

20 Years Ago, Annika Sorenstam Had a 2003 Season that Was One for the Ages

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The comment was a casual response to an unplanned question. Asked during a Callaway Golf outing at Bay Hill during the 2003 PGA Merchandise Show in January if she would accept a sponsor exemption into a PGA Tour event Annika Sorenstam replied: “If I got an invite, I would say yes in a heartbeat.”

With those 12 words, she kicked off one of the most dramatic and consequential seasons in the history of golf. At least eight PGA Tour events offered Sorenstam invitations. Thirty years after tennis great Billie Jean King routed Bobby Riggs in the “Battle of the Sexes,” Sorenstam would take on men on their terms – a PGA Tour event set up to Tour yardage and specs.

But while Sorenstam’s appearance at the Bank of America Colonial in May received as much attention as any sports story in 2003 – the first round was one of those rare days when the world stopped to watch golf – it was only part of a remarkable year.

In addition to taking on the men at Colonial, Sorenstam won two majors – the LPGA Championship (now the KPMG Women’s PGA) and the AIG Women’s Open, completing the career Grand Slam. She was also one stroke back in the other two majors, finishing second to Patricia Meunier-Lebouc at the Chevron Championship and one stroke out of the three-way playoff at the U.S. Women’s Open won by Hilary Lunke over Angela Stanford and Kelly Robbins.

By a mere two swings – a fanned wedge on No. 14 at Mission Hills in the Chevron and a wayward 4-wood on the 72nd hole in the U.S.

Women's Open at Pumpkin Ridge – Sorenstam would have pulled off what no man or woman has done: Win four professional majors in the same calendar year.

Colonial was a bold gamble in which Sorenstam placed both her personal reputation and that of women's golf on the line. The timing was perfect. In 2002, Sorenstam won 11 LPGA events, including a major, at a time when Hall of Famers Juli Inkster, Karrie Webb and Se Ri Pak were all at their peak. Annika was also second three times in 2002, third three times and set the LPGA season scoring average at 68.70.

Sorenstam chose Colonial because it's a shot-makers course where more value is placed on precision than on power. It was also fitting that Colonial is known as Hogan's Alley since Annika and Ben Hogan have two of the most reliably repeating swings in the history of golf.

The atmosphere that week was awesome; larger crowds, more media and more energy than Annika had ever played in front of. When she walked onto the tee to hit her first drive – No. 10 on Thursday – Sorenstam and her caddie, Terry McNamara, stood just feet from me. I could see the muscle in her neck twitching with tension.

Her coach, Pia Nilsson, told me that when she wished her well on the way to the tee, Annika was so nervous she could not make words come out. Annika told me she had two thoughts: "Whatever I shoot today, Nelson (her cat) will still love me. And wherever the first drive goes, and it can go anywhere, I am going to find it and then hit it again."

She absolutely ripped her opening tee shot with the same gloriously smooth tempo I'd witnessed for years, sending her 4-wood -- which she normally hit about 225 yards -- 255 yards. When she feigned falling over afterward, Sorenstam won the gallery over.

Annika handled the 7,080-yard layout with a one-over 71 that was so much better than the score indicated. She missed only one fairway -- No. 5, a brutally difficult tee shot. The stats say she hit 14 of 18

greens but in fact she putted for birdie on every hole, using the putter 36 times, including from the fringe as she made one birdie and two bogeys.

That she missed the cut the next day, shooting 74 while playing on an emotionally empty gas tank, is of little consequence. She answered her singular question: Could she handle the magnitude of the moment? Sorenstam passed that test with flying colors. As much as Colonial meant to Annika as a golfer – she won the next two LPGA events she played – it meant even more to her as a person.

In my opinion, Sorenstam left Colonial being comfortable being a superstar for the first time. The shy kid who deliberately finished second in junior golf so she wouldn't have to give a victory speech and who took a month off after winning the 1995 U.S. Women's Open in order to avoid the media had emerged from her first PGA Tour event as no longer Annika Sorenstam but simply Annika.

She embraced that stardom as the year moved on. After Colonial, there were two victories in LPGA majors, and completion of the career Grand slam. Then in September, Sorenstam led Europe to victory over the United States at Barsebäck in her native Sweden, winning four of her five points in the first Solheim Cup played on the European continent.

On Saturday, she and Suzann Pettersen played Laura Diaz and Kelly Robbins in one of the most exciting matches I've witnessed firsthand. With Europe leading 8½ to 6½ the outcome of the last four-ball match was crucial. If the United States won, they'd be trailing by one a point 8½ to 7½ going to Sunday singles. A halve would make it 9-7 but a win by Sorenstam-Pettersen gave Europe a healthy 9½ to 6½ advantage heading into the final 12 matches, which Europe won going away.

That Saturday four-ball was tied after 15 holes. No. 16 was halved with birdies and then on No. 17, with Diaz 4 feet from the hole, Robbins 35 feet away, Sorenstam sitting at 15 feet and Pettersen out of the hole after a wayward drive and a few Norwegian expletives, the

USA opted to have Diaz putt first based on the fact Robbins was away. And she made the birdie.

Now Sorenstam needed to make her birdie putt to keep from going 1-down with one hole to play. When the 15-footer toppled in it unleashed the most emotional reaction I ever saw from Sorenstam on a golf course. She screamed at the hole, screamed at her partner; tossed her putter in the air and ducked out of the way as it fell to the ground.

On the next hole, with Robbins away the USA again opted to have Diaz putt first from 6 feet. After she missed, Pettersen rolled in her 10-footer for birdie and Europe had the crucial match in which a combined 15 birdies had been made.

By the end of September, Sorenstam had won two majors, finished one back in two others, completed the career Grand Slam, become the first woman in 50 years for play a PGA Tour event and led Europe to victory in the Solheim Cup on her native Swedish soil. But 2003 wasn't quite over for her yet.

In October, she was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame. She ended her speech with words that still give me goose bumps:

“After I played Colonial, Ron Sirak, a golf writer and a friend said, ‘Annika can no longer be looked at as a female golfer, now she is simply a golfer.’ Truly, that is all I ever aspired to be.”

There is a word in Swedish “logom” that means “just enough.” When Vikings passed the beer skin they muttered “logom, logom” which meant take just enough and leave some for the next guy. There is also a Swedish saying: “Enough is as good as a feast.”

Coming from a culture obsessed with fairness, Annika struggled to accept that she was better than the rest -- that she was, in fact, the best of her time and one of the best ever. I always thought Annika's greatest strength, along with her physical and emotional balance, was

her ability to commit 100 percent to a decision. When she picked a club and a shot, she had no second thoughts. None.

When I asked her after Colonial if she would play another men's event, she told me: "No. I play golf for one reason, to have a chance to win on Sunday. I can't do that out here so why should I play? I proved I could handle it. That's all I wanted."

True to her word, she never tried to cash in by accepting the lucrative offers that were out there to play another men's event. She knew Woodstock only happens once.

What Annika is today – a successful businesswoman and leader in the growth of the game – began that incredible season 20 years ago. She entered the Bank of America Colonial as a female golfer and left it as a golfer. She entered it as a reluctant superstar and left it as a one-word celebrity.

Perhaps the answer to it all is in words Annika said to me much later. "I knew," she told me about playing Colonial, "that the worst that could happen is that I learn something."

There is a lot to learn from Sorenstam's 2003 season, perhaps most importantly that what we achieve is limited by what we believe we can achieve. That was a season that was too good to believe – but it really happened 20 years ago.