive -108 diopter facet lenses transform his eyes into intriguing black dots. After exchanging a few words and anecdotes, though, it only takes a few minutes to realize that appearances can be deceiving, and that, in reality, his gaze is extremely sensitive and sharp. And that’s exactly what you would expect from a passionate professional photographer, who proves by example that the practice of his art and impaired vision are perfectly compatible thanks to modern technology.

Living in harmony with his passions

“As a child, I developed a number of vision problems, including amblyopia, astigmatism, strabismus, keratoconus and, primarily, progressive myopia. These problems became more severe and advanced more rapidly following a racing accident in a hydroplane (a cross between a motorcycle and a powerboat designed for offshore racing), which caused severe injuries to both eyes, not to mention the side effects of the antibiotics I was forced to take, which also contributed to my declining vision,” Jan summarizes. As a result, his myopia, measured at -45 diopters in 2001 with a loss of 4-5 diopters per year, has now (as he is about to turn 60) reached a record-setting degree of severity: -108 diopters. And even though advances in oph-
Sensations, both strong and gentle

“After earning an engineering degree and a doing a stint in a state agency dedicated to coaching competitive athletes, I started a company specializing in scale model-making and moulding. This early professional ‘artistic’ endeavour gave me a chance to indulge my passion for building miniature remote-controlled racing boats and testing them in competition. I was a member of the national team for a long time before becoming a coach, first for Czechoslovakia, and then for Slovakia after the dissolution.” At the same time, Jan’s attraction to nautical activities led him to develop a passion for another, more physical type of racing: hydroplane racing, which he practiced from the mid-1990s up until his accident in 2001. Forced to adapt once again following this accident, Jan was more determined than ever and decided to become a coach – and a winning one at that, since his protégé was none other than Marian Jung, a tenfold European hydroplane-racing champion and a six-time world champion. It’s obvious the man is addicted to speed and thrills, but his favourite hobby demanded another, gentler kind of feeling: photography has fascinated him ever since he was a child, when he spent many Saturdays with his father developing photos in the requisitioned family bathroom. He practiced photography for a long time as a hobby before taking the plunge and applying for his licence as a professional sports photographer in the early 2000s, motivated by the rapid development of digital technologies, which offered him a way to overcome his visual limitations – and even turn them into a plus! This proved to be a winning transition, as evidenced by the many awards he has won throughout the world, in such diverse places as China, Qatar, Austria, Monte Carlo and the United States.

An instinctive photographer

The first question that comes to mind in view of the severity of his myopia is, “Does he really see what he is photographing?” He answers frankly: “No! I can’t see the subject through the viewfinder, but I don’t need to see it;
it is enough to know what I want to photograph. I know where to position myself and when to press the shutter button. It’s all about experience and feeling. My perception of the environment is different, but I try to free myself from the limitations people with good vision impose on themselves, such as their focus on subject, framing, lighting and so on.”

“Digital technology lets me shoot in burst mode – in general six to seven perfectly clear shots – and select the most expressive photos on my computer. For near vision, I wear a pair of telescopic magnifying glasses designed for computer work.” This connoisseur of strong emotions and distinctive representations feels that nothing is more important than the expressiveness of the subjects and scenes he immortalizes. Jan regrets the current trend in photographic circles that applauds clarity and technical perfection over the raw emotion that he feels should emanate from a photo.

Capturing unique moments

Jan claims that he doesn’t have any failed or insipid photos to toss out. This is all the more surprising given that his chosen field is sports photography. Here again, it’s all about experience, knowledge of the subject, creative spirit and a proper command of the equipment. “I’ve always liked sports. I’ve practiced or coached a good number of them and I’m in contact with several federations. To take good photos of athletes, you need to understand the mechanisms of their discipline and basic movements in order to capture the very essence of their sport. You also need to look for an original angle, a unique point of view, as close as possible to the action without disrupting it. Many sports photographers are content to stick to one position. I don’t hesitate to move around, to diversify my compositions. I also like to gradually zoom in on a scene, to get closer to the main subject and the energy he or she gives off.” He particularly likes to express this sensitivity in water sports as well as in mountain sports, including dogsled races, track athletics – and rodeos.

