

# A Golden Age for Older World-Cup Women Racers

*With medical advances and reduced ageism on the circuit, the average age for female World Cup winners is now older than the guys. And the women aren't slowing down yet.*



COURTESY: JACKIE WILES

Last season, Italian Federica Brignone, at 34, became the oldest woman to win a World Cup race. That trend is continuing, as older female racers across all national teams are excelling as never before. The U.S. women's ski team competed in the downhill and super G in Garmisch, Germany last season, with ages ranging a full decade apart, from 21–31. Left to right: Tricia Mangan, Jackie Wiles, Haley Cutler, Isabella Wright, Allison Mollin, Lauren Macuga, Breezy Johnson and Keely Cashman.

**BY EDIE THYS MORGAN**

**A**t the 2025 World Cup Finals in Sun Valley, Idaho, the sport's greatest champions in each discipline gathered to battle one last time and claim their season-long crowns. Overall crystal globes, hoisted by Marco Odermatt and Federica Brignone, capped the event. It was an individual race, however, that stole the show. In the women's super G, Switzerland's Lara Gut-Behrami won decisively,

while overall World Cup winner Brignone claimed the bronze. Between them, American Lindsey Vonn punctuated her successful comeback by winning silver.

The average age of the podium: a wizened 36 years old. In a sport where 30 was once considered the far end of realistic viability for female competitors, that snapshot brings a new reality into focus: Times are changin', and age isn't slowing anyone down.

## **Trending Older**

In October 2024, the Italian Brignone, 34, won the season opener in Sölden, Austria, and broke the record for the oldest woman to win a World Cup race (age 33), set by Elisabeth Görgl in 2014. She went on to break that record nine more times, including notching her first win in downhill and becoming the oldest female overall World Cup champion in spring 2025. Brignone took the latter crown



USSA

Perhaps no athlete better represents the expanded opportunities for female racers than American superstar Lindsey Vonn, who, at 40, became the oldest woman to podium by winning silver in the super G at last season's World Cup Finals in Sun Valley, Idaho.

from Gut-Behrami, who won her second overall title just the year before at age 32.

Meanwhile, Vonn was already the oldest woman on record to finish in the top 30 of a World Cup race, based on her results during the 2024–25 season. Her result in Sun Valley then eclipsed the oldest podium record (age 34), set by Alexandra Meissnitzer in 2008. That feat, at age 40—after nearly six years away from the sport—garnered Vonn a seventh ESPY nomination, for best comeback athlete.

On the other hand, success by older male ski racers is nothing new. France's Johan Clary won silver at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing at age 42. The oldest skier to win a World Cup remains Didier Cuche, at age 37, and Dave Ryding notably won his *first* World Cup at age 35. The speed circuit is populated by scores of men deep into their 30s, some of whom bring their families on the road and celebrate with their young children at the finish. Up until now, that has not been the standard for women, but throughout the World Cup's existence, the average age of race winners has steadily inched up more for women than for men. That age is now 30 years old for women, compared to 27 for men.

### Age Gradually Creeps Up

When American Gretchen Fraser won her Olympic skiing medals in 1948—at

age 28 and after a five-year break from competition due to World War II—the press referred to her as the “unheralded housewife.” Even as ski racing gained professionalism, the sport continued to be viewed as a hobby for women and was not financially viable. After winning World Championship giant slalom bronze in 1962, two-time U.S. Olympian Joan Hannah had to give back her medal-winning skis because selling them might have jeopardized her amateur status. “There was no way I could support myself and race,” says Hannah. Culturally, too, athletics were less welcoming to adult women. After 1960 Olympian Bev [Anderson] Brockway got married, she recalls, Bob Beattie, coach of the budding U.S. Ski Team, “let my parents, my husband and myself know that he didn't want married women on the team.”

In 1968, 18-year-old Kiki Cutter was the first American to win a race on the newly created World Cup. She retired two years later, at age 20. As amateur rules loosened and national team support grew, more women were able to secure sponsorships and pursue ski racing professionally. Austrian superstar Annemarie Moser-Pröll retired in 1975, at age 22, to care for her ailing father. She returned after one season away and racked up 24 of her 62 wins before retiring for good in 1980 at age 26.

