

# Downhillers Going the Distance

*The Olympic Ladies Reunite in Vail.*

BY EDIE THYS MORGAN



From left: Former racers Pia Riva McIsaac, Starr Walton Hurley, Bev Anderson Brockway and Joan Hannah (not shown) constitute the core of the “Olympic Ladies,” who have known each other since the 1960 Games and reconvene each winter to ski fast and swap stories.

Every winter, for five days around the beginning of March, a group of very fast women congregate on the slopes of Colorado’s Vail Mountain. They have a set routine: arrive on a Sunday, stock up on groceries, pile into a condo and ski five days straight.

The women follow routes that avoid crowds and maximize access to the wide-open slopes where they can open the throttle. They jokingly refer to themselves as the Arctic Blonds, a nod to their shared hair color. Most people simply call them

the Olympic Ladies, as they have known each other since the 1960 Winter Olympics.

Bev (Anderson) Brockway gets credit for first organizing the reunion some 20 years ago. Attendance has peaked at 14 and included an international roster of Olympians and national team members. “The group morphs and changes through the years,” says Bev, “but Joan [Hannah], Pia [Riva McIsaac], Starr [Walton Hurley] and I have been the core.”

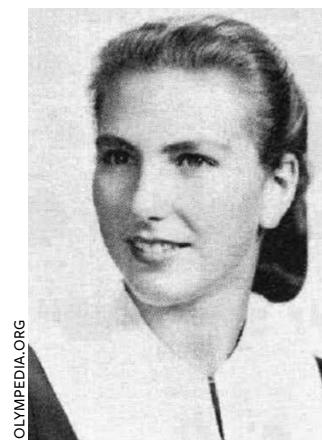
All four women found ski racing from different places on the globe. Pia was the second of 10 children and learned to ski at



The Olympic Ladies competed in an era when women could not train with the men. The cover blurb for *Life’s* February 1960 Olympic issue notes that “pretty U.S. skiers warm up for the girls’ Olympic ski team.”

the vacation house her father built in Selva, in Val Gardena, Italy. She started ski racing after high school and quit interpreter school to pursue the sport. She went on to win 10 national titles, compete in the 1960 Olympics and return for the 1964 Olympics after a brief retirement.

After those Games, American coach Bob Beattie agreed to support her on a spring race tour in the U.S., and Pia secured a job as a ski instructor in Vail. There she discovered Colorado powder: “I couldn’t believe how much fun it was,” she says, “just like nothing, having a little fluff on top of your skis.” She met her



Starr Walton



Beverley Anderson



Pia Riva



Joan Hannah

future husband in California, where she eventually settled.

Bev learned to ski at a weekend slope near her hometown of Mullan, Idaho, where lifts and a lesson cost \$1, and skiing was a winter sport girls could do. She took to it, and on Sundays after playing the organ at church, she’d bolt to the slopes immediately. When she qualified for national and then international competitions, the town collected money in coffee cans to fund her expenses.

Despite having no formal training, the University of Washington honors student won all four national titles in 1958 and qualified as one of six American women on the 1960 Olympic team. Following the Games she hit the spring racing tour in Europe, cementing her European friendships.

Starr’s family was involved in starting virtually every ski area west of Donner Summit in California—including Nyack, Rainbow Tavern, Soda Springs, Donner Summit and Sugar Bowl. Her grandparents built Soda Springs, and her parents founded Donner Ski Ranch. “Skiing was a way of life for me,” she recalls. “It was what my family did.”

Starr raced for Sugar Bowl, coached by her father, and won her first race at age five. She won the prestigious Silver Belt race at age 14. By 1963 she was a national champion and competed in the 1964 Olympics in Innsbruck, where she was the top American downhiller.

On the other side of the country, in Franconia, New Hampshire, Joan was also born into ski racing. Her father, Sel, was a four-event (downhill, slalom, jumping, cross-country) skier at Dartmouth. He was a member of the U.S. Nordic Combined

team before becoming a coach and ski area designer. All four Hannah children also raced and Joan would make it her life’s work. She competed in the 1960 and 1964 Olympics, won giant slalom bronze in the 1962 World Championships and racked up six national titles. She earned her ski instructor certification in 1967 and has been on the job ever since.

## THE VAIL CONNECTION

By best recollection, the reunions started around 2004. Bev bought a condo in Vail in the ’80s, where she and Pia coordinated annual trips. There, they reconnected with Joan who, along with Pia, taught skiing for 27 years before moving home in 1992 to take care of her mother. Bev and Starr had stayed connected through a Northern California Olympians group, so the latter joined the group, which by then included American teammate Linda (Meyers) Tikalsky and German skier Anneliese (Meggl) Freeman. Coming later were 1958 FIS team member Nonie (Foley) Shaw, 1960 torchbearer Babette Hauelsen and 1964 Olympian Barbara (Ferries) Henderson. Penny Pitou, double silver medalist in 1960, joined the group for a single trip.

Vail was also home to 1960 Olympic teammates Dave and Renie Gorsuch. “Without their generosity, it would be much harder for us to get to the hill and even to Vail,” says Bev. Renie, and Dave before he passed away in 2021, provided the women with the latest equipment, a home base in Vail Village and annual hosted dinners. Dave often joined the women skiing, while Renie was typically on European buying trips for the store.

In 2020 the women wrapped up their

trip just as Covid struck; the following year—vaccinated, then tested on arrival—they kept on schedule. Some of the women have dropped out over the years for health- or travel-related reasons. For others, nothing—not Covid, glaucoma, macular degeneration, cancer, broken bones or replaced joints—has gotten in the way. They do not dwell on their infirmities, Joan explains: “We don’t talk about much. We just go do it.”

