

The author stands near the top of the World Cup Super G trail at Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy. The FIS Masters Cup Super G starts just below the World Cup start.

Opposite: First time's the charm! The author on the podium after the Super G in Cortina!



STORY BY LISA BALLARD
PHOTOS BY JACK AND LISA BALLARD

GOING FOR A GLOBE

HOW A LOCAL 55-YEAR-OLD SKI RACER WON A WORLD TITLE

Developing world-class ski racers is part of the fabric of the Upper Valley. Countless US Ski Team Members, including defending Olympic slalom champion Mikaela Shiffrin, age 22, have honed their skills on our local mountains. Mikaela could potentially rule the women's World Cup for another decade. At age 39, New Hampshire native Bode Miller, the most successful American man in alpine ski racing, is on the cusp of retirement. But what if a skier wants to compete at an international level into his or her 40s, 50s, 60s—and beyond?

The Fédération Internationale de Ski (FIS), the international governing body for snow sports, sanctions over 40 masters' world cups around the globe each winter. Athletes ages 30 and over compete in five-year age groups, vying for the overall title among their peers. In addition, the FIS awards season-long discipline titles in Super G, giant slalom (GS), and slalom. There are no downhill in international masters racing. There are also no coaches, gear technicians, dietitians, masseurs, agents, or lucrative sponsorships. Athletes on the international masters circuit are on their own to train, coordinate their travel, tune their skis, and handle a myriad of other details while pursuing their ski-racing goals.



Clockwise from top: A racer approaches the finish during the FIS Masters Cup at Cortina d'Ampezzo. Muriel Jay (France), the author, and Silvia Giacosa (Italy) show off their globes.

Opposite, top: A post-race lunch spot with a view of the Dolomites. Bottom: The author shows off her hardware after winning a Super G in Valle Nevado, Chile.



That said, FIS masters racers do have three things in common with younger World Cup stars: a love of ski racing, the need for speed, and a desire to win a “globe,” the iconic trophy that looks like a cut-glass golf ball atop a hollow glass tee.

A masters racer for almost 30 years and a regular on the podium at the US Alpine Masters Championships, I dreamed of going for a globe, but as a self-employed adult without extraordinary financial resources, I needed to pick my moment. That moment came last winter. At age 55, I would be the youngest in my age group so, in theory, the spryest. I could still hang with the fastest 30-somethings on the American masters circuit, but I knew that wouldn't last forever. What's more, the dollar was strong—a good time to travel abroad.

Chile

The FIS Masters Cup begins each year in South America, typically at Valle Nevado, La Parva, and/or El Colorado, three massive interconnected ski resorts

perched at 12,000 feet in the Andes above Santiago, Chile. Last year, the opener included two Super G's and a GS at Valle Nevado, then a slalom at La Parva, so I packed my ski bags, brimming with excitement about visiting a place where I had never skied before and wondering who would show up.

Winning an FIS Masters globe is a points chase. A skier's best nine finishes count, with the finals—a GS and a slalom—worth double points. Attending the finals is a must, but otherwise, race locations are at each competitor's discretion. Two of the top female masters racers in the world were in my class, Muriel Jay from France and Silvia Giacosa from Italy, but they didn't show up in Chile. If I skied well, I would have a jump on both women going into winter.

September is the beginning of the South American spring. Endangered Andean condors soared on thermals within a few feet of the small cluster of hotels at Valle Nevado. The weather was glorious, sunny and warm during the





Top: View down the race hill in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Bottom: Slalom action on the FIS Masters Cup in Cortina.

day but dipping below freezing at night, making the snow conditions bombproof early, then soupy by afternoon.

On the first race day, inspection for the two Super G's started at 7am, exceptionally early in hopes of completing both races before the warm afternoon temperatures turned the track to mush. Dawn broke as I got off the chairlift at the top of the mountain. Intending to use the terrain between the summit and the starting gate to warm up, I made cautious turns in the flat light. Suddenly one of my ultra-sharp edges caught on an unseen frozen lump just as I came onto a 500-foot headwall. I slammed onto my back and started sliding headfirst down the icy face.

"I could die here!" shouted the voice inside my head as I accelerated down, down. Stopping required an adept roll such that the edges of both skis engaged fully. Otherwise, the leverage from my extra-long speed skis with their strong bindings would surely take out a knee. Three times I tried to self-arrest, but each time an unseen bump threw me back into a headfirst slide. On the fourth try near the bottom of the headwall, I veered enough toward the uneven edge of the piste and finally stopped.

Another American, who had seen the fall, skied up to me. "Are you okay?" he asked, handing me my ski poles and helping me up. "It's going to leave a mark," I chuckled, shaken but trying to sound upbeat.

My left hip throbbed from my cart-wheeling crash, but aided by large doses of ibuprofen, I managed to ace both Super G's and the GS the next day. I rode the high into the last event, the slalom, blasting out of the start, and then found myself outside the course at the fifth gate. The strength had suddenly evaporated from my left leg, which screamed from the hip to the knee despite the painkillers. It worsened by the hour. Two days later, when I got off the plane at home, I could barely walk. A large hematoma had created crippling pressure under the iliotibial (IT) band, the connective tissue along the outer thigh. The only cure was time. Luckily, the rest of the ski season was two months away.