Top American women have also stayed in the game progressively longer. The



COURTESY: CINDY HIRSCHFELD

After nearly six years in retirement, Vonn foreran the Birds of Prey downhill last season to prepare for rejoining the circuit.

powerhouse American women who won the Nations Cup in 1982 all retired before age 30: Christin Cooper and Deb Armstrong at age 24; Tamara McKinney and Cindy Nelson at 28 and 29, respectively.

World Champion downhiller (in 1997) Hilary Lindh of the U.S. retired at age 27, while her teammate 1998 Olympic super G champ Picabo Street pushed the age limit to 30, as did slalom star Kristina Koznick, who retired in 2005. Two of Team USA's biggest stars—Vonn and Julia Mancuso—retired (temporarily, as it turned out, for Vonn) at 34 and 33, respectively.

### The Biological Clock Keeps Ticking

Marriage is no longer seen as a barrier. Raising a family while ski racing, however, is a different challenge. Even as women have proven they can balance motherhood and sports in arenas like tennis, soccer, basketball and track and field, a sport as dangerous and travel intensive as ski racing does not lend itself well to raising children.

To date, the only female ski racer to have a child and return to the podium was Ulrike Maier. The Austrian won the 1989 super G world title while pregnant, at age 21, and successfully defended it in 1991, with toddler Melanie in the finish. Maier tragically passed away after crashing in a downhill race in 1994. In 2009, at age 30, American Sarah Schleper finished as high as fifth in a World Cup after having her

son, Lasse. Nobody has combined motherhood with World Cup skiing success since.

### Age: The Undefeated Winner and Still Champion

Older athletes must overcome undeniable athletic disadvantages. As performance director for both Red Bull and the U.S. Ski Team, Per Lundstam spent more than 30 years working with scores of top athletes across a range of ages and sports. “We see that the elasticity and tissue start to go down after age 26, 27,” says Lundstam, who is now the director of Utah's Rowmark Ski Academy. “It's harder for athletes to be jumping and doing explosive moves and fast movements.” He explains that as people age, “their reaction to the muscle is still the same, but then the contraction speed in the muscle to create actions or activations is slower.” Those changes help explain why older athletes are more prevalent in speed events than in the faster-twitch arena of slalom racing.

He notes that the biggest obstacle for older athletes remains injury, which in ski racing is so common as to be inevitable. Brignone suffered a serious injury in her last race of the 2025 season, a low-stakes national championship giant slalom. Her return for this winter's Olympics remains in question. Indeed, repeated injury is what forced Vonn into retirement the first time. “That just complicates the whole scenario of power output, speed, changing direction, elasticity and jumping and explosive movements,” says Lundstam.

### Physiological and Medical Advances Help Prolong Careers

Skiers have a high incidence of not only ACL damage but also acute and overuse injuries to the back, hip, shoulders and ankles. The good news: Repairs can now be done with less-invasive techniques accompanied by more-efficient, personalized rehab and therapeutic protocols, which ultimately allow athletes' bodies to endure longer. American downhiller Jacqueline Wiles has seen the downstream effects of such advances. When she joined the World Cup in 2013, at age 21, she never imagined she would still be racing at age 33. “It was very rare to see anybody into their 30s,” she recalls. “It's been a really cool last decade of women pushing that envelope a little bit more.”

Take Vonn, for example. She retired in 2019 because of unbearable knee pain that also affected her other joints. Five years later, in April 2024, after thoroughly researching options, she had a partial knee replacement. She explained her modest aspirations to her fans on social media: “I hope this helps me lead the active life I've always wanted.”

Getting back on skis with no pain, however, rekindled both the joy of skiing and her competitive fire. “Having more strength in my right leg now means less compensating. It allows me to do more and to ski more like I used to,” Vonn adds. Within months, she was plotting her World Cup return, and in less than a year she found the podium.

