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ANNIKA AT

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ROLLING INTO A NEW DECADE, THE LPGA CHAMP AND HALL OF FAMEE REFLECTS ON MOTHERHOOD, MENTORSHIP, AND WOMEN WHO GOLF

BY CHRISTINA CUSH



Age is just a number. But if you're a decorated professional golfer like Annika Sörenstam, numbers mean everything—especially when they're on a leaderboard. When Sörenstam retired in 2008, she left behind a stellar career, having made her mark as one of the best golfers in history. As a pro, she won almost 100 international tournaments and took home the top trophies at more than 70 official LPGA tournaments, making her the winningest female golfer. What's more, she's the only female golfer to shoot a 59 in competition. A 59!

With all these successes, talking with Sörenstam is like chatting with a friend: She's calm, thoughtful, positive, humble, and busy. When *OI* caught up with this accomplished and athletic Orlando resident by phone, she was avoiding the Sunshine State's fierce summer heat in Lake Tahoe, where she and her family typically spend the season. Of course, this year was different, with COVID-19 considerations and all, but Sörenstam still made the best of it. She applied her decades of disciplined thinking under pressure to lead her family, with her husband of 12 years, Mike McGee, by her side. She and McGee share two children, 11-year-old daughter Ava and 9-year-old son Will. "My biggest role is being a mom and proud wife," Sörenstam says.

But how did she celebrate her big 5-0 in early October? Like many celebrations, hers got downsized and reinvented per the pandemic. "Six months ago, I was planning on a big party," she says. "Now it's my closest friends for dinner in small batches." Check out her Instagram account, @annikas59, to view see homey videos of her preparing healthy meals, plus her pumping iron before she goes out to hit her irons. You don't get named ESPN's No. 1 "Most Dominant" female athlete in 2018 by sitting on the couch eating ice cream. Well into her retirement, what's her motivation to remain fit and agile? She says it's to stay connected to the golfing girls who participate in her ANNIKA Foundation programming, of which she is the CEO, and to set an example for her own two children.

LIVING IN O-TOWN

A friend of golf great Arnold Palmer, Sörenstam is also a soccer mom and a dance mom during the school year, a time that she notes is quite busy. "I get up around 5:30 and get the kids to school," she says. "Now I'm running around when they are on Florida virtual school and I'm switching between teachers, getting on calls, working out, and tending to my business ventures. It's go, go, go." She credits her steady marriage for keeping the balance during this zany time. "Am I working from home, or am I living at work? I don't really know. It's balancing. You have to be flexible and use teamwork. I so appreciate my husband."

When school is in brick-and-mortar format, Sörenstam and McGee shuttle their kids to and from Lake Nona Middle School and Lake Park Elementary School. Sörenstam moved to Florida in 2000, "in the thick of my career," she says. "I didn't know anybody, but I found a great community in Lake Nona. I wanted to be more productive in my golf career and avoid time zones when I traveled, which meant living on the East Coast. I was able to go home after a tournament for Monday and Tuesday, then I'd be off to the next one. Plus, Orlando is good for golf all year round."

The list of Orlando bonuses also includes her parents living nearby nine months out of the year, having her husband's sister 10 minutes away, and having her own sister within a three-hour drive. Sörenstam takes advantage of mild temperatures by playing outside with her husband and kids—pickleball, swimming, and golf—or they'll cruise on the boat and have friends over for a barbecue. Sörenstam and McGee are happy to do the cooking and don't really have a favorite local res-

WHETHER PLAYING GOLF OR ON SAFARI, ANNIKA SÖRENSTAM LOVES SPENDING TIME WITH HER HUSBAND, MIKE MCGEE, AND THEIR TWO CHILDREN, AVA AND WILL.



restaurant. She jokes, “We like wine, so we will look at the wine list before we go somewhere.”

SETTING THE EXAMPLE

In addition to her two kids, Sörenstam is a role model to more than 600 girls who are part of her ANNIKA Foundation, which sponsors at least seven girls-only tournaments worldwide. At a foundation match, girls attend workshops on everything from mental toughness, to fitness, to having fun. “I love to entertain and spoil them and make them feel special,” she says. “Also, to remind them of why they should play golf.” Growing up in Sweden, Sörenstam says she watched a lot of tennis, rooting for Chris Evert. Then she started watching golfer Nancy Lopez sink putts. Now she is a Nancy Lopez to the next generation.

The foundation hosts at least one event a year where 30 to 50 college coaches recruit global players and give out scholarships. Sörenstam played at the University of Arizona and was the first female freshman to win as an individual at the NCAA Division 1 Championship. She acknowledges that golf and its repetitive motions are tough on the body, so the need for fitness, hydration, nutrition, and rest is essential. The sport can be equally taxing on the brain, especially during times like these, when COVID-19 ruins countless young golfers’ plans to travel to opportunity-yielding tournaments. But girl golfers need to be tough, physically and mentally, if they are going to thrive in this sport.

SHINING A LIGHT

Though Sörenstam has been the most financially successful female



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OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:
SÖRENSTAM PARTICIPATES
IN A GOLF CLINIC AS YOUNG
ENTHUSIASTS LOOK ON.





golfer to date, with earnings nearing \$23 million, if you look at what her male counterparts make, it's chump change. Tiger Woods, at the top of the male heap, has earnings over \$120 million. Sorenstam's cash stash puts her at a level equivalent to the top 60 to 70 earners on the men's side of the sport.

"Men make 10 times more than women in tournaments," she says, "and with endorsements it's more." Part of the discrepancy can be blamed on television. The PGA tour gets paid to broadcast its events on different networks, but the LPGA pays to broadcast their events. However, she is patient and optimistic that things will change for women golfers. "It takes time," she admits. "We can make a nice living now, and it's gotten better, but we don't settle where there is room for growth. It's a team effort—players, sponsors, media—everybody has to do their thing. Unlike with women's soccer, our ratings aren't up there. We can't justify a sponsor package like the men can. We have 1 million watching versus 10 million."

Despite the data, Sorenstam supports how the LPGA is navigating toward equal footing. In the meantime, she's fighting her own battle on the golf course—to design them. Globally, Sorenstam has completed three 18-hole golf courses in China, South Africa, and Korea.

She started out with her buddy, Arnold Palmer. "Our first redesign was in Minneapolis," she recalls, and it was suitably named The King & The Queen, referring to each of the links legends. "Now I have five in the works in Canada, Malaysia, Turkey...I'm totally into it," she says. On a more serious note, she

says, "it is hard to make an impact as a woman in a male-dominated industry. The perception of female golfers is that they hit short and want to play an easy course. We can change people's perspectives as we grow the game."

As Sorenstam looks forward, she also reflects back on how she got started, crediting her parents for instilling within her a strong work ethic. It didn't hurt that she lived close to a golf course. One day, when she was 14 or 15, she was practicing at the range and it started to rain. She called her dad for a ride home. He said, "Annika, there are no shortcuts to success." She chose to stay and finish her practice. This has become a mantra that has served her well. "I learned it early, but still think about it often," Sorenstam reflects. "It's my guiding light." <<

