

Annemarie Moser-Proell

The Austrian “Sportswoman of the Century” says her 62-win World Cup record was made to be broken. **BY EDIE THYS MORGAN**



PHOTOS COURTESY ANNEMARIE PROELL



Annemarie Proell of Austria retired from ski racing in 1980, shortly after she won downhill gold at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York (left). She still holds the all-time record for women’s World Cup wins, with 62 first-place finishes.

As Lindsey Vonn racked up World Cup victories before her season-ending crash at the FIS World Championships on February 5 (*see sidebar*), she did so with one number in her sights: 62—the number of victories needed to match the all-time record for women’s World Cup wins. The name behind the target is Austrian racer Annemarie Moser-Proell, who retired in 1980 shortly after winning Olympic downhill gold, the crowning achievement of her 12-year career.

Today, she lives quietly in Kleinarl, the little town a few hundred meters below the mountain farmhouse where she grew up. Here, the former ski champ—who will turn 60 on March 27—pursues her hobbies: gardening, skiing, and most avidly, hunting in the mountains throughout the Carinthia and Salzburg regions.

Close by, tourists make the pilgrimage to Cafe Olympic to have a slice of strudel or a mug of glühwein, and to view a collection of her trophies and awards. These include six overall World Cup titles (1971–1975 and 1979), five World Championship titles, three Olympic medals (two silver, one gold) and 13 discipline titles (seven

downhill, three giant slalom and three combined).

The sixth of eight children, Annemarie Proell (her maiden name) started skiing at four years of age, was hunting in the mountains with her father at eight, and made her World Cup debut at a downhill in Bad Gastein in 1968, at age 14. Hank Tauber, then coach of the U.S. women’s ski team, remembers Proell then, when she was “skinny as a bean.” At Bad Gastein she fell seven times and finished last. Proell grew quickly in stature and maturity, winning her first World Cup, a GS, in Maribor, Yugoslavia, in 1970, and earning a reputation as a fierce and clever competitor.

American ski racer Cindy Nelson describes Proell’s legendary downhill savvy in a story from Grindelwald, Switzerland, in 1972. On the first training run, Proell pulled off the course at a particularly treacherous section and hiked back up to where the coaches stood, to observe the rest of the field and pick her line. Nelson dislocated her hip in that race, and several other top competitors sustained serious injuries. Proell won that race, and all eight downhills during that season. When



Above: Proell racked up six overall World Cup titles and three Olympic medals in her career. Right: In 1999, she was named Austrian Sportswoman of the Century and shared honors with Jean-Claude Killy as World Sportsman of the Century for winter sports.

CAN VONN COME BACK?

Lindsey Vonn's campaign to break Annemarie Moser-Proell's record ended on February 5, when the American racer crashed on the Super G course at the FIS World Championships in Schladming, Austria. The harrowing footage of the accident would lead anyone to wonder if Vonn could possibly come back in time for the 2014 Olympics. Her answer to the press, even before her successful February 10 surgery at the Vail Valley Surgery Center, was unequivocally, "Yes!" Is that realistic?

Vonn tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and medial collateral ligament (MCL) in her right knee, and broke her tibial plateau. Initial reports looked dire, especially considering the violent crash and mention of the tibial plateau. Tamara McKinney's broken tibial plateau in 1989 required a bone graft from her hip, hardware for 18 months and seven hours of surgery. McKinney did not return to competition. The type of fracture Vonn suffered, however, often occurs as the knee pivots when the ACL tears, and does not in itself require surgery. Christin Cooper had a tibial plateau compaction injury on January 30, 1983, that involved no twisting or torn ligaments. Nevertheless, U.S. Ski Team surgeon Dr. Richard Steadman would not clear her for on-snow training until November. By February 1984 Cooper was back to speed, winning a silver medal in the Sarajevo Olympics.

One orthopedic surgeon close to the situation described Vonn's injury as "a pretty routine blown-out knee." That typically means six months off snow, and then a closely monitored progression through free skiing, training and finally racing. Recovery depends on each unique injury, athlete and recovery protocol. Between the U.S. Ski Team and her sponsor Red Bull, Vonn will have the best sports science, rehab and training facilities available. It becomes a race against the clock, but Vonn is no stranger to that.

Nelson returned to Grindelwald in 1974, it was to break Proell's streak of 11 consecutive downhill victories, and claim the U.S. Ski Team's first World Cup downhill victory. That night, Tauber recalls, "We bought every bottle of champagne in the Hotel Eiger."

