

Vreni Schneider

The most decorated Swiss skier of all time leads a quiet life in her hometown of Elm. **BY EDITH THYS MORGAN**

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When Vail first hosted the FIS World Alpine Championships, in 1989, Switzerland ruled the slopes. Swiss skiers won 11 medals—not quite the 14 medals they’d hauled in on home turf in 1987, but impressive nonetheless. And the most decorated Swiss skier in '89 was not the dazzling Maria Walliser, nor the all-event altar boy Pirmin Zurbriggen, nor the impetuous Peter Mueller. The only skier to emerge with three medals was Vreni Schneider, whose character was best captured in her finish-line reaction at the women’s combined. When U.S. racer Tamara McKinney crossed the line to grab gold from Schneider, the smiling rival rushed immediately to her side, proclaiming, “For me, silver is as good as gold. I am so happy for you.”

Today, Schneider (who turned 50 in November) prefers the quiet life in her home hamlet of Elm, where she and her husband, Marcel Fässler, raise their two young sons. From this perch in the eastern Alps, one can ride the Schabell chairlift to ski the five-kilometer Vreni Schneider piste, stroll down Vreni Schneider Weg, get outfitted in nearby Glarus at the Vreni Schneider Sports

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Above and right: At the 1989 FIS World Alpine Championships in Vail, Schneider led the Swiss team with three medals: gold in giant slalom and silver in slalom and the combined.



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Left: Schneider hiking with her husband, Marcel Fässler, and her sons, Florian and Flavio. Right: Vreni pals around with four-time Olympic gold medalist Marlie Schild at Kühtai, Austria in 2014. Schild retired last season with a record 35 World Cup slalom wins (Vreni retired with 34 first-place slalom finishes).

Shop and take a lesson (from Vreni herself) at the Vreni Schneider Ski, Snowboard and Race School.

Such are the spoils of an Alpine ski hero in Switzerland. Despite being the most decorated skier—as well as Sportswoman of the Century—in her home country, Schneider is happiest outside the limelight, spending time outdoors with her kids and staying close to home.

The youngest of four, Verena “Vreni” Schneider started skiing beside her parents’ house at the age of three. In school, people started to notice that this girl had “something in the legs that others did not.” That something was strength, and Schneider steadily moved up the ranks of the Swiss juniors. Her progress came to a halt when her mother died of cancer in 1980. Vreni was 16. From then on, Vreni and her three older siblings were raised by their father Kaspar (known as Chäp), a cobbler turned sports shop proprietor, and Vreni had to back off on both her school and her skiing to tend to household duties. She struggled to make the Swiss team, and nearly quit racing. Eventually, however, she heeded one of her mother’s last bits of advice, which was essentially, “If skiing is what you really want, go after it with everything.”

Schneider’s first World Cup win was not until age 20, in December 1983. Just over a year later, in her fourth race, she had learned how to win. She started her medal collection by winning the giant slalom at the 1987 World Championships in Crans Montana, and followed up with slalom and giant slalom golds in the 1988 Calgary Olympics. Then, in 1989, “Vreneli” (a nickname based on a centuries-old Swiss gold coin) embarked on a season for the record books.

No only did Schneider win three world championship medals in Vail, but she also won a record 14 World Cup races, including all seven slaloms and a streak of nine races in a row. Her style was marked by strength that allowed her to ski a rounder, more carved line, while still maintaining speed. At a time of design experimentation in race skis, “she was able to use the tail and juice the ski for acceleration throughout the turn,” McKinney explains.

Unlike her more celebrated teammates—the precise

technician Erica Hess, fiery Michaela Figini and media savvy Maria Walliser—Schneider kept a low profile. Part was her personality and part was her lack of confidence in languages other than her native Swiss German. Communication was no hindrance, however, in one of her most important relationships, with her Rossignol service technician Jean-Pierre (JP) Ansermoz. At one time, Ansermoz was the technician for Hess, Figini, Walliser and Schneider, but it was Schneider who often rode in his car between races.

“She spoke German and he spoke French, and neither spoke more than a few words of the other,” says Ansermoz’s son Hugues, who was a Rossignol technician with the American men’s team and later served as head coach of the Swiss women’s alpine team. “But it was amazing how well

they communicated. She had 100 percent confidence in him and together they figured out what had to be done.”

“She was incredible under pressure,” Ansermoz says, which over time made for consistency. During her career, Schneider amassed 55 World Cup wins (the third-highest for women alpine racers, behind Annemarie Moser-Proell of Austria and U.S. racer Lindsey Vonn) and three overall World Cup titles, as well as six slalom and five GS globes. From 1986 to 1995 she was never out of the top six in the overall standings and, though not a fan of speed events, also earned podiums in both downhill and Super G.

Bad luck and a back injury slowed her in 1992 and ‘93, but she rebounded sweetly in 1994 with a signature come-from-behind win in the 1994 Olympic slalom. It was her fifth Olympic medal and third gold, making her both the most decorated women’s alpine Olympian and the most successful Swiss skier of all time.

Schneider retired in 1995, after 11 seasons on the World Cup. In 1996, while lunching with her father at the *Stammtisch* (the locals’ table) in her sister’s restaurant, a mason from out of town sat with his friends at the other end. Vreni bought coffee for the entire table. The mason thanked her by inviting her to dinner, and the rest is *Geschichte*. The couple married in 1999 and have two sons—Florian, born in 2004, and Flavio, in 2006. Both sons are avid skiers and aspiring racers, though Vreni’s own skiing is limited by persistent knee pain.

Schneider lost her father in 2010, and admittedly “fell into a deep hole” with grief. *Ä Gruess us dä Bergä* (Greetings from the Mountains), the album she released in 2012, includes *Ich Vermissä Dich* (I Miss You), a tribute to her father. That same year, her live performance on a popular Swiss television show opened the door to the entertainment world—and to critics. Schneider got support from fellow ski racer and singing megastar Hansi Hinterseer of Austria. “Don’t listen to the critics,” Hinterseer counseled, “but follow your heart.” Schneider did just that, opting out of future live performances. “I’m a mother, not a singer,” she says. For now, at least. ❄️