

Ganong recaps downhill season, eager for 2018

By International Ski Federation

Downhiller Travis Ganong of Truckee has been racing on the most impressive World Cup courses for the past eight years, claiming two victories, one of them this season in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. We took the time to catch up with him and talk about his season, his career, but also the specificities of downhill ski racing.

Your 7th World Cup season concluded with a 12th place in the downhill standings and a 15th place in super G. It looks like there have been lot of up and downs, how would you rate your season? Are you satisfied with your performances?

Yeah it has been a season of highs and lows for me for sure, but I am really happy to end the season ranked in the top 15 in two events for the first time in my career. I had some really great performances and some other races where I pushed hard and took some chances that didn't end up working out. This season in downhill and super G the margins were so close that you had to push hard and take risk and when everything worked out, like in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, it was nice to stand on the top of the podium!

You mention it, one of the highlights was indubitably your second career win in the downhill in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Can you describe that special day?

Yeah, Garmisch-Partenkichen was for sure a bittersweet day for me. I think for me this was the best downhill performance of my career, where I skied exactly how I wanted to and it all worked out, but also I started right after my teammate Steve Nyman who crashed and had a season ending injury. It was hard having such an amazing result for me and then going back to

the hotel and seeing Nyman's condition, as well as watching all of the other crashes that day. The conditions of the downhill on that day were for sure on the limit of what is safe, and it was really tough to see all the injuries that day, but that's downhill ski racing and we have to push hard and ride that thin line to be competitive with a field that is so stacked right now. I wish the best to all the injured athletes and hope they all make successful returns to the World Cup downhill tour.

This win gave you confidence for the World Championships in St. Moritz, but things didn't go as planned or hoped there, as you finished 25th. What happened? Was the pressure higher as you were defending a silver medal from Vail/Beaver Creek?

Yeah, St. Moritz really didn't work out for me, and I was really hopping to follow up the World Cup win with something special, but that is downhill ski racing, where any given day, anyone can win or lose. All the guys on tour right now are skiing so fast and it was tough all season being only four-tenths of a second behind the winner and barley making it into the top 10. I don't put any pressure on myself ever, but try to just focus on the little things that I can control, and then other than that, I just try to have fun and enjoy every moment that I get to spend in the mountains with a pair of skis on my feet. Also, it really was a tough week in St. Moritz with the weather and canceled training runs and races, and lowered starts, and I didn't handle the changing conditions very well, and that is something that I can really learn while moving forward. The downhill really did change completely when we couldn't start from the top, having no real speed for the top flat section of the course.

There is another special event coming up next year: the 2018 Olympic Winter Games in PyeongChang. How are you preparing for this event? What are your goals?

Yeah, I am really excited to head back to South Korea and

represent the USA again at the Olympics. I have great memories from Sochi where I had an amazing performance in the downhill and I hope to again try and fight for a medal. I have learned a lot about racing downhill and super G over the last few years on tour and now that I have that experience, I know how to better prepare to be more consistent on a weekly basis, and my goals are to try and stay healthy and strong all season long, and go into the games with as little knee pain as possible so I can push hard and ski how I want to. It has been really hard over the last few seasons managing my knee pain, but I am approaching my training and preparations a little differently this summer and hopefully it will work for next season.

In downhill, the density of the field is very high, with 11 different winners in the last 16 races. What makes the difference at the end of the day? What does it take to be the fastest?

Yeah, it's crazy how competitive downhill ski racing has become over the last years. There are so many top level skiers and anyone of them can win on any given day. This is really good for the sport I think, and it's making us athletes work harder than ever and ski on the limit to try and win, and that is elevating the sport and bringing ski racing to new levels. At the end of the day, since the margins are so small and since we are all pushing so hard, it is the athlete that makes the least amount of mistakes, while also taking the most risk that is going to win. It takes a very special performance, and that is why I think there have been so many different winners.

So taking risks is an inherent part of downhill. How do you deal with this? Is the danger always present in your mind?

Yes, downhill ski racing is a dangerous sport and I think that risk management is a very important part of finding success. Since it's an individual sport, no one is going to tell you when and where to take chance or to hold back, and that is why

gaining experience is a huge key to learning how to manage the risk and find success. For my entire career on the World Cup, I have always tried to ski at an 80 percent level of risk or attack. Every year while doing this I try and gain more experience and stay healthy, and then the next season all of a sudden my new 80 percent risk level is at last seasons 100 percent level or higher. Over the seasons I have learned and been able to push harder and harder while still staying in a relatively safe range of risk, and now when I have a good performance while skiing in my comfort zone, I know that I can be faster than anyone. I hope to keep building on this through my career and continue to learn how to manage the risk.

During your time off the World Cup circuit, we often see you shredding the mountain free riding. Do you enjoy it so much for its similarities or its differences to alpine skiing?

I love to ski off piste as much as I can to get a break from skiing on ice and to bring some perspective to my life, realizing how lucky I am to travel the world being a skier. I mean don't get me wrong, racing a classic downhill course going as fast as you can from top to bottom and sending it off of jumps is still the most fun thing I have found to do on a pair of skis, but I still love the difference that free riding brings, and think that it really compliments my ski racing. Going back to the risk management, I think that backcountry skiing relates to downhill ski racing in many ways as where you always have to manage the risk and dangers associated and ski within your comfort zone to manage the apparent danger and in the case of backcountry skiing, stay alive. It was really tough this winter being in Europe from December through February when the hills were green and watching all my buddies have day after day of bottomless powder skiing. I had serious FOMO scrolling through my Instagram feed every morning and seeing how good it was back home at Squaw Valley.

Squaw Valley is where you grew up and the World Cup returned to the Californian venue this season. What does it mean to you

and how was the atmosphere? You had the chance to race and win the U.S. Championship there in 2013. How would it feel to be able to race a World Cup in your home yard?

It was so cool to bring the World Cup back to California and to show off my home ski area of Squaw Valley. There is so much skiing history in Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and so much passion for the sport, and it's a shame that World Cup ski racing has been absent from the region for so long. Ski racing is growing as a sport in California where the Squaw Valley Ski Team alone has over 1,200 kids in the program, and it was so cool for all those kids and others to see firsthand what ski racing on the World Cup level really is. I am sure that this one race inspired so many of these kids, and it will really help fuel the fire of the next generation of racers from California. The atmosphere was off the charts as well. I have been to a lot of women's World Cup races to support my girlfriend Marie-Michele Gagnon, and this was by far the biggest and loudest crowd that I have seen at a women's race. When Mikaela Shiffrin came down and won, everyone was on their feet and screaming as loud as they could, and it was a really special moment. I really hope that the FIS took note at how successful the Squaw Valley and Killington races were and that this will lead to a more fair World Cup Tour where the races are spread out evenly around the World.