"The Tiger of Kleinarl" or simply "La Proell," as she was known in the French press, was adept in all of the alpine disciplines and a formidable presence on the tour. She puffed on a cigarette before stepping into the starting gate, and had public disagreements with Austrian ski team officials and her ski company, Atomic. *Sports Illustrated* described her as "the aggressive, intolerant, petulant, magnificent Annemarie Proell." But competitors remember a fun-loving farm girl at heart. Canadian racer Betsy Clifford recalls a "playful, wonderful person who liked to have a good time." Proell taught Clifford how to knit, and showed her the "safe places to go out at night, where the coaches wouldn't find you." Clifford spent one Christmas in nearby Wagrain and visited the Proell family farm, reachable by ski lift and tram. "Living up there is what made her so good," says Clifford, who marveled at Proell's strength. "You had to walk up and down that mountain to get to school. Just looking at her hands, you could see how strong she was."

In 1974 Proell married Herbert Moser, and before the 1975-1976 season she surprised the ski world by announcing her retirement. She needed to care for her ailing father, though rumors circulated about a dispute with Atomic, and that the pressure to win three gold medals in the upcoming Innsbruck Winter Games was too great. During that time she and Herbert started Café Annemarie. Her father, Joseph Proell, died of lung cancer in June 1976. By the next season the star had returned to the White Circus. She went on to secure the records that would make her a legend, retiring for good in 1980.

After retirement she put the skis aside and followed the European sports-star success model: Use your money and name to create a business opportunity (a hotel, a ski school, a sports shop), and then let fame

Proell is mobbed by fans and members of the press after her 1980 downhill victory in Lake Placid

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and hard work be your annuity. In Moser-Proell's case it was the café, and the couple dove full time into running it, with Annemarie rising at 5 a.m. to make strudel, pastries and tortes. Their daughter Marion was born in 1982.

In 1999, Moser-Proell was named Austrian Sportswoman of the Century. That same year she took the stage with Pelé, Mohammed Ali and Michael Jordan when she and Jean-Claude Killy shared World Sportsman of the Century for winter sports. Humbled to be in such company, she admitted that she was probably the only one of the group who was in the kitchen the next day, making pastries and serving the guests.

Herbert Moser was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lung cancer in December 2007, and died in January 2008. When Moser-Proell sold the cafe later that year she described it as "her life's work." The renamed Café-Restaurant Olympia remains a major attraction in the region, but she is no longer involved in its operations. In 2009, she built the house she and Herbert envisioned for their retirement. An advocate for preserving wild lands and the wild animal populations they support, she enjoys hunting deer, chamois and boar with a Ferlach rifle given to her by her community to celebrate her world title in 1978.

More than anything, she enjoys spending time with her nine-year-old grandson Elias, born in 2003. The family farmhouse is now a mountain hut where guests can enjoy local cuisine and, panoramic views of the mountains that sculpted young "Annemirl" into a champion.

Moser-Proell makes minimal public-relation appear-

ances but follows the sport and met Vonn last season in Flachau. To Vonn's delight, Moser-Proell even invited her to Kleinarl for a visit. Annemarie is impressed not only with Vonn but also with her resources. "She trains very hard, is mentally very strong...and has the will to win." As for how she will feel if and when the record is broken, she is matter of fact: "Records are there to be broken...I feel truly bad for Lindsey. She came to the World Championships in such good form and was such a great hope for the U.S. ski team."

Already the next Moser-Proell and Vonn is on the horizon, in the name of Mikaela Shiffrin (*see page 9*). In Flachau, the American phenom won her third World Cup at the exact same age, to the day, as 17-year-old Annemarie Proell did in St. Gervais in 1971. How does she feel about yet another young ski racer being touted as "the next Moser-Proell?" It has happened before, and she finds it silly. "Comparisons are always made quickly. Every person pursues her own purpose." 🐛

Edie Thys Morgan's book Shut Up and Ski is available online at Amazon.com. Learn more at www.racerex.com.

LINDSEY VERSUS ANNEMARIE

APPLES AND ORANGES OR SPLITTING HAIRS?

	Downhill	Super G	Giant Slalom	Slalom	Combined	Total
Moser-Proell	36		16	3	7	62
Vonn	29	20	3	2	5	59

Annemarie Moser-Proell's ski-racing victory record stretched from January 1970 to March 1980. Lindsey Vonn started her streak in December 2004, and will presumably rejoin the effort in Fall 2014 at the earliest. Several factors complicate any straight comparisons of these two athletes and their accomplishments.

The addition of Super G to the World Cup Calendar in 1985 was a boon for speed-oriented competitors like Vonn. Also, the absolute number of races per season is much greater in Vonn's era. The total number of races on the calendar during

Moser-Proell's reign ranged from 17 to 29 per season, whereas the World Cup calendar since 2004 has ranged from 33 to 38.

Moser-Proell's tally gets a boost from combineds, which were not physical races, but the statistical paper result of combining slalom and downhill results at ski meets. Vonn's combined victories come from her racing in special downhill and slalom events that are timed to create a combined result.

Some might see the comparisons as apples and oranges, while others simply see it as splitting hairs. Clearly these women are rare athletes who both are worthy of the history books.