Lundstam notes that the optimal process of stress/recovery/growth requires accurate timing. “If you apply the recovery too early or at the wrong time, you actually reverse the growth-factor expressions that you are trying to achieve with the stress from training, so it's a delicate process you are working with,” he explains. Success requires the very best sports science resources as well as a bottomless reservoir of mental and physical grit. Vonn has access to both.

### The Age Advantage

Age also comes with other benefits—in Vonn's case, 18 seasons on the speed circuit. “I think that the knowledge of all the downhill tracks gives me a pretty substantial advantage,” she says. “There are not many women that have run the World Cup courses, and especially the Olympic track, as many times as I have.” That advantage is most pronounced in speed events, which are run on the same tracks year after year.

The mindset advantage, Vonn believes, makes up for any physiological disadvantage. “I don't put as much pressure on myself, I think, as the younger athletes who are in a different mental mind space than I am,” she observes. American downhiller Tricia Mangan, 28, has battled her way up the ranks in tech and speed as both an independent athlete and on the national team. When she watched Brignone ski this season, she saw a clear head at work: “You could just see how freely she skied,” Mangan says. “I think that is only possible when you are really young and a rookie and don't have a ton of pressure/expecta-



NICK HOWE | COURTESY CHRISTIN COOPER

All the members of the legendary U.S. women's 1982 Nation's-Cup winning team retired before age 30. Team ace Tamara McKinney (on shoulders) retired at 28.



At 18, in 1968, Kiki Cutter was the first American, man or woman, to win on the newly launched World Cup circuit. Four World Cup wins later, Cutter retired at 20.



Austrian champion Ulrike Maier is the only World Cup racer to podium after having a child. Increased financial support and medical advancements increase the likelihood for that to happen again.



A young Jackie Wiles (right), a beneficiary of the Lindsey Vonn Foundation, started racing at 21. Wiles, now 33, said it was then rare to see women racing into their 30s.



The press described Gretchen Fraser as an “unheralded housewife” after she became the first American to win Olympic gold.



Lindsey Vonn mentored Lauren Macuga, a 22-year-old rising star, on the way to her first win last season.



Many older female racers are now looking ahead to compete in the 2034 Salt Lake City Olympics at an age inconceivable when they began their racing careers.



Jackie Wiles, a mentor to younger racers now and a recipient of similar support early in her career, celebrates a second-place downhill finish in Cortina last season.

## The powerhouse American women who won the Nations Cup in 1982 all retired before age 30: Christin Cooper and Deb Armstrong at age 24; Tamara McKinney and Cindy Nelson at 28 and 29, respectively.

tions, or when you are a veteran and are at a point with your skiing that you have complete confidence.”

### Sharing the Wealth

The benefits of experience accrue to the other athletes as well. When Wiles first joined the team of veteran speed skiers on the World Cup, “it was extremely inspiring,” she recalls. “Not only did I get to join, but they all took me under their wings.” That included Vonn, who helped Wiles financially, through the Lindsey Vonn Foundation, and by identifying equipment issues nobody else saw. In 2017, the two shared a podium in Cortina for Vonn’s 79th career win.

Wiles made a point to pay it forward to the younger generation. Among them is her frequent roommate on the tour, last season’s 22-year-old breakout star Lauren Macuga.

Meanwhile, Vonn stepped back into the mentorship culture she helped create. “It was like having another friend, but this friend just happened to have all of this knowledge from being the best in the world,” says Macuga. In St. Anton, Austria, Vonn helped Macuga decipher a challenging section of the downhill course: “I couldn’t visualize what to do there and Lindsey was right there.” On super G day, Macuga scored her first career victory.

### Attitude Adjustment

The benefits also come indirectly through changing attitudes. When Vonn started hinting at a comeback last fall, Wiles joked that she would be relieved not to be the oldest racer on the team. After missing full and partial years of competition due to injury, Wiles wondered if people saw her as “too old.” With Vonn’s comeback, that feeling disappeared: “It was like nobody cared about age anymore. It’s always been a big discussion, and all of a sudden that barrier felt like it was lifted,” Wiles says.

