

Maria Walliser

Still another pretty face: The former world downhill champ is now a champion for health. **BY EDITH THYS MORGAN**

BOB THOMAS/GETTY IMAGES



Maria Walliser won 25 individual races during her ten-year World Cup career, including downhill gold medals at the Alpine World Ski Championships at Crans-Montana in 1987 (left) and Beaver Creek in 1989 (below). She triumphed at Beaver Creek by a decisive 1.5 seconds.



SPORTS FILE

Eat yogurt. And take your folic acid. That's what Maria Walliser, as an official spokesperson for Danone Activia yogurt and ambassador of Switzerland's Folic Acid Offensive, wants us all to do. The 50-year-old Swiss skiing star, yoga instructor, vintner, and mother of two dispenses this advice in magazines, on TV and in person with the same megawatt smile, lilting voice and graceful manner that

made her the darling of the media in her racing heyday. It's an easy sell, because there's no doubt that Maria Walliser, like the wine from her vineyard, is getting even better with age.

I first raced against Maria Walliser at the World Alpine Ski Championships in 1987, and she didn't quite seem real. Not *geziert* or phony as some rivals suggested,

but simply too good to be true. She and the rest of the Swiss Alpine juggernaut captured eight of the ten titles on their home turf in Crans Montana. During that era, legends like Pirmin Zurbriggen, Peter Mueller, Erica Hess and Vreni Schneider garnered movie-star status in their home country, appearing on billboards throughout Switzerland touting everything from skis and goggles to banks and cars, chocolate bars and sports drinks.

None got more airtime than Maria Walliser, and none seemed as comfortable in the spotlight. By winning two gold medals in Crans Montana (downhill and Super G), she not only vindicated the Olympic disappointment of 1984 in Sarajevo (when her 17-year-old teammate Michela Figini upstaged the 20-year-old favorite to seize DH gold) but also affirmed her title as the glamour girl of ski racing.

The rivalry between the fiery, unscripted Figini and the well-packaged, composed Walliser became tantalizing front-page news in a ski-crazed nation. Though Walliser today insists the gossip was just that, the Figini/Walliser rivalry built buzz and intrigue around an extraordinarily talented and ambitious group of Swiss Baby Boomers that dominated throughout the Eighties.

In her ten year World Cup career, Walliser won two overall World Cup titles (1986 and 1987) and 25 individ-

ual races in every event but slalom. Her favorite victory was in Vail in 1989, when she defended her 1987 World DH title by a decisive 1.5 seconds. When Walliser ended her fairytale career (on top, of course) in 1990, she hinted at pursuing a career in acting. Even in retirement, the Swiss tabloids eagerly reported on every stage of her first pregnancy with husband Guido Anesini. In 1991, when their daughter Siri was born with spina bifida—a neural tube defect also known as “open spine”—the single-minded focus that had driven Walliser’s own career shifted to a new and entirely selfless purpose.

This challenge involved research, doctors, specialists, therapies and most critically, mental and spiritual strength. “Maybe my background with sports, therapy and physiology helped me come to grips with these demands, but in my eyes being a mother can never be compared to being an elite athlete,” she says. Driven by a quest for knowledge and understanding rather than competition and personal ambition, she nonetheless describes having “the strength of a bear” when it came to her daughter’s health.

Walliser is now president of the Foundation for Switzerland’s Folic Acid Offensive (<http://www.folsaureur.ch>) a movement dedicated to increasing awareness of the importance of folic acid during pregnancy and for overall health. A lack of folic acid in early pregnancy has been linked to spina bifida and other birth defects, while the B vitamin has beneficial effects on heart health, depression, dementia and a host of other issues. The campaign encourages a diet high in folic acid and vitamin supplements for women while advocating for folic acid-enriched foods. “In the USA, white flour is enriched with this important vitamin, so the people have no deficiency,” Walliser explains. One study reported that the average American consumes 0.5 mg daily while the average Swiss gets 0.25 mg. The recommended daily dose is 0.4 mg (and twice that for pregnant women).

Siri, now 21, lives an active, independent life in her wheelchair, skiing and biking with adaptive equipment, driving her own car and living in her own apartment while studying law at the University of Lucerne. Her younger sister Noemi, 17, is following mama Maria’s tracks, attending a ski academy in Davos where she balances ski racing, school and being a teenager. “For a young girl to invest so much for your sport and give up all your free time...as we both know, this is hard work!,” says her mom. Noemi also sings in a choir that was invited to perform in Missouri and Utah this past summer.

Walliser keeps in touch with her racing colleagues, many of whom have expressed a new respect for the post-competition Maria, the tireless advocate for the health of her own children and the children of Switzerland. She maintains close ties to sponsors Völkl, Marker and Descende. “Old love never dies!” she jokes. Naturally, Noemi skis on Marker/Völkl, and for the past ten years Maria has coordinated a junior team on Marker, Völkl and Uvex.

Walliser, as the ads on TV indicate, stays active all seasons. In December she hopes to get her diploma as a yoga instructor, after three years of study. She golfs,



Walliser balances work and time with her family, including husband Guido Anesini (above), an insurance agent, and daughters Siri (right, in wheelchair) and Noemi (standing). Siri is a law student and Noemi attends a ski academy in Davos.



especially at charity events for her favorite causes and with Guido, who does not share her passion for the high mountains. She also meets friends at the climbing gym, but still she gravitates to solitary time in the mountains where she bikes, hikes and goes Nordic walking. “In winter there’s nothing better than skiing,” she says. On her 50th birthday in May she gave herself a tour up Piz Bernina, the highest peak (4,000-plus meters) in her current home canton of Graubünden.

As for a typical day, there is no such thing in the Anesini-Walliser household. During the week both girls are away, while Guido works as an insurance agent in Chur and Liechtenstein. Maria works from her home office, traveling frequently for her various duties. On weekends the girls are home, and though all four family members are under one roof, they’re moving different directions. “Four family members and four different directions, but somehow we hold it together!” Listening to her describe family life, it’s clear that Maria Walliser is, after all, very real indeed. ❄️

Two-time Olympian and freelance writer Edie Thys Morgan lives in New Hampshire with her family. Her latest book is Shut Up and Ski. To learn more, go to www.racere.com.