## THE ROUTINE

Every morning in the condo, Joan, the only one of the group on Eastern time, gets up and makes the coffee. “It takes me a couple tries to make it strong enough for Pia,” she says. The women hop on the bus to Bridge Street, and Gorsuch, where they pick up and store their gear. From there, it’s up the mountain on Gondola One.

With their history as Vail instructors, Joan and Pia have crafted a route with minimal crowds. They take a warmup run on Ramshorn, then head to Game Creek Bowl and Pia’s favorite run, Lost Boy. “It’s a green slope, but it has some ups and downs and little changes of terrain,” she says. “And you can go as fast as you’d like.”

From the top of Game Creek they see when the classes come down from Lionshead then move to frontside cruisers like Avanti and Pickeroon. “It’s got to be groomed and good going for the ancient skiers who ski fast together,” says Joan.

## TIMES HAVE CHANGED

Though their competition days predated the World Cup, the women raced in classic venues like the Hahnenkamm in Kitzbühel, Austria; the Coppa Foemina in



From left: 1960 Olympians Dave Gorsuch (U.S.), Pia Riva Mclsaac (Italy), Linda Meyers Tikalsky (U.S.), Bev Anderson Brockway (U.S.), Joan Hannah (U.S.) and Anneliese Meggl Freeman (Germany).

Abetone, Italy; the Coppa Grischa in Lenzerheide, Switzerland, as well as St. Moritz and Davos; and the Arlberg-Kandahar races throughout the Alps.

It was an era when *Sports Illustrated* described these female Olympians with terms like chunky and chubby, the friendly blonde, the bouncy blonde, the blonde chatterbox and the cute little brown-haired number. Women were not allowed to train with men, even if they were faster than them, and were held to different social norms than their male teammates.

Bev still has a letter from Beattie telling her “he really didn’t think it was appropriate for married women to be ski racing,” she says. And yet it was okay for male racers to be married. After the 1964 Olympics, Starr points out, many people celebrated Billy Kidd and Jimmie Heuga winning silver and bronze medals, but few know that Jean Saubert won bronze and silver in those same Games.

What the women remember most, however, is the family feel in the ski racing community. Bev recalls friendships with European male racers like Roger Staub and Jean Vuarnet and the kindness of Austrian Toni Spiess and others who coached her, waxed her skis and let her train with them. “I became a visual learner,” she says.

Although they did not find Beattie a good women’s coach, Joan explains that he staked a claim for American ski racing on European turf: “Beattie put the U.S. on the map. He made the FIS point set-up so that

the racing in the U.S. also counted on the international circuit. He made that a big possibility,” she says. That led to the World Cup, which Beattie co-created in 1966.

### KEEPING PACE

Out on the hill, the women are all still downhillers at heart. Pia, at 88 the oldest and fastest of the group, takes the lead. Bev, citing medical necessity, follows closely behind her. “I have macular degeneration, and I love these great big downhill GS turns that Pia makes. I like it because we can ski fast!” Joan and Starr follow at a safe distance, making sweeping, disciplined turns.

“Among our group of four, I am the best,” Joan asserts, and none dispute it. This is due, in large part, to her 57 consecutive years as a certified ski instructor and her winter gig coaching the Flying Fifties program at Loon Mountain, New Hampshire. “She used to rotate on one side on one turn and do the other one very well,” Pia explains. “Now she does it fabulous on both sides. I mean, she is *really* a good skier.”

Joan readily cedes top honors within the larger group to Barbara (Ferries) Henderson—a bronze medalist in downhill at the 1962 World Championships and the group’s most recent addition. Henderson’s husband, Canadian Olympian Scott Henderson, is among the few spouses who join the group.

They maintain a healthy clip. “We

ski too fast,” Joan admits. The women are careful not to overstep their limits, however. They don’t ski over their heads, don’t ski on weekends and don’t ski bumps. Nonetheless, there have been some accidents over the years. Joan was hit by a snowboarder. Starr slipped and cracked her pelvis in two places (taking herself to the emergency room on the bus).

After a pit stop at Wildwood or Mid-Vail, Pia is usually the first to call it a day, at around 2 p.m., while the rest take another couple of runs. Other than a traditional dinner at the Gorsuch’s, they cook in the condo each evening and enjoy each other’s company.

### STAYING YOUNG

Ski racing may have changed from the days of being a tight community and an amateur pursuit, but the sport itself has evolved in a good way. “If it weren’t for the skis and the grooming, we wouldn’t be skiing anymore,” Starr notes. She stays in shape by walking two miles every morning with her dogs and skis “regularly, but wisely” midweek at Northstar, Sugar Bowl and, occasionally, Palisades Tahoe.

Joan spends her summers tending her garden and her winters building her pottery inventory and teaching at Loon. Bev has wound down her successful real estate business but still manages some properties. She maintains a regular pickleball routine, though after suffering a broken nose on the court, she’s promised her kids to no longer run back for overhead shots. Pia, who lives on a walnut orchard in Davis, travels to see family in Italy and still regularly visits their former cattle ranch off the grid in California’s Mendocino County. When she saddles up her horse, she reluctantly stays in the arena.

In addition to running Sacramento’s sister city program, Starr does motivational speaking, using her Olympic experience to spread the message of sport’s enduring value. “I didn’t win a gold medal that you can hang around your neck, but I won a gold medal for myself that day because I did the very best I could do,” she says. Her description of the women’s yearly reunion underscores her positive attitude: “Light and with a song in our heart. That’s how we ski and have a great time.” ❄️

*Two-time Olympian Edith Thys Morgan is a regular contributor to Skiing History.*