



# Simply the Best

In the game of golf, that would be Annika Sorenstam. BY MICHAEL KONIK

**S**ORRY, TIGER. Sorry, Hale. Sorry, Ernie, Sergio and Phil. Sorry Se Ri, Karrie and Juli. You all played golf wonderfully well in 2002, winning piles of money and loads of trophies and heaps of respect from your fellow masters of the links.

But none of you came close—sorry again, Eldrick—to matching the consistent brilliance of, in my opinion, golf's player of the year: Annika Sorenstam.

Since female golfers get about as much attention and adulation from the mainstream media as amateur wrestlers, the average sports fan may be only vaguely aware that Sorenstam, 32, a Swede living in Florida, won 11 times on the Ladies Professional Golf Association Tour in 2002. (She also won two other nonsanctioned international events, including Australia's ANZ Ladies Masters.) How astonishing was her performance? Sorenstam won more than half the tournaments she entered worldwide. And in eight out of the 12 events she didn't win, she placed in the top five, including three second-place finishes and three thirds. She led the LPGA Tour in scoring average (68.70, the lowest in tour history), rounds under par (60 out of 76, or 79 percent), greens hit in regulation (80 percent), top-10 finishes (20 of 23, or 87 percent) and, oh yeah, in money earned (\$2,863,904, which would have put her in eighth place on the PGA TOUR, where the boys play for exponentially more in prize money). She was also named the LPGA's Rolex Player of the Year—the fifth time she's been so honored in nine seasons.

## SORENSTAM FILE

**NAME** Annika Sorenstam

**BIRTH DATE** October 9, 1970

**BIRTHPLACE** Stockholm, Sweden

**RESIDENCE** Orlando, Florida

**FAMILY** Husband, David Esch

**COLLEGE** University of Arizona

**TURNED PRO** 1993

**JOINED LPGA TOUR** 1994

**LPGA TOUR VICTORIES** 42

**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS** All-time leading money winner in ladies' professional golf . . . has qualified for LPGA Tour Hall of Fame . . . shot LPGA-record 59 at 2001 Standard Register Ping in Phoenix . . . has missed only eight cuts in 193 LPGA starts . . . winner of two U.S. Women's Opens and two Kraft Nabisco Championships.

The magnitude of her athletic accomplishments can be properly understood only in the light of recent history. Sorenstam had almost as astonishing a year in 2001, when she won eight times and set or tied a jillion records (OK, only 30) and generally distinguished herself as the Great One among the best players in her sport. That year, people, including her competitors, said that her 2001 record was a magnificent anomaly, if not exactly a fluke. Australian Karrie Webb, herself a two-time Rolex Player of the Year and one of Sorenstam's chief rivals, said at the conclusion of 2001, "I can tell you now, I will eat my hat if [Sorenstam] wins eight tournaments every year from now on."

Would you like Vegemite with that cap, Ms. Webb?

Sorenstam already has more than twice the number of points needed to qualify for the LPGA Tour Hall of Fame, and will officially become a member once she completes the 10-year playing requirement at the end of this year. She has already earned in her career more than \$11 million in official prize money and who knows how much more from her sponsors. She's already distanced herself from the competition as surely and inarguably as Tiger Woods has from his yelping pack of pursuers on the PGA TOUR. So all that's left for this young champion to do is make sure, like Woods, that when she retires she's known as the Best Ever to Have Played her sport. Right?

"I'm not concerned with things like that," Sorenstam tells me, walking down the eighth fairway at the spectacular Trump International Golf Club, in West Palm Beach, Florida. "I'm not sure how you can objectively compare people from different generations, with different equipment, different course conditions, different competition. Honestly, I can't worry about being called the best ever. All I can do is play as well as I can and try to meet my

goals.”

It's hard for me to communicate the simultaneous forcefulness and modesty with which Sorenstam says what she thinks. She is an athlete—and, more important, a person—who knows herself and trusts herself, and the confidence that combination breeds can be both dizzying and humbling. Her voice is soft yet strong, high like a girl's but assured like a woman's. And though she has a gentle mien, her eyes are steely and unwavering. I believe the cliché of choice among sportswriters to describe this surety of purpose is “focus,” and Sorenstam has it in abundance. Even when she's practicing, hitting balls *for nothing*, Sorenstam is intent on getting better, on playing a vexing and imperfect game as perfectly as possible. She shot 59 at Phoenix in 2001, and she fully expects to do it again, because her goal every time she plays a round of golf is to shoot 54.

Seriously. “The ball doesn't know you just made five birdies in a row,” Sorenstam explains. “I don't see a mental coach, but I'm a big believer in visualization.”

What I see when Sorenstam swings a golf club or strokes a putter is the exact same lovely choreography, again and again and again. Her head “comes up” as her hands pass through the hitting area, à la David Duval, and she says she *doesn't* look at the clubface striking the ball, as orthodox tradition dictates. Therefore she never gets stuck behind the ball, and she looks remarkably unfettered. She looks *free*—every time she swings. This ability to repeat her fluid, perfectly balanced motion, whether it's during practice or on the 18th hole of a major championship, makes her more or less immune to the vagaries of pressure, and difficult to beat.

