

GANONG WINS DOWNHILL RACE OVERSHADOWED BY CRASHES, INJURIES

GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN: Numerous crashes and serious injuries to Valentin Giraud-Moine and Steven Nyman overshadowed a men's World Cup downhill race won by Travis Ganong on Friday.

Both French skier Giraud-Moine and American Nyman were airlifted for intensive care at the local hospital in Garmisch.

The race was held up for half an hour while Giraud-Moine, who was second in Kitzbuehel, Austria, and on course for a top-10 finish in Garmisch, received attention after losing control on the Kandahar course and crashing into the net near spectators.

The French Ski Federation said in a statement later that Giraud-Moine dislocated both knees. "He will be

brought back to France as soon as possible for the continued treatment of his injuries," the federation said.

Nyman had crashed shortly before Giraud-Moine, after a jump into the netting. He also suffered a serious knee injury. "Quick update. My season is over but aside from my knee everything is okay. Time for some surgery and healing. I WILL BE BACK!" the American said on Twitter.

Ganong claimed his second World Cup win in 1 minute, 53.71 seconds, beating Kjetil Jansrud by 0.38 seconds and Peter Fill by 0.52.

The race had been rescheduled from Wengen, Switzerland, where heavy snow forced the classic Lauberhorn downhill to be canceled on Jan 14.

Another downhill is scheduled for today but there are likely to be changes made to the course, with many skiers grateful simply to finish on a day of seven crashes in all. "I was able to push and stick to my plan and not be too fazed by all the crashes and everything," said Ganong, the first American to win in Garmisch. "It was a tough day for sure. But I'm super happy to win today."

Erik Guay crashed spectacularly, though the Canadian escaped with just minor injuries and was able to wave at the camera.

"Bumps and bruises but I'm thankful to have skied away from that crash with nothing major! Thanks for all the well wishes," the 2011 world champion said on Twitter. Guillermo Fayed also crashed, The French Ski

Federation said he suffered a right knee injury and his return will be determined after treatment. Lindsey Vonn, who crashed during a World Cup downhill training session on Friday in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, tweeted: "I can't watch the race in Garmisch any more. Too many injuries and crashes. This is crazy!!!"

Jansrud leads the downhill standings after the fourth race, with 202 points, three ahead of Fill and 34 ahead of Dominik Paris of Italy. The men race downhill again yesterday at the same course. "I have no expectations for tomorrow," Ganong said. "Just show up and try to ski my best. If I ski my best, I know I can win. I'll try not to think about it too much, and hopefully I'll have another good day tomorrow." — AP

AS FALCONS RETURN TO BIG GAME, REMEMBERING THE DIRTY BIRDS

ATLANTA: The last time the Atlanta Falcons made it to the Super Bowl, they put on quite a show. Just not when it mattered.

The team known as the "Dirty Birds" capped off a remarkable season in 1998 by doing almost everything wrong once they claimed a spot in the big game. "I didn't do a good enough job of making them understand that you don't want to just be there," said Dan Reeves, who was the Falcons' coach. "You want to win it."

In the lead-up to the Super Bowl, Reeves actually got things rolling by unwittingly rekindling his ugly breakup with the Denver Broncos, who just happened to be Atlanta's opponent. Then there was a dispute over the way the players got off the plane once they landed in Miami. For some reason, receiver Terance Mathis decided the Super Bowl stage would be a good week to talk about his battle with alcohol and a feeling that he wasn't appreciated. And brash cornerback Ray Buchanan turned media day into a full-blown circus by wearing a dog collar - the Falcons were underdogs, you see - and saying Broncos star Shannon Sharpe looked like a horse. All of that paled in comparison to what happened the night before the game, when safety Eugene Robinson - perhaps the most respected member of the team - was arrested for trying to pick up a prostitute. Robinson was bailed out of jail and played in the game, only to get beaten on a long touchdown pass.

Not surprisingly, the Broncos cruised to a 34-19 victory and their second straight title in John Elway's final game.

"Any kind of distraction hurts," Reeves recalled in an interview from his Atlanta home. "When one player causes a distraction the night before the game, it makes it more difficult. But we just got beat by a better team." Despite the loss, the team is still remembered fondly in Atlanta, a city that has produced only one championship team - the 1995 World Series-winning Braves - in any of the major sports. Jamal Anderson, who rushed for more than 1,800 yards and takes credit for the arm-flapping dance that gave the team its nickname, said he can hardly go anywhere without someone remembering the '98 Falcons.

RETURN TRIP

"No matter what airport I'm in, when people recognize me, they yell, 'Dirty Bird!'" Anderson said. Eighteen years later, with the Falcons headed back to the Super Bowl for only the second time in franchise history, the team that paved the way left behind some useful lessons. For one, never assume there will be a return trip if things don't work out. The Dirty Birds certainly thought they'd get another shot, but they followed up their 14-2 season by going 5-11 the following year - the first of three straight losing campaigns. They didn't even get back to the playoffs until 2002, with a largely different cast.

