

Lonny Vanatta

FROM LITTLE TOOT TO PRO RACER



BY DOUG MCGILL AND VINNY GRILLO

Only a handful of skiers qualify for the prestigious pro circuit. Following the legacy of other noted Steamboat skiers, Lonny Vanatta is a hot newcomer to that scene. Vinny Grillo and Doug McGill visited Lonny second year pro ski racer, for an interview to see what pro skiing was really like. We went to his neat little log house on Missouri Street where he lives with his parents and little brother. Lonny answered the door and invited us in. After a short conversation about hunting, we began with the questions.

Lonny was born in Steamboat and has lived here all his life. He's been skiing ever since he could walk, starting at Howelsen Hill and then moving to Mt. Werner. Lonny explained, "I skied in 'Little Toots', a small organization that is still going on now for younger kids about 3-6 years old. I guess I skied in Winter Carnival until I was about eight years old and then I started skiing on the ski team. I was on the Steamboat Ski Team probably ten or twelve years. I think I got my A, (Class A is the top classification in



VINNY AND DOUG STARTING THEIR INTERVIEW WITH LONNY.

amateur racing) before most of my friends. I was in the sixth grade.

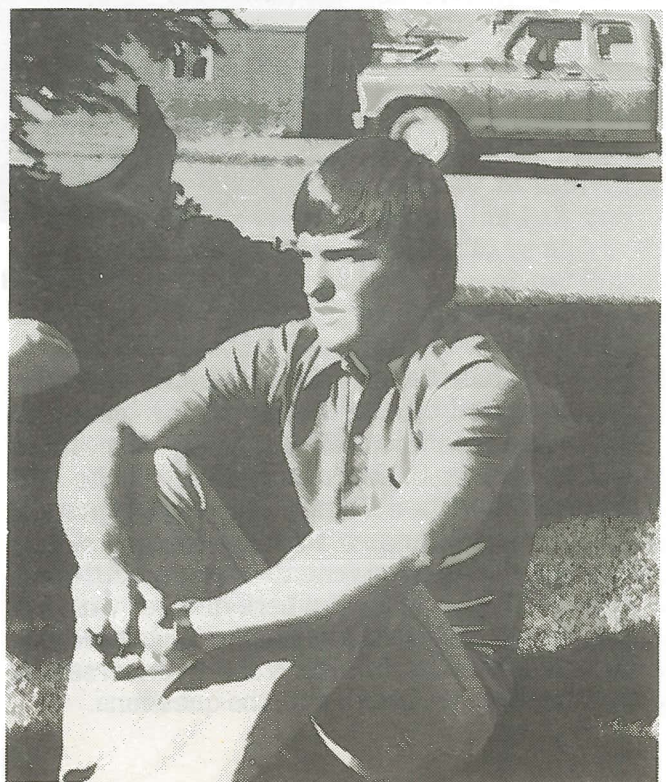
"I decided to leave Steamboat and ski for Vail because I didn't have that much competition here in Steamboat. I got to a certain point where most everyone had gone away to do something else, so there weren't enough people here for me to compete with. Another reason was that the Steamboat team wasn't organized. So I went to Vail to get better training and better coaching. They also have better racing conditions in Vail."

We asked Lonny why he decided to go pro? "Well that's kind of a long story. Actually it's the politics with the U.S. team and oh, I don't know, it seems that if you're not buddy buddy with certain people on the U.S. team you just don't get anywhere. I really don't know why I didn't get on the U.S. team. One spring we had some races and I had really good results. I was invited to a fall training camp with the U.S. team. We trained for two weeks, then had some races. At the end of the races I thought I had done as well as anybody but I didn't get picked for the team. All the best racers on the B and C team were in the competition. I don't know why they didn't pick me, I had good enough F.I.S. points to be on the team, and I had the second best Slalom points of anybody on the C team. That year I was pretty disappointed. This was in 1977. I finished the year out, then I made my decision last year to get out of the whole thing and go pro."