My left leg was weak but better by the time the chairlifts opened in the Northern Hemisphere in November. By mid December, the FIS Masters Cup resumed in Europe. No surprise, Jay and Giacosa topped the result sheets after each event. I wondered how I would stack up against them, and though I longed to travel from race to race all winter in Europe, I couldn't abandon work and family.

From the beginning, I figured 15 starts would give me a reasonable shot at a globe, allowing for a few subpar days, like the slalom in La Parva, yet plenty of other chances to get points. I patiently waited for my next four races—two Super G's, a GS, and a slalom—which would be in Park City, Utah, a race venue I knew well. My competition didn't show up there either, and the golds were mine, a good confidence builder before heading to their home snow.

Italy and the Czech Republic

I chose back-to-back weekends in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, and Pec pod Snezkou in the Czech Republic for a total of five races. Cortina offered three starts, Super G, GS, and slalom. I was curious to visit this famous European resort, the site of the 1956 Winter Olympics and an annual stop on the women's World Cup. Pec pod Snezkou was located two hours from Prague, a city I longed to tour. My plan allowed me to see Prague midweek and then pick up two more starts, GS and slalom, before traveling home.

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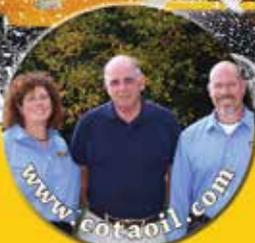
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2 The author (third from left) on the podium with the other racers in her age group, women ages 55 to 59. **3**

The races in Cortina were an eye-opener. Over 300 racers competed each day, including more than 100 women, on the Tofana Olympia run. I bested Jay and Giacosa in the Super G, but both outskied me in the technical events. I had excuses—jet lag, new place, new terrain, new food, new everything.

Jay and Giacosa did not go to the Czech Republic, though 280 other racers were there. It was one of the high points of the winter for the cultural experience and my surprise win among all women in the GS. Pec pod Snezkou, the largest ski resort in the Czech Republic, is in the Giant Mountains, the highest range in a country with rolling topography and elevations similar to Vermont's Green Mountains. In addition to alpine skiers, hundreds of cross-country skiers and winter hikers pulling kids in sleds crowded the slopes and woody trails. The mundane architectural remnants of the Soviet era were painted happy colors, and the mood of the resort was friendly and upbeat.

Then more bad luck. A stomach virus leveled me on the overseas flight home. The debacle landed me in the hospital on



an IV, then in bed for almost two weeks. When I finally got back on skis, the FIS Masters Cup finals were a mere week away, and I was even weaker than after the injury to my IT band.

The Finals

The field was smaller at the finals the first weekend in April, in Abetone, Italy. The ski resort, located in Northern Tuscany, had no snow except for the shell of ice on its race trail. Racers had to hike a quarter-mile down a grassy slope from the finish area to the gondola base. The lack of snow kept everyone away who wasn't in contention for a globe. Among the dozen women in my age group, Jay and Giacosa were in the draw along with an Austrian named Brigitte Unger. The four of us started the weekend in a four-way tie for first. With the snow melting fast and the GS needing a longer run, race officials flipped the schedule, running the GS first—more bad luck for me.

I had budgeted one day to get on my skis after the overseas flight, figuring I only needed to ski into the top three in the slalom on day two, when jet lag hits

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the worst. On day three, feeling better, I would race the GS, my stronger event, hoping for a win and enough points to earn the coveted crystal trophy for my age group.

I charged down the GS but misjudged one critical turn just above the flats, bleeding speed. Determined, I kept pushing, but when I crossed the finish line, the scoreboard showed me in second place, .2 seconds behind Giacosa. Unger finished third and a devastated Jay finished fourth. I would need to ace the slalom to overtake the Italian.

The next day, Jay pulled herself together, winning the slalom. Giacosa finished second, and I nabbed third, only .5 seconds off Jay's pace. I skied my best slalom in recent memory, but it wasn't good enough. I ended up third for the season in my group. Later that day, I graciously accepted a small globe for my efforts. It was a globe, though not the one I had set out to earn eight months earlier. Then the emcee announced the winners of each discipline.

"The overall winner for Super G is Lisa Densmore Ballard from the United States." The crowd exploded with applause and cheers, as the other Americans pushed me toward the stage. I had forgotten about the discipline titles. Overwhelmed with happiness, I hugged the enormous crystal globe. I was the first American woman to win the overall Super G title on the FIS Masters circuit! Again, it wasn't the globe I had set out to win. It was even better.

There's a saying in ski racing circles that old ski racers never retire, they just go downhill. The FIS Masters Cup lets athletes at any age push themselves to their personal best, while offering a bonus: the chance to travel to some fascinating places. I can't wait to do it again! 🏔️



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