By then, Anderson was out of the league, his

career cut short at age 29 by two severe knee injuries. "You never know what's going to happen," he said. "When you get a chance to be there, you've got to lay it all on the line."

Plus, the sting of losing the final game of the season never leaves you. To this day, the 44-year-old Anderson has never watched a replay of his lone Super Bowl. "You don't ever get over losing a Super Bowl," he said. "People's careers are made by being the MVP of that game. You get that title forever. I'm very proud of winning the NFC championship and the way we did it. At least we got to hang that banner. But I sure wanted to win the Super Bowl."

The NFC championship game remains the highlight of the season for Reeves, especially since it came just three weeks after he underwent quadruple-bypass heart surgery.

Despite their lofty record, the Falcons were huge underdogs going on the road to face the Minnesota Vikings, who had lost only one game while setting an NFL scoring record. In the raucous Metrodome, Atlanta trailed by 10 points early in the fourth quarter, and it looked as though the Vikings would clinch the victory when Gary Anderson lined up for a 38-yard field goal with just over 2 minutes remaining.

'DIRTY BIRD'

Stunningly, Anderson missed for the first time all season. The Falcons drove for the tying touchdown and won in overtime on Morten Andersen's 38-yard field goal. On the stage in the middle of a stunned, empty stadium, Reeves did the "Dirty Bird" with his players.

"There's not any question, the win in Minnesota" was the game Reeves remembers most. "Because of the circumstances and how good a football team they were and winning on the road, having everything really against you as far as the crowd and everything," he said. "Certainly, the fact I had bypass surgery made it little more special."

Unfortunately for Reeves and the Falcons, they couldn't win the game that really counted. Little did they know, their loss would have a profound effect on a current Falcons star. Vic Beasley was just 6 years old, but he was already a huge fan of the team growing up about an hour's drive north of Atlanta. Now an All-Pro defensive end who led the league in sacks, he hasn't forgotten the pain he felt watching the Falcons' first Super Bowl. "I cried that night," Beasley said. "I still remained a fan through thick and thin."

Now, he and his teammates have a chance to finish the job. They've got no bigger fans than the Dirty Birds. "I'm very happy for them," Jamal Anderson said. "I'm really, really happy for the city. I'm really happy for Falcons fans, the true and hardcore fans who are supportive and encouraging. You know, we have an interesting history in this city. I'm just happy to see that we finally made it back." — AP



CORTINA D'AMPEZZO: Switzerland's Lara Gut, center, winner of an alpine ski, women's World Cup downhill race, celebrates on the podium with second placed Italy's Sofia Goggia, left, and third placed Slovenia's Ilka Stuehec, in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, yesterday. — AP

GUT WINS DOWNHILL, VONN CRASHES OUT

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO: Defending overall World Cup champion Lara Gut won her first downhill of the season yesterday while Lindsey Vonn crashed for the second consecutive day.

Gut finished 0.05 seconds ahead of Sofia Goggia of Italy and 0.47 in front of Ilka Stuehec of Slovenia. Gut was competing in the final downhill before her home world championships in St. Moritz, Switzerland.

"There's no better way to enter worlds," Gut said. The victory reduced Gut's deficit in the overall standings behind American leader Mikaela Shiffrin to 30 points.

Vonn lost control and slammed into the safety netting in the same spot where she crashed in Friday's training run. "I'm OK. I'm a little sore but hopefully I'll be fine for tomorrow," the American said. "I just caught my edge, that's all."

After collecting herself, Vonn skied down to the finish area. She had already had a small bobble earlier in her run but was 0.18 ahead of Gut at the first checkpoint just before her crash.

Vonn had asked the International Ski Federation's race director to smooth out a small

lip that gave her trouble in training. "They changed it but I still caught air," Vonn said. "I just caught my edge and did the splits. It happens, unfortunately."

Vonn, who has won a record 11 races in Cortina, returned earlier this month from nearly a year out with injuries. Ramona Siebenhofer of Austria, Nicol Delago of Italy and Valerie Grenier of Canada also fell.

PERFECT PERFORMANCE

Goggia had the Italian crowd going wild before Gut came down and silenced the fans with a perfect performance on the lower section of the Olympia delle Tofane course, which is full of curves.

"I didn't have a really fast start but, from the middle of the slope, it was getting better and better and I had more confidence in my skis and really able to finish well," said Gut, who trailed Goggia at each checkpoint. "It's better to have the green light at the finish than just at the intervals." It was the 23rd win of Gut's World Cup career and her first downhill victory in Cortina -

which is considered the premier stop on the women's circuit.

As usual, the Olympia delle Tofane course was bathed in sunshine and skiers hit speeds of 120 kph (75 mph) in the Tofane schuss, a narrow chute between two walls of rock. "There's not a place in world where the slope is so (well) prepared," Gut said. "I wish we had more places like Cortina. It's just cool."

