Mancuso breaks U.S. women's Alpine skiing medal drought

By Mike Gorrell
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SESTRIERE, Italy - Just when the U.S. Alpine ski team most needed a boost, Julia Mancuso provided a big one Friday.

Mancuso became the first American woman since 1984 - one month before she was born - to win an Olympic gold medal in the women's giant slalom. It was only the second medal U.S. Alpine skiers have won in Turin, matching the gold won in the men's combined by Ted Ligety, her high school classmate at Park City's Winter Sports School.

And it left Mancuso and Ligety, two kids who once won a day at Lagoon for a physics project they cooperated on, coming together again as standard bearers for a U.S. Ski Team that deems itself "Best in the World" but has nothing to show - yet - from its big guns.

"It's great momentum," proclaimed U.S. Alpine Director Jesse Hunt, looking forward to today's men's slalom event. "We have one more race to go and we have a good shot in that race. It's always nice to have good results to bring confidence to the whole team."

The 21-year-old Mancuso, who grew up in Squaw Valley, Calif., site of the 1960 Winter Olympics, dominated the field on a cloudy, snowy day in Sestriere.

She skied the fastest run of the morning, then was only 0.01 second slower than the best time on her second run to beat silver medalist Tanja Poutiainen, Finland's first Alpine skiing gold medalist, by 0.65 seconds.

As soon as she saw the result on the scoreboard, Mancuso pumped both arms into the sky and fell back onto her back, exulting.

"Olympic champion. It's weird to say that," she said later. "I can't believe I just won the Olympics. At the medal ceremony (tonight in Turin), maybe I'll get emotional."

Her mother, Andrea, said it was "surreal" watching her daughter clipping through the challenging giant slalom course laid out by Croatia's Ante Kostelic, whose children Janica and Ivica have won three medals here in Turin.

"I almost had to pinch myself when she was coming down and I kept seeing the splits showing minus, minus, minus," Andrea Mancuso said, minus meaning Julia's time was less than the leader.
But Andea Mancuso didn't find it at all surprising that her daughter had reached this pinnacle.

"Julia grew up in Squaw Valley and, really, that's all you do is ski. There's nothing else to do. We skied every weekend. We skied Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. She started racing when she was six and started beating the boys when she was seven," Andrea said.

"Everyone who's ever seen her come through the [Ski Team] ranks has always known that this is what she would do."

But no one could have anticipated it would come at a better time for the U.S. Ski Team.

"For us," said Coach Hunt, "it's great that some of our younger athletes are stepping up on the big stage. Certainly, we expect our veterans with more experience to be here at the top. But this go-round, our young ones are stepping up and showing they can perform."

Teammate Stacey Clark, who embraced Mancuso shortly after her winning run, acknowledged that "everyone was starting to get worried that we weren't going to medal here and weren't living up to our expectations. But we kept our cool the whole time. We never accepted the pressure as being put on us."

Besides, added Sarah Schleper, "I pretty much thought that Julia could come through. She's a big event skier . . . She's a great giant slalom skier. She's got a real good feel for the snow and making turns."

Mancuso also seems immune to pressure.

She spent Thursday night focused on the women's figure skating competition, eating warmed up pasta and Pop-tarts, "not really the best diet for dinner," she laughed.

Mancuso knew she shouldn't stay up too late, since the first giant slalom run started at 9:30 a.m. But she couldn't pull herself away from the television. Friday morning she got up and "just wanted to go out and have my best day."

She wasn't worried about the fact U.S. women had not won a medal in this Olympics.

"Our team was a little disappointed after the speed races[downhill and super-G], but there was nothing we could do really," she said.

"We didn't have any regrets. We all did our best and that's what it was about. Going into the giant slalom, it's really cool that it was the last [women's] race and that I was able to win for all of the team. It was just a matter of going out there and doing my best."

Sometimes holding the leader position after the first run can be a hindrance. Especially at an event as big as the Olympics, demons can start bouncing around in your head. Not Mancuso's, not Friday.

"Because it was bad weather, it sort of made it seem less like the Olympics because you always dream of the Olympics as the most perfect race with tons of people there and all this pressure," she said. "But it was just another day on a stormy race course and that helped me take the pressure. It wasn't about winning or thinking about what place I'd be in. I just had to remember it was about skiing."

Mancuso also wasn't aware how treacherous the course had become. At least
four skiers, including Schleper, had missed a gate one-third of the way down. Others had slowed down to avoid having a "Did Not Finish" posted next to their names.

"I just went out of the start knowing that Anja [Paerson, the slalom gold medalist] was only 0.18 seconds behind me. So I had to really put down a run to make it happen. I played it safe and took risks where I could, and came to the finish line fastest, I guess."

That's right. Paerson actually faded to sixth, her usual place on the podium taken by another Swede, bronze medalist Anna Ottosson.

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