Of course, Jan has other strings to his photographic bow, some of which are more intimate. Attracted to “faces with character,” he admits to a special fondness for portraits

Jan’s favourite photo is one of Pope John Paul II, taken during his visit to Banska Bystrica in 2003. “The area reserved for photographers was jam-packed, my view was obstructed by the Swiss Guards, and the Pope’s face was hidden in his hands during prayers – but all of a sudden, he lowered his hands slightly and I shot the photo in a fraction of a second! This photo was seen around the world, and I even enlarged and framed it and sent it to the Vatican.”
Jan likes to immortalize memorable moments, so it’s not surprising that a large share of his collection of portraits is devoted to music, singers and instruments. “I like to calmly listen to jazz, in good company, but I can’t resist picking up my camera from time to time.”
and boasts a fine collection of photographs of Slovak and international celebrities, nearly 900 of which are autographed.

**Focusing on the future**

He has collaborated with numerous national magazines and has had exhibitions throughout the world, including in Lake Alfred (Florida), Monte Carlo, Budapest and Bratislava. Recognition and a promising future in photography are likely in the cards for this artist who, in any case, does not like to look back. “I have some wonderful memories, but I am not a fan of nostalgia. Living in the past and regretting ‘the golden age of analogue photography,’ for instance, is counter-productive, especially for someone like me who owes so much to modern technology. And I’m not the only one who feels this way! The new cameras and the array of possibilities opened up by digital technology have made a huge contribution to the development of sports photography,” insists this inveterate Nikon fan, who works extensively with the D4S, an SLR perfect for motion photos, and who has been greedily eyeing the brand-new D5.

**Visions of hope**

As energetic as he is, Jan is convinced that work – even pleasant, artistic work – is not all there is to life. He therefore engages in a wide range of activities, including travel, exploration, and charitable commitments, particularly in support of the blind and visually impaired. For example, he is a member of the Lions Club in his hometown of Banska Bystrica, where he works to raise awareness and funds for children suffering from severe disabilities (including visual and mental disabilities) and for everyone suffering from severe refractive errors (i.e. ametropia). His activism also led him to support and participate in the Cesta světla (Way of Light), an annual charitable event organized by the Slovak Union for the Blind, which is set to celebrate its 13th event. “Both the sighted and visually impaired can participate in this big annual photo competition, which generates some absolutely superb, highly original photos,” Jan explains, pointing out that the event is followed by a travelling exhibition that he hopes, one day, will travel beyond Slovakia’s borders.

These are just a few examples, among many, of the philanthropic endeavours of a man in a day-to-day struggle to improve his own condition via the practice of visual yoga. “I spent six months mastering the technique, and I have now been practicing these exercises for over three years to train my eyes and prevent excessive fatigue. The results are palpable, and I feel like my vision is deteriorating less rapidly than before. I would advise all visually impaired people to try these exercises.”

With his big heart, enormous energy and overflowing enthusiasm, Jan Miskovic is a real phenomenon, which in his eyes is perfectly normal. He likes to recharge his batteries near the water, listen to jazz, and spend quality time with friends and family. He’s a man like any other, but also a consummate artist whose record of achievements includes a singular summit: undoubtedly the world’s highest degree of myopia! •
Always looking for the best possible angle of view, Jan took advantage of the abundant snow to dig a hole and position himself at ground level. “It was only when I saw the photo on my computer that I realized the dogs were literally flying above the snow!”
Hydroplane races are the only passion that Jan no longer indulges in, since his accident. “I miss the adrenaline, but I content myself with taking photos. I am especially attracted to water and try to get as close to it as possible whenever I can.”
From a painful attack in Muay-Tai combat to a high jumper’s flop technique and the disturbing choreography of a rodeo, Jan strives to capture movement, the essence of sports. “You need to look for an original angle, a unique point of view, as close as possible to the action, but without disrupting it.”