It shifted the outlook for younger athletes, too. When Salt Lake City was announced as host for the 2034 Winter



Hilary Lindh, 1997 World Champion downhill, retired at 27 even though she was expected to compete in her fourth Olympics. She now views 27, as “ridiculously young” to retire.



Left to right: U.S. ski teammates Jackie Wiles, Stacey Cook, Laurenne Ross and Alice Kckennis early in their careers.



Olympics, Park City native Macuga knew without hesitation that she wanted to compete. “It put it into perspective for me right then, because I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll be 32 then. I’ll be in my prime, and you can keep going after that.’”

The ability to view a longer runway for an athletic career gives cover for older athletes, takes the pressure off developing ones and replaces ageism with inspiration. In his article for *Sciare* magazine, “Is Lindsey Vonn One of the Most Legendary Athletes in Sports?”, Italian journalist Marco Di Marco called Vonn’s knee “a biomechanical assembly of titanium and will,” and her Instagram profile “a public gym of resilience.”

### What’s the Motivation?

Money would seem an unlikely incentive for Vonn, whose \$2 million or so of lifetime prize money is just one piece of a diverse portfolio of investments, projects and endorsements with top global companies like Red Bull, Under Armour and Rolex. But that’s not the case for most athletes. Female competitors still lag far behind men in pay—none are among the top-100 highest paid athletes per a 2025 story on Yahoo Sports—and ski racing’s compensation pales in comparison to that in fields like tennis and golf. Nevertheless, for the sport’s top athletes it makes financial sense to compete as long as possible. In the 2024–25 season, 20 female ski racers made more than \$100,000 in prize money alone with many hauling in substantially more in endorsements. Plus, superstars like Gut-Behrami and Brig-

none can cement their legacies and lifetime earning capacities in countries where top Alpine skiers are true celebrities and, increasingly, social-media influencers.

On its own, however, money is rarely an incentive. Lindh retired as reigning World Champion and with the prospect of going to her fourth Olympics as a favorite. “I was making way better money than I ever have since—to this day!” she says. “But that was not a factor in any of my decisions.” Looking back, she sees 27 as “ridiculously young” for retirement, but after 13 years on the U.S. ski team, “I was ready to do something new. And I didn’t feel like I wanted to put the same level of effort into ski racing that I knew it required to be successful.”

### Time to Move On

Koznick admits to having a moment of second-guessing as she watched Vonn’s return but remembers wanting to move on with her life and start a family. “It was a hard transition,” she admits, “but I think if I were to do it again, I would have chosen the same time to retire.” While Vonn notes that the ability to freeze eggs can essentially pause the biological clock, the grueling ski racing lifestyle is nonetheless difficult to sustain. Cooper recalls, “I was explicitly told I was ‘too young’ to quit, but I had done pretty much all I’d dreamed of.” That included winning World Cups in multiple disciplines, as well as FIS and Olympic medals. She continues, “That seemed like plenty, in terms of what I might gain that would be new, or refreshing or more satisfying,

against the work and time required to get that last unachieved 10 percent.”

Gut-Behrami talks openly about her desire to start a family and of what her friend and former rival Anna Veith described to her as the joy of “waking up and realizing that you have the responsibility of another little one and not the responsibility of yourself.”

### Vonn’s Legacy Is Beyond Records

Whether or not legacy is a part of Vonn’s motivation, it is part of the conversation. Cooper admires how Vonn rewrote not only skiing history but also the standards of fitness and professionalism. She sees it as unfortunate timing that Vonn’s ground-breaking accomplishments were eclipsed by Mikaela Shiffrin’s annihilation of World Cup records. With Vonn’s comeback, Cooper says, “she is effectively writing herself back into the history books, where she belongs.”

Vonn has mixed feelings when she hears that her success has motivated others, because she thinks women are capable of playing sports much longer than they actually do, even without her example. “It’s clear that you can physically still do it, as long as you’re motivated and your body holds up,” she says. “I’m really excited about the potential for more women to believe in themselves and believe that their careers can be longer than what others expect.”

*Frequent contributor and two-time Olympian Edie Thys Morgan profiled broadcaster Chris Ernst in the July-August 2025 issue.*