I went from the Colorado tour to the World Pro Tour; my first race was at Winter Park and I did pretty well. I talked to a few sponsors and a few sponsors talked to me, from there I pretty much had it made. They paid my way and gave me a little money to get through the season.

If someone wanted to get into the pro circuit who had no prior racing experience there are a few things that they would have to do. First, there is a thing called the 'Pro Challenge', the top three pro racers run a course; all the newcomers have to ski the course and have to come within five percent of the fastest time. If you make it through the Pro Challenge, you go into a group called the Friday Afternoon Club. The Friday Afternoon Club consists of everybody below 40th place in the point standings. There are usually 30-35 guys in the club who will run the course. They have two runs, the five fastest from each run are qualified to run in the qualifications. These ten guys are then put in with the top forty. These fifty then try to qualify for the pros. You then take the eight fastest in each run on each course and wind up with thirty-two guys. It's not as complicated as it sounds. If you were just starting out in pro racing you have to go through the Pro Challenge, the Friday Club, then you would have to place in the qualifications to even get into the race. The better you qualify the more money you get. Seventeenth through thirty-second gets \$133.00, 9th-15th gets \$333.00, 5th-8th gets \$800.00, 4th gets \$1200.00, 3rd gets \$2200.00 2nd \$3000.00, 1st \$5500.00—that's an average race totaling \$40,000.00."

Vinny asked Lonny about the differences in pro and amateur courses. "Pro and amateur courses are actually a lot different. In amateur races there are two gates that you have to go through and the courses are more out of the fall-line, with bigger rounder turns. In pro the courses are set more down the fall-line, the turns aren't quite as round, they're shorter and quicker. I like pro courses much better."



"How do you train during the off season?" Doug asked. "I train most of the year. I usually take a couple months off in the springtime after the races and I try to stay in fairly good shape during the summer. I bought a bicycle this summer and rode out to Steamboat Lake and Oak Creek. I run long distance and do a lot of strength exercises. I start working pretty hard in the fall and try to get on snow early. I also work on speed because the pro courses are a lot shorter than other courses. I stick to a few things each day. I run a few miles every day and then try to mix up the rest. It's hard enough training on your own without having someone to push you along."



"Are you sponsored by anyone," Doug asked? "I have about six or seven sponsors right now," Lonny answered. "Right now I ski for Rossignol, Salomon, Kerma, Arvil, Nordica, Avis, and Hawaiian Tropics also sponsor me. During the season I usually have four to six pairs of skis. Two or three pair for each event, a pair for training and a pair for racing. About halfway through the season your race skis are pretty worn so you use those for training and get a new pair of race skis. You have to use the skis your sponsors supply you with. I have Nordica boots, Salomon bindings and Kerma poles. They give us skis plus a contract at the beginning of the year for so much money. They pay all our expenses and if we do well they match our winnings. The longer you're with them the better they treat you. I'll probably make more money before the season starts this year than I did last year through sponsors and contracts. We get a contract from our sponsors and they pay us so much retainer before the season starts.

Some ski companies will write it up in their contract, saying that you have to show up at their office 5, 8 or 10 days. Some companies will pay extra and some just have it in their



contract. Ski racing is a pretty high risk sport. It's like all sports you end up paying for all your insurance, you pay for everything yourself if you get hurt."

The subject of parties came up and Lonny commented, "I think pro racing got a bad name on the subject of parties earlier when it first started, mainly from a number of guys that party a lot. Everybody thought that all pro racers went out and partied and had fun all the time, but I think that has really changed a lot. Most of the guys take it as more of a business than a sport. There is a lot of money in pro racing now, so most everybody takes it pretty seriously. We have certain rules that we have to follow. The top twenty-five men on the pro circuit cannot race in certain races. They can't race in the B circuit, that makes us look bad. We have to go to certain meetings or we get fined. If we miss meetings we can be fined \$50.00."



