

Spider Sabich

The face and personality that drove the popularity of professional skiing died tragically and far too soon, but left a lasting impact on the sport and its people.

When Spider Sabich walked away from the World Cup in 1971, and onto the professional tour, he pioneered a ski racing revolution. A year later when the restrictions on amateur skiers were at their peak at the 1972 Olympics, Sabich was on his way to winning his second consecutive World Pro Skiing Title, eclipsing the earning power possible for his former US Ski Team teammates. He went on to popularize the tour and the dual format, enticing top American and European racers who defected from the constraints of their national teams to the freedom and opportunity presented by professional racing.

When Sabich was murdered in 1976, just before embarking on the next phase of his career, it was a life cut short, and a legacy unreckoned. Finally, 46 years after his tragic death, the ski world comes together to remember his contributions to the sport, as an athlete and as a person, and to place him rightfully in its pantheon of champions.

From the moment he entered the world on Jan 10, 1945, Vladimir Peter Sabich Jr would be known simply as Spider. His father Vlad, a B-52 pilot turned California Highway Patrolman, and mother Frances, the local postmistress in their hometown of Kyburz, CA, believed in discipline, education and the benefits of outdoor activity. The three Sabich kids — Mary, Spider and Steve (“Pinky”) — learned to ski and to race at tiny Edelweiss Ski Area, and learned to race among coach Lutz Aynedter’s “Hornets.”

Spider and Pinky, part of the fast crew known as “The Highway 50 Boys,” secured skiing scholarships at the University of Colorado, and in 1963 Spider moved to Boulder. There he studied aeronautical engineering and joined Bob Beattie’s CU Buffs. Among his teammates were future Olympians Billy Kidd, Moose Barrows, Jimmy Heuga, Ni Orsi and Jere Elliot.

In the spring of 1967, at age 22, Spider made his World Cup at Jackson Hole, WY. He finished 6th, and the following year, tackled the fledgling circuit full time as a member of the US Ski Team, coached by Beattie. That season, he also caught the attention of Robert Redford who was researching his 1969 feature film *Downhill Racer*. The film’s homegrown hero Dave Chappellet’s go-for-broke style was largely inspired by Spider.

In medal position after the first run of the 1968 Olympic slalom, Spider ended up 5th, matching Kidd’s GS result as the best American skiing performance in those Games, and heralding a bright future. Spider ended his first full season on the World Cup with a win in front of 5,000 fans at Heavenly Valley — a mere 30 miles from Kyburz.

Over the next two seasons on the World Cup, Sabich racked up three more podiums, and 11 more top-10 results (for a career total of 16). Meanwhile, Beattie — with Kidd as his marquis athlete — had moved on to start with World Pro Skiing (WPS) Tour. Sabich was increasingly frustrated by the constraints of both the World Cup and the US Ski Team, and the hand-to-mouth existence of American ski racers.

In January 1971, after his first run at a World Cup in Germany, Spider flew back to the states to join the WPS Tour. Three days later he won his first pro race in Buffalo, NY, pocketing a check for \$1250, more than ten times the \$200 annual US Ski Team stipend. He went on to win seven races, beat Kidd in the final race, winning the Overall Tour title and \$21,188. The following season Spider defended his title with nine more wins, and broke his own record for prize money, making more than \$50,000 (\$344,000 today).

The WPS Tour brought the relatively unknown sport of ski racing to the American people, in accessible venues across the country—from mighty Aspen and Vail to tiny Buck Hill and Beech Mountain. The easily understandable head-to-head format brought the drama, excitement and fun of ski racing up close, connecting it to a new, enthusiastic fan base. It also attracted TV and sponsors.

In four years, the Tour's prize money grew from \$92,500 to more than \$500,000. Spider's laid back California vibe, easy humor and contagious joie de vivre, made the articulate athlete a marketer's dream, and he earned another \$150,000 plus annually from sponsors.

Atop that sponsor list was K2 Skis, a fast-growing brand that perfectly matched Spider's work hard/play hard mentality. He tirelessly tested skis, worked trade shows and press events, and visited retailers across the country. In Europe, where the American ski companies had previously garnered little credibility, Spider represented the free-spirited legitimacy of American skiing, and American skis.

With his athletic and financial success Spider became the embodiment of everything Beattie had imagined World Pro Skiing could be: American ski racers making a living on their own terms, on their own turf, and using it as a springboard to their professional lives. He enjoyed both a life and a lifestyle similar to what European ski stars enjoyed. He built a home in Aspen's exclusive "Starwood" neighborhood, earned his pilot's license and bought a twin-engine Piper Aztec that he often flew to competitions.

Meanwhile, restrictions on amateurs continued to tighten, crescendoing with the disqualification of Austria's top skier, Karl Schranz, from the 1972 Sapporo Olympics for "professionalism." Athletes like Tyler Palmer, Hank Kashiwa and Otto Tschudi, enticed by Spider's success and lifestyle, traveled directly from the Games to join the Pro Tour.

Spider welcomed the influx of competition, generously mentoring incoming athletes, teaching them the range of athletic, social and business skills it took to make it as a pro.

Eventually, the opportunity enticed 1968 triple Gold medalist Jean Claude Killy out of retirement. Spider and Killy's epic battle for the 1973 season title, recounted in the film, "Spider and the Frenchman," ended when Spider crashed off a bump, badly injuring his neck and back.

Nonetheless, it was Spider, clutching his red white and blue K2 skis in his signature Demetre sweater, who graced the cover of GQ magazine in November 1974. He remained the face of the American pro tour, and the picture of success.

As a brand ambassador for Snowmass Spider deftly navigated all aspects of Aspen's scene, encouraging young racers while comfortably mingling along the spectrum of cowboys and ski bums to the celebrities and the ultra-rich. At one of the tour's celebrity Pro Am events in 1972, he met French singer, Claudine Longet, who later moved in with him.

Plagued by injuries old and new (in all seven broken legs, knee, back, shoulder and neck injuries), Spider missed the entire 1975 season. Along with Beattie, he was actively plotting his post-skiing career, utilizing his wealth of skills, sponsor connections and contacts.

By March of 1976, Spider had decided to quit ski racing and break up with Longet. On March 21, Sabich returned home after a day of training at Buttermilk, and Longet shot and killed him in his own bathroom.

As the ski world reeled from losing a favorite son, his impact endured. K2 built on Spider's success to become a major international brand. In 1993, Bernard Knauss became the first pro skier to break the \$1 million mark in winnings, and World Cup skiers now openly earn sponsor and prize money. Amateur and pro skiers face off with no eligibility restrictions on today's revived Pro Tour, and at the Spider Sabich Race Arena in Snowmass people of all ages come to experience the rush of side by side racing. As the title of the documentary on his life assures us, Spider Lives.

Born: Jan 10, 1945 (Sacramento, CA)

1963-67: Attended and skied for University of Colorado, Boulder

1967: Competes in first World Cup at Jackson Hole, WY, finishing 6th.

1968: 5th place in Grenoble Olympic SL (ties for best US result with Billy Kidd)

1968: Wins World Cup SL at Heavenly Valley

1968-1971: Achieves three podiums and 18 top-10 results in Olympic and World Cup competition.

1971: Debuts on World Pro Skiing Tour, winning 7 races and the Overall Title

1972: Wins nine races, defends WPS title and breaks his own record for prize money, making more than \$50,000.

1973: Wins three races and is 3rd on the Overall Tour; sustains back and neck injuries in the final race.

1974 Comes back from injury with two wins, but sustains another knee injury.

Ambassador for Snowmass and namesake of Spider Sabich Race Arena

