



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

Donna Weinbrecht's life has been about getting things done, no matter what obstacles have stood in her path. She started out as a figure skater as a young girl but became more interested in skiing while growing up in West Milford. When she arrived as a ninth-grader at West Milford High School in 1978, she and her best friend, Juli-Anne Warll, wanted to get involved in activities. But there was a slight problem.

"We were freshmen, and as any new high schoolers finding their way, wanted to join in activities," Donna recalled. "We loved sports but were not attracted to the traditional outlets. Juli-Anne's family moved into West Milford and her parents were ski instructors from Canada and encouraged our small lake community to ski."

The catch was that West Milford, even with its location in northern Passaic County that's also in close proximity to the state's prime winter resorts, didn't have a ski team. So the two freshmen, with support from their families, campaigned the student body, circulated petitions (needing at least 100 signatures), and even found someone willing to coach. Their gym teacher was West Milford football coach Shawn Poppe, and he agreed to lead them. So they took their case before the Board of Education, and the adults listened and agreed to launch the team.

"We got the go-ahead to start the West Milford ski team in our sophomore year," Donna said. "And we were very successful from the get-go."

That's a nice story in itself, but it's far from the end of what Donna Weinbrecht accomplished in the sport. Some 14 years later, she won a Gold Medal at the 1992 Winter Olympics in France, in Freestyle Moguls. It was the first time her specialty event was contested at the Olympics, and she made the most of the opportunity. Weinbrecht was picked for the U.S. Freestyle Team in the late 1980s, and over the next 14 years, competed in a total of three Olympics, was a five-time World Cup title winner, won 46 individual World Cup events, and seven U.S. National Championships. In the year before her Olympic victory, she won the 1991 World Championship. She was inducted into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame in 2004, a monumental achievement for someone from New Jersey. Amazingly, Weinbrecht's prowess as a freestyle skier came in a roundabout way.

"I raced throughout my West Milford years, and as much as I loved to ski, I was more attracted to the discipline of freestyle mogul skiing than racing gates," she said.

"I graduated in '83 and went to an art school in New Jersey, which eventually closed after I had been there for a year and a half. Coincidence? Who knows. So I told my parents that I wanted to try to make the U.S. Freestyle Ski Team and moved up into our winter home in Killington, Vermont. I worked up at the mountain, self-trained, and took myself to all of my eastern competitions."

Mogul skiing consists of a timed run on a steep heavily moguled course. Moguls are a series of bumps or mounds in the snow; the skiers are judged on their turns, jumps, and speed. While training herself, her motto was simple: "If the guys can do it, why can't I?"

The more time she devoted to the sport, the better she got, highlighted by the unforgettable day she stood atop the medal platform in France.

"Winning the first Olympic Gold Medal awarded for Freestyle Mogul skiing in Albertville, France was the gem of all gems," she said. "It was a childhood dream to represent the United States at the Olympics, and I was fortunate enough to make that dream come true three times."

She returned to those other two Olympics, in 1994, and '98, even though she severely damaged her knee in 1993, a career-threatening injury that sidelined her for a year. Aside from her extraordinary professional success, she also looks back fondly on playing a role in launching the ski program at West Milford.

"We had a group confidence in our pursuit and a knowing we'd be successful, and maybe that came out in a positive way that was infectious for the adults," she said. "Our parents supported us because the process was a learning experience and they did have to drive us there to present in front of the Board. Also, Shawn Poppe, "Coach Poppe" as we called him, being just hired out of college had the openness to be all in and supported our enthusiasm. He was a constant supporter of my career, once even stepping in to accept an award for me. Without people like Coach Poppe, athletes would have a much more difficult time in achieving their goals."

She remains involved in teaching and promoting the sport to this day. Among her endeavors is a popular camp program designed for women skiers that takes place throughout the season at Killington.