**"I JUST GO UP THERE AND RUN
MY OWN RACE AND DO THE BEST I CAN."**



ON A SHORT COURSE THE START CAN MEAN THE WHOLE RACE.

“What chances do you think the U.S. ski team has of ever being up there in top competition in the Olympics?” “I think their chances are really good, there’s no reason why they shouldn’t be, they have ideal training facilities and good coaches. I think the biggest thing that bothers the U.S. team is skiing in Europe. It’s just a different ball game over there. You eat different, there are different people, and different languages. You have a hard time adjusting to the atmosphere over there. The U.S. should do well; the ones that are doing well now just don’t worry about the different life style. The Mahre brothers go over there and ski their own race and don’t worry about anything or anyone else and that’s why they’re doing so well. I think in the Olympics the Mahre brothers have a really good chance of winning some medals. With the rest of the guys it’s just hard to tell.”

“Do you think now that pro racing is so good it will draw a lot of amateur racers out of the future Olympics and into pro racing?” Doug asked. “I think it will eventually, but I really don’t think the amateur racers want to race pro until they’ve finished with their amateur racing. The amateur racers in Europe really have it made. They get paid well, ‘under the table’. They get paid by their government, by their national team and by sponsors. Karl Schranz got kicked out of the Olympics one year for professionalism because he was getting paid. If they had checked every skier in the Olympics that year there wouldn’t have been any Olympics because everybody was probably getting paid. The Americans don’t get quite as much as the Europeans.”

“I heard you were going to France for some training,” Vinny said. “Yea, the Rossignol pro team goes over there every fall to train for about six weeks. We’ll be doing about one week of dry land training and five weeks of snow training. That will be one week of free skiing and the rest of the time running a pro course with three bumps. Rossignol takes their own starting gates and builds their own jumps. Pro starts are electronic. The starter pushes a button to open the gates and is facing away from the racers as he does so. Once he says, ‘courses clear’ you better be ready to go. He then says, ‘racers ready’ and pushes the button to open the gates. One problem with the starts is if a racer jumps the gun, and pushes into the gate, the gate will jam. If this happens you have to release the pressure before the gate will open. This can really throw your time off because the other guy’s gate will have already opened and he’ll have a gate and a half lead on you before you even leave the start. The best way to start is, when he says ‘racers ready,’ you begin moving forward and by the time you reach the gate it has opened. On a short course the start can mean the whole race, but on a longer course you don’t have to worry as much. I haven’t seen a schedule yet, I imagine there will be twelve to fourteen races. They were talking about having races in Japan.

I asked Lonny to explain the difference in courses to us. “Well actually they are all pretty much the same, it’s the snow that’s different. I haven’t skied in Europe, but I’ve heard it’s a lot harder, like skiing in the East. It’s hard to get used to skiing on snow and then on ice. I think

probably our toughest course was in New York. Last year it rained for three days before the race and froze the night before and they had built really big jumps. The course started on a long flat, with one jump. The second jump was right at the end of the flats where it drops off onto the steep, this jump was seven feet high. When you came off you couldn't see the finish because it was flat then dropped straight off. The snow was rock hard like ice. That was probably the toughest race of the year.

"I haven't seen any real bad accidents. I saw one guy get a bruised hip, his hip had to be drained four times. One racer pinched a nerve in his back, going off a jump. There were also two broken legs and that's about all the accidents I've seen. Usually the pants and suits that we wear have pads sewn right into them. The worst fall that someone could take would be to fall as you are coming off a jump onto hard snow or ice at about 25 miles an hour. Once I straddled a gate off a jump. I went off the jump and landed on my back which didn't feel too good. That was in Minnesota, luckily the snow wasn't too hard there."

specialty and so I didn't race in them. This year there will be more of them and if you want to be in contention in the top ten, then you have to race downhill. There were three last year but they are talking of having five or six this year. Slalom and giant slalom are dual, head to head. They figured that they couldn't do that with the downhill because it would be too dangerous."

