

Marc Girardelli

One of the greatest all-around alpine skiers in history is now a family man and entrepreneur. **BY EDIE THYS MORGAN**



On a typical day in Vaduz, the capital city of Liechtenstein, Marc and Andrea Girardelli are up early to send their young girls off to school. Then they go to their respective jobs: Andrea is a business analyst for a software company, while Marc manages various business interests that range from travel and ski resorts to medical technology and apparel. After school, a neighbor comes to watch the kids, ages five and eight, until the couple returns in the early evening. Weekends are family time with the two girls and Girardelli's older son and daughter, who live nearby.

This is exactly the ordinary life that Marc Girardelli wants, and not a bit like his younger years as an international skiing superstar.

From the time he was 7, Marc Girardelli was a promising skier in his home country of Austria, winning the Topolino Trophy—the bellwether of future skiing stars—at age 11. But by the time he was 12, his father and coach, Helmut, had significant disagreements with the Austrian system. Instead of relinquishing his son to Austria's famed Stams ski academy, Helmut called up

a connection he had made at the Luxembourg Ski Federation. A short conversation, a physical exam and some paperwork later, Marc was Luxembourg's one-man ski team.

As the record books indicate, the tactic worked. Battling alongside Pirmin Zurbriggen of Switzerland, Girardelli was one of the greatest all-around alpine skiers in history, winning five overall World Cup titles and becoming the first person to win five disciplines in a season. During his 17-year World Cup career, he amassed 46 victories, 11 World Championship and Olympic medals (including four golds, though none Olympic), and a title globe in each of the five alpine disciplines.

"Am I happy I did it? Absolutely," he says today. Would he want that life for his own kids? Not a chance: "I want them to do sports, but not excessively." He cites the time, effort and danger involved, along with the lack of education and money typical of most athletic careers. "And if they do make it, there is the lack of privacy..."

Marc Girardelli, his wife Andrea, and their two young daughters at their home in Vaduz.

Marc Girardelli's life was never private. Father and son's relentless (many would say harsh) training regimen was the stuff of legend: rising before dawn to ski on glaciers before the sun softened them; repeating every skill until it reached perfection; eschewing diversions like a social life. The monastic dedication built physical and mental strength, as well as a metronome-like style that spanned all events in every condition.

The quiet, intellectual loner who preferred classical music to rock and roll also had a quick sense of humor and an overriding sense of fairness. When Steve Mahre was disqualified for wearing an incorrect bib number while winning a slalom race in 1984, Girardelli was awarded the victory, his second ever on the World Cup. He immediately gave the trophy to Mahre. "It was the natural thing to do," he explains. "If it had been a gold medal, it would have been his as well. Life is not about trophies. It's about the friends you have and the things you do. Personality is more important than performance."

Other racers envied his unrestricted sponsorships that commanded more than \$2 million per year, but along with the money came the burden of having to organize his own training and sometimes keep his own national federation afloat. Girardelli estimates these expenses mounted to more than \$300,000 per year before the season even started. "Not many racers could take that kind of pressure," he says.

Nor could many people endure Girardelli's grueling routine, both in daily conditioning and under his father's regime (one racer recalls Helmut breaking a ski pole over Marc's back when he skied out of a slalom). Every junior racer is agonizingly familiar with "Girardellis"—a lateral sprint, squat and turn, designed to make legs and lungs scream for mercy. A high pain threshold helped him come back from no less than 14 knee surgeries, usually in record time. One of his worst injuries required U.S. Ski Team surgeon Dr. Richard Steadman to rebuild every ligament in Girardelli's left knee. The doctor sent him home with a strict rehab protocol, and permission to start skiing with one ski on his uninjured right leg in three months. Three and a half months later, Steadman received a picture of Girardelli skiing with one ski...on his left leg.

In the end, injuries forced Girardelli into retirement in 1996, at age 33. He describes his last three years as "more rehab than racing," when he had to use elevators because his knees no longer allowed him to walk up and down stairs.

Intellectual curiosity and years of negotiating with sponsors instilled a keen business sense that served the serial entrepreneur well. Today, his main focus is leading and organizing 15 to 20 incentive trips per year in Europe, for companies and high-net-worth clients. While rehabbing from another knee injury Girardelli discovered Bemer, a medical technology company specializing in microcirculation, which boosts blood flow and immunity to aid in training and recovery. Impressed with the results, he became an avid user and spokesperson.

Girardelli also promotes skiing in Eastern European



Top: Girardelli in the 1992 Winter Games in Albertville, France. Center: His first ski race, as a child in Lech, Austria. Right (l to r): Alpine racing champs Franz Weber, Girardelli, Alberto Tomba and Franz Klammer.



ski resorts like Bansko, Bulgaria. That connection put him in contact with a Bulgarian winemaker that makes 10,000 bottles per year of Marc Girardelli red, white and rosé. And of course you can sip your Girardelli wine while wearing his line of high fashion, high function skiwear that's sold throughout Europe.

Though not one for regrets, Girardelli admits he missed a lot by not having the camaraderie of a national team. Today, he very much enjoys social and ski reunions with one-time rivals like the Mahre brothers, Luc Alphand and Paul Accolla, and he invited Pirmin Zurbriggen and Franz Klammer to his wedding.

When not working, he stays active cycling, hiking and golfing (though he hesitates to consider the latter a sport). As for skiing, he's still got it. Just three years ago, a late-night bet with Marco Buchel in Zagreb ended in a duel: Girardelli on Buchel's 2009 GS skis, Buchel on Girardelli's 1992 GS skis, two runs on a 40-second course. Girardelli won by four seconds each run, proving he won't ever, really, be ordinary after all. ❄️