

Holly Flanders

Finding “the joy” in hurtling down an icy mountainside at 70 mph, Flanders led U.S. downhillers and collected three World Cup victories in team’s Nations Cup-winning era.

By Andy Bigford

Holly Flanders had somehow managed to rise up through the junior ranks to reach the U.S. Ski Team even though she considered herself to be a “slow poke,” always grinding on the details while trying to catch up with the fastest skiers. It was at a fall 1979 on-snow training camp in the Austrian Alps when things finally came to a head. She was tired of finishing 15- or 20-something in World Cup downhills, and on this day she was weary of always being one or two seconds behind her teammates in timed GS runs, even though those training partners happened to represent the best U.S. team ever assembled, with the likes of Tamara McKinney and Christin Cooper. It suddenly dawned on Flanders that she should “stop trying so hard” for just a moment, and instead absorb the view of the snow-capped peaks on the horizon. “For the first time **at the training camp**, I noticed the beauty of the surroundings, and realized how lucky I was to be there.”

With her mind free, Flanders focused on “the joy” and won the very next training run; the life-balance discovery changed her career trajectory...and her life. Two years later she would win World Cup downhills in Bad Gastein, Austria, and then Arosa, Switzerland, ultimately finishing second in the downhill standings for the 1981-82 season. That year, the cohesive U.S. women did something never accomplished before or since: They won the women’s Nations Cup, the elusive trophy that has historically been the province of Austria. Under the old scoring system, only the top 15 finishers earned World Cup points, with 25 points to the winner. Flanders’ totaled 90, and the U.S. women edged Germany by 57 points.

Thirty years later, Flanders’ middle son Alex, who she’d taught to ski (and with whom she would experience an emotional roller coaster of peaks and valleys), stood on the start ramp of the X Games Big Air contest in Aspen, broadcast worldwide by ESPN. Of all the lessons Alex had received from mom, he thought of this one: “Take in the beauty of the scenery.” Alex looked out across the Roaring Fork Valley, flipped and spun his way to the

gold medal, and then collected another title in the World Championships slopestyle at **Park City** the next week. “It made a difference for me,” says Alex, who nominated Holly for the Hall of Fame.

Holly Flanders grew up in Deerfield, N.H., close to Manchester and 70 miles north of Boston. Urged on by her older sister Debbie, also a strong ski racer who would go on to coach for 30 years, Holly started skiing as a toddler and then racing at age 7 at nearby Mount Sunapee. While attending Burke Mountain Academy in high school, she showed enough promise to be elevated to the USST. A strong glider who had to learn how to feather her turns at 70 mph, she eventually mastered the technical aspects and became dominant, especially on cold snow.

As the U.S.’s top ranked downhiller from 1982 to 1986, Flanders would eventually win a third World Cup race in Mont Sainte-Anne, Quebec, in 1984, record 10 podium results, and finish in the top 10 on 27 occasions. Along with Cindy Nelson, who had started a few years earlier and overlapped with Flanders, their results set speed team benchmarks for other downhillers to build on. Picabo Street, Hilary Lindh, and Lindsey Vonn would do just that.

Flanders raced in two Olympics and two World Championships as a 10-year member of the team, and also won a pair of national titles. After retiring from the team, she would win the 1987 Women’s **Downhill** Pro Tour, and then go on to become the Director of Skiing at Park City, where her personality and upbeat attitude made her the ideal resort representative. She developed programs for women to improve their skiing, holding women’s clinics for 26 years. She also did race commentating for CBS, ESPN, Turner Sports and GGP.

While still ski racing, she had qualified for the Olympic Road Cycling Trials in 1984. Her physical conditioning no doubt helped her become an anomaly during her career: She never suffered an ACL injury while racing (though she says she caught every cold and flu that went through the team). After retirement, she jumped on a bike in the off-season and brought home a dozen Masters national mountain bike titles.

The early 1980s U.S. women’s team was indeed a rarity, and Flanders still marvels at how the coaches, trainers, and administrators of that era, including Michel Rudigoz, **Ernst Hager**, John Atkins and John McMurtry, were able to create and maintain a healthy team

dynamic in what has always been an individual sport. It wasn't that the coaches didn't disagree, they did, sometimes harshly. But they would hash it out behind closed doors, and when they emerged, they presented a unified plan that everyone bought into without second thoughts. Especially Flanders. "She was a coach's dream," recalls Atkins, who was the team's tough-as-nails conditioning coach. The Nations Cup has been a near-impossible quest for the U.S.—with just the 1982 women's title in 50-plus years—largely because the Austrians are so darn fast, but also because the U.S. tends to have the superstars (Bode, Lindsey, Mikaela) but not the supporting cast of an entire team. The early '80s had their superstar in Tamara McKinney, the first U.S. skier to win the overall World Cup, and then plenty of stars who all got along and fed off each other, Flanders high among them.

"Associate with the best" worked then, and it is one of **the seven decisions that determine destiny** outlined in Flanders' forthcoming book, titled *Skiing Downhill Fast*. Both a business primer and look back at her ski career, Flanders concludes that it's the decisions you make, not **only** talent, that lead to success. Her advice includes focusing on one thing and committing wholly to it, experiencing the beauty (see above), and setting your own style rather than copying others.

Flanders had three children with her husband, Todd Schlopy, an NFL placekicker turned motion picture cameraman (and the cousin of former U.S. Ski Team member Erik Schlopy). They divorced after having their third, and Holly raised the family primarily as a single parent. She now lives in Heber, Utah, with her youngest son, Tyler, who is 19. Alex lives nearby and her daughter, Beth Anne, and grandson live in California. Flanders stays busy these days as a motivational speaker and a wellness coach (when there isn't a pandemic), and the book is natural extension of all she's learned.

## Career accomplishments

Born: Dec. 26, 1957 (Arlington, Mass.)

1964: Starts racing at Mount Sunapee, N.H.

1977: Earns U.S. Ski Team spot after attending Burke Mountain Academy.

1980: Races in first Olympics in 1980 at Lake Placid, then again in 1984 at Sarajevo.

1982: Wins her first two World Cup downhills and helps U.S. women to only Nations Cup title while finishing second in the downhill standings.

1986: Retires from U.S. Ski Team with three World Cup wins, 10 top three finishes, and 27 results in the top 10.

1987: Becomes Director of Skiing at Park City; eventually hosts women's ski clinics for 26 years at various resorts.

2011: Watches her son Alex win X Games gold, World Championships slopestyle gold, and gold and bronze on the Winter Dew Tour.