"Did you win a race last year?" Vinnie asked. "No, I came in second twice. One in Aspen and one in Calgary, Canada. In Aspen it wasn't very close; I had to race Andre Arnold and he beat me in both races. Up in Calgary I was skiing very well but in the first round of the finals I made a bad mistake, and I was beaten by a Japanese man by a little over three tenths. On the second run I beat him by a little over two tenths. I lost over all by eight one hundredths of a second."

"What are your goals in skiing this year?" "I haven't really set my goals on winning over all. I set my goals of placing in the top five. I'm in better shape and it's good to have a little more experience. After awhile though, I think age takes over experience, so the advantage is to the young and aggressive. I'd like to continue racing



YOU HIT SPEEDS UP TO 25 MPH OFF THE JUMPS.

"What is your best event?" Slalom is my best event, it always has been. I've had some good giant slalom races but slalom has always been my best. I never did very well in downhill. I have always enjoyed it but it was never my best event. It seems like some guys are natural in slalom and giant slalom, and some are natural in downhill. I didn't race in any downhills last year, but I have to this year. Downhill was never my

for maybe eight to ten years but I might be racing only another four or five. You just have to make the best of it while you can. There are a couple of men on the tour that are thirty and thirty-one, they are still racing and doing well. Werner Bliner is thirty-one and finished in the top ten last year."

"Who did you race against that was tough?" asked Vinnie. "Well I raced against all the best. I



PRO COURSES ARE MORE DOWN THE FALL LINE AND ARE SHORTER AND QUICKER.

raced against Odermatt and Arnold. In Aspen I raced against Andre Arnold in the finals and he won the overall circuit this year. He made almost \$93,000.00 and it probably doubled after the sponsors paid him. Last year Arnold skied for Fritzmeier, Raichle and Tyrolia. Fritzmeier is a ski company in Austria but this year he has switched to Atomic. He trains in Austria. Andre will be real tough again this year, and there are always a few new guys that are really tough. Arnold never was a top Austrian racer on the National team. He was on the B team and was kicked off a few times, so the guys on the team have seen what he can do but he never was a top Austrian racer. There will probably be a lot of Austrian racers."

"What do you think the pro circuit is heading for in the future?" we asked Lonny. "I think it's definitely going to get bigger; last year was the biggest year pro racing ever had. All the sponsors were really happy with the way things went, and the majority are willing to come back for the races this year. I think it's on its way up for sure."

"Does being on the road all the time bother you at all?" "I'm pretty much used to it but it does get old sometimes. If there was one thing I didn't

like about racing it would probably be the traveling. I don't like the East very much because of the cold weather, hard snow and the mountains aren't very big. I like the West a lot better. California isn't bad, Sun Valley is a nice place. We travel around 20,000 miles during the season. We travel from the West to the East, back to the Mid-west, up to Canada, back to the East then back to the West. It's an awful lot of traveling but you have to stay at it. Last year there was a race every weekend from the first of January to the end of March. There were four races a month for three months straight. I like Steamboat as well as any place I've been. Last year there were no races here

"What do you see yourself doing several years from now?" "Well I'm hoping to get a good enough name for myself in ski racing so that I can pretty much have it made in the ski industry. It seems like once you do well in ski racing, that you don't really have to worry too much about an income for the rest of your life. I hope that something like that will happen to me. I would like to stay in the Steamboat area if I can, it all depends on what happens."

We were able to fully understand the amount of determination and self discipline a pro racer needs, when Lonny explained to us his feelings in the final moments before the race.

"I like to sit by myself and concentrate. I try to memorize the course, think about getting a good start and remember where the gates are after the jump. I try not to think about my competition. I just go up there and run my own race the best I can. When you start worrying about things, that's when you mess up."



"I LIKE TO SIT BY MYSELF AND CONCENTRATE BEFORE THE RACE.