In West Palm Beach, the day before Sorenstam will begin her final LPGA event of 2002—the ADT Championship, for the top 30 players on the tour's season money list—she's competing in the tournament's pro-am with a team of four awestruck men who, I can report, are collectively giddy and honored to be in her charming, personable company for five hours on the golf course. In addition to yours truly, Sorenstam's quartet of hackers consists of Associated Press correspondent Doug Ferguson, Hall of Fame baseball pitcher and Jockey underwear model Jim Palmer, and the owner of the golf course we're playing (as well as a few other properties here and there), Donald Trump.

The Donald on the golf course is a lot like The Donald off the golf course, which is to say highly entertaining and consistently larger than life, like a living cartoon. He never stops promoting, never stops schmoozing, never stops making authoritative pronouncements. In the company of the world's greatest lady golfer, though, Trump is—dare I say it?—almost humble. Like the rest of our group, he's eager for swing tips and putting lessons, and he's (nearly) dumbstruck when his massive tee shots—he's a legitimate single-digit-handicapper with a lot of length off the tee—are regularly eclipsed by those of a woman half his size. “I played with her last year,” Trump tells me as he admires another of Sorenstam's fairway-splitters. “She's a lot longer this year.”

That would be thanks to a rigorous off-season workout regime Sorenstam has adhered to the past two winters. “I sat down and identified the areas where I could improve, and my fitness was one of them,” she says. “The trainer I'm seeing says I'm up to 70 percent of my optimum strength. So, obviously, I'll keep working on that before 2003.”

### The Grass Office: Phoenix

If every desert golf course were built like **We-Ko-Pa Golf Club** (18200 East Toh Vee Circle, Fountain Hills, Arizona; 866-660-7700 or 480-836-9000; [www.wekopa.com](http://www.wekopa.com)), I would play far more often among the saguaro cactuses and scorpions in 100-degree heat. The course is the chief asset of the Fort McDowell Casino, an enterprise of the Yavapai Nation, and respect for the sovereign land is one of We-Ko-Pa's strongest attributes. Unlike many high-priced Phoenix-area tracks, this one doesn't have a speck of real estate development surrounding the 7,225 yards of golfing ground, just unfettered views of ancient mountains and towering prickly flora. Scott Miller's design incorporates naturally growing obstacles situated in the middle of five holes, forcing players to choose a side or suffer

Sorenstam and I linger together on the 14th green at Trump International. The rest of our group has gone on to the next tee, where they sign autographs as they wait for the group in front of them to clear the 15th fairway. Sorenstam stays behind, putting to a white disc the size of a golf hole, which her caddie, Terry McNamara, places at various points on the green. I ask her what seems to me the obvious question: When is enough enough? What can possibly motivate someone who has nothing to prove?

Sorenstam smiles easily and naturally and says, “Even after I won eight tournaments [in 2001], I thought it was possible to do better. I want to see how good I can get at this game. I love it. I live for it. I'm married to a man who accepts that. When it's over, I'll walk away. But while I'm competing, I want to discover how good I can be.”

According to those who know Sorenstam well, she's the kind

fee: \$180.—*M.K.* of person who can't do two things at once, because she's so intensely consumed with whatever task is presently before her. This single-mindedness, Sorenstam tells me, helps her feel as if every shot is the same, divorced of any meaning except executing in the moment. "I find that if I concentrate on how I *feel* on a golf course, if I feel comfortable," she says, "the results come."

No kidding. In 2002, the big story at an LPGA event was when Sorenstam either wasn't in a position to win (only twice, finishing tied for 59th in a rain-shortened tournament and uncharacteristically losing in the first round of a match-play event) or—stop the presses!—didn't make the cut (only once, but it was a major, the Weetabix Women's British Open).

When she leaves golf, Sorenstam wants to raise a family with her husband, David Esch, and explore her other passions, which include skiing and cooking. Like so many other superstar athletes, she fantasizes about opening her own restaurant. "Five years more—maybe less—then I'm done," she confides. "But first I have to win a few more majors [she has four, including two U.S. Women's Opens], especially the British. That's really important. I'm European, after all!"

The night before our pro-am round, at a pairings party held inside Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, I ran into Ty Votaw, the commissioner of the LPGA and a tireless promoter of female athletes. He said, only a little hyperbolically, that Sorenstam was about to complete the greatest single season anyone had ever had in sports. I politely agreed that 10 wins in one LPGA season was indeed stupendous. Votaw, nodding with certainty, said, "It will be 11. She'll win this weekend, too. No doubt."

She did, of course. And as the LPGA Tour commences its 2003 season next month, nobody in golf doubts that Sorenstam has the game—the shot-making ability and the mind—to win every tournament she plays. Least of all Annika Sorenstam.

After playing with her at Trump International, in a round during which she flat missed exactly one shot (a fairway metal to a par-5 that was at the very end of her distance range) and hit all the rest stone-cold pure, you can count me among the legions who think Sorenstam is the greatest.

She's pretty darn good at golf, too. 🏌️

*Sky golf columnist Michael Konik ([DeltaSkyGolfman@aol.com](mailto:DeltaSkyGolfman@aol.com)) is the author of Nice Shot, Mr. Nicklaus (Huntington Press).*