It was the eighth podium result this season for Goggia, who is still seeking her first victory. She needs one more podium to match the Italian women's team record of nine set by Deborah Compagnoni in 1996-97 and 1997-98.

Stuehec, who won the opening three downhills of the season, retained a 77-point lead ahead of Gut in the downhill standings.

Viktoria Rebensburg of Germany finished fourth and Nicole Schmidhofer of Austria came fifth. Breezy Johnson was the top American in a career-best 10th and teammate Stacey Cook finished 11th. Julia Mancuso did not enter the race, preferring to delay her return from hip surgery to today's super-G. — AP

MEDVEDEVA SOARS TO SECOND EURO TITLE

OSTRAVA: Russia's Evgenia Medvedeva soared to a second straight women's European figure skating title in world record style on Friday.

The 17-year-old produced a flawless skate to music by Alexandre Desplat to eclipse South Korean star Kim Yu-Na's overall total score from the 2010 Vancouver Olympics by over a point with 229.71. Medvedeva also posted a new record 150.79 points for the free skate to surpass her own mark achieved on her way to world gold in her first senior season last year.

She led a Russian 1-2 finishing over 18 points ahead of teammate Anna Pogorilaya (211.39). On the ice in Ostrava, wearing a delicate pink and grey dress, the tiny skater from Moscow impressed with the ease of her jumps and free flowing style. She even added a superfluous combination of three jumps for good measure, "because I wanted to do a little me more than normal," giggled the teenager. It was a second gold for Russia in Ostrava after Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov won the pairs title on Thursday. Former five-time European champion Carolina Kostner of Italy, returning after almost three years away from competition, prevented a Russian women's sweep for a third consecutive year by taking bronze with 210.52. Russia's Maria Sotskova was fourth.

For 29-year-old Kostner, the 2012 world champion and 2014 Olympic bronze medalist, it was a 10th European medal. She took time off after the Olympics and then received a ban in 2015 after being caught up in a doping scandal involving her former companion, walker Alex Schwazer.

"The joy of skating well surpasses the joy of a medal. It's the cherry on the cake after this beautiful week," said Kostner. Earlier Spain's Javier Fernandez put himself on track for a record-equaling fifth straight men's title.

The 25-year-old from Madrid earned a new personal record 104.25 points for his Flamenco routine to open up a lead of nearly ten points on

bidding to match the record of five straight European titles last achieved by Czech Ondrej Nepela in 1973.

In ice dancing, Russians Ekaterina Bobrova and Dmitri Soloviev lead going into today's free dance final. Two-time reigning champions Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron of France are in third. — AFP



OSTRAVA: (L to R) Second placed Russia's Anna Pogorilaya, winner Russia's Evgenia Medvedeva and third placed Italy's Carolina Kostner pose with their medals on the podium of the ladies free skating competition of the European Figure Skating Championship in Ostrava, Czech Republic on Friday. — AFP



FOXBOROUGH: In this Dec. 12, 2016, file photo, New England Patriots defensive end Chris Long (95) reacts during the first half of an NFL football game in Foxborough, Mass. Long signed a one-year deal with the Patriots after two injury-plagued seasons ended his eight-year run with the Rams. — AP

BLITZBOKS RED-HOT IN WELLINGTON SEVENS WC

WELLINGTON: South Africa continued to set the pace at the Sevens World Series in Wellington yesterday, while former New Zealand coach Gordon Tietjens' return to his homeland with Samoa fell flat. England, South Africa, New Zealand and tournament surprise package Canada all topped their pools with three wins from three matches to cruise into the quarter-finals.

But it was the competition-leading Blitzboks who caught the eye, holding Australia and Japan scoreless before demolishing Fiji 31-12. They raced to a 17-0 lead but Fiji narrowed it to 17-12 before South Africans stepped up a gear and the reigning series champions and Olympic gold medalists had no answer.

"We came out and laid a solid foundation, then really built on that," South Africa captain Philip Snyman said.

"Fiji ran us close towards the end but luckily the guys came through." Canada provided the major upsets of the day, defeating Wales (28-2), Scotland (28-19) and Russia (29-0). Scotland still qualified for

the quarters as runner-up in their group, as did Argentina, Fiji and France.

Local interest was on the Pool C grudge match between New Zealand—who have won the Wellington tournament for the past three years—and Tietjens' Samoa. Tietjens coached New Zealand for 22 years, guiding them to 12 Sevens World Series titles, four Commonwealth gold medals and two Sevens World Cup crowns. He announced his departure after last year's failure at the Rio Olympics, and then accepted a role with the Pacific Islanders.

However, he was still officially contracted to NZR, which made him sit out the opening rounds, making Wellington his first tournament in charge of Samoa. Tietjens, who has described his treatment as "hurtful," said he knew the New Zealanders—who have won the Wellington tournament for the past three years—would be fired up facing their former boss. He was proved correct as they scored in the first 90 seconds and went to record a comprehensive 33-7 win. — AFP