

Retirement is a new start for Annika Sorenstam

BY RANDALL MELL Sun-Sentinel
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Annika Sorenstam (AP Photo/John Bazemore)

Annika Sorenstam relished sending text messages to Tiger Woods after winning a major championship.

She liked to remind him how she stood in their friendly duel.

If the Swedish star doesn't already have Greg Norman's cell phone number, somebody ought to give it to her.

He could be next in her good-natured jabs at male champions she would like to challenge.

Women's golf doesn't have a Great White Shark, a player who turned golf fame into a business empire of diverse and varied interests.

Sorenstam, 38, might be the first woman to have the skill, means and ambition to break women's barriers in that world, too.

With her farewell appearance as a full-time LPGA player coming in the ADT Championship at Trump International this week, Sorenstam is bracing for a wave of emotions. There's the sadness that comes with goodbye in a Hall of Fame career that has included 72 victories and 10 major championships. But there's the anticipation of a refreshing new start, of leaping full time into the next phase of her life.

"I'm not choosing the word retirement because I'm not really retiring," Sorenstam said of her decision six months ago to leave competitive golf at year's end. "I have a lot going on, and the last thing I'm going to be doing is sitting on a couch. I'm so active with all my businesses."

Sorenstam is poised to conquer new worlds with her Annika business brand.

Next May, she's launching a new wine label under that brand. She has a signature fragrance due out next year, too. She also has a clothing line, a golf academy and a fledgling golf course

architecture business among her interests. Plus, she'll be taking aim at activist opportunities for women and children. There's also her ambassador's role with the USGA, her Olympic golf leadership role and tournament host duties.

"I'm really looking forward to the next chapter in my life, which is going to be a little bit more personal," Sorenstam said.

On Jan. 10 near her home in the Orlando area, Sorenstam plans to marry Mike McGee, a former player agent who is now the managing director of the Annika brand. They began dating three years ago.

"When people say to me, 'Oh, so you run Annika's business,' I laugh," McGee said. "She runs them, I just help out."

That's Sorenstam's nature. Her businesses will have her fingerprints all over them. "Share my passion," is her brand's theme.

Charlotta Sorenstam, Annika's younger sister, is the manager of golf operations of the Annika Academy in Reunion outside Orlando. If you call, you can hear Annika's voice welcoming you.

"Even when she isn't here, she's here in spirit," Charlotta said. "Annika is hands on."

That extends to the wedding. When Charlotta went for the recent fitting for her bridesmaid dress, Annika came along. In fact, Annika was there when Charlotta returned for a follow-up fitting.

"She had to approve everything," Charlotta said.

Sorenstam's entire family is making the trip to ADT to see her farewell LPGA event this week. Her father, Tom, a retired IBM executive, and mother, Gunilla, will join Charlotta. They'll be there knowing it's not actually Annika's final competitive event. She's flying to the Lexus Cup Sunday night and headed to the Dubai Ladies Masters for her final competition next month.

McGee wants to see all his future wife's dreams come true.

"I want to see her happy and content while we build a brand that's the best ever for a female athlete," McGee said.

Pia Nilsson, who coached the Swedish national team when Sorenstam played on it from 1987-92, isn't surprised by Sorenstam's diverse business interests. About seven or eight years ago, Sorenstam turned tables on Nilsson on the driving range at the Kraft Nabisco. She made Nilsson her pupil.

"Annika wanted to know if I were taking care of my investments," Nilsson said. "She asked me about the stock market, and I told her I didn't really know anything about the stock market. She sat me down and taught me. Her interest in business has been growing for some time."

Charlotta sees Annika's analytical approach to golf in the way she lives her life. She's always charting ahead, setting her course while preparing to navigate obstacles and challenges that await. This new chapter of Annika's life has been charted for several years.

"She approaches business like she does golf," Charlotta said. "If she has a weakness, she works on it. She becomes better at it. If she doesn't know something, she educates herself. I think it's all about her wanting to do the right thing in the right way and to be able to look back and be proud of herself and what she's done."

A LOOK BACK

Career LPGA Tour victories: 72.

Major championships: 10.

Notable Achievements

Inducted into the LPGA Hall of Fame in 2003 . . . Eight-time LPGA Rolex Player of the Year, most in tour history . . . Six-time Vare Trophy winner for low scoring average . . . Only player in history to sweep LPGA Player of the Year, Vare Trophy and money-list title five times . . . First woman to shoot 59 . . . Winningest player in Solheim Cup history (22-11-4) . . . Lowest scoring average in LPGA history (68.70) . . . Holds LPGA records for most strokes under par over 72 holes (-27), 54 holes (-24), 36 holes (-20) and 18 holes (-13).