

An Ideal Life.



Vladimir "Spider" Sabich (1945-1976)

By Terence McHale
Researched with Drew Hummel

I guess any time someone dies at thirty-one it has to be a tragic story. And, in terms of time and potential, of lost moments, of a good guy not enjoying all the promises of friendship and fortune that he'd earned, there was a senselessness to how we viewed the killing of a young California skier. It did not stop us when we drove to Kyburz, a tiny town in the foothills approaching Lake Tahoe, and ended up asking

the first person we met, a waitress at one of the handful of commercial establishments, if she remembered Spider Sabich.

She had heard the question before. Earthy in a hippie way, solid and young, efficient, and close enough to being pretty to be pretty, she remembered immediately a guy she had never known.

She said the house where Spider grew up was the gray A-frame a quarter mile down the road. She told us the family was not there any more. The Sabich family left Kyburz a long time ago. She warned us there was a chain across both ends of the circular driveway to keep people from pulling in to take pictures. Philosophical about not being too impressed about anything happening away from the mountain, she was willing to concede that Spider had been memorable. His fame might have faded everywhere else, the California kid even the French glamorized on a popular post card, yet people still stopped with some regularity on their drive up Highway 50 to confirm that Spider Sabich was once a real person.

Kyburz was named after the family that owned the land where most of the town was built a century or so ago, a mountainous plot that abuts a national forest. It is a place of big trees and rustic cabins. Most of the time there are about eighty people living there, but when the vacation cabins are full the town swells to five or six hundred. The waitress complained that the national forest made any growth impossible, which wasn't good for business, and created a bit of a time warp, a sense that nothing except the prices ever change in Kyburz.

The town was remote enough in the '50s and '60s that the three-station television reception was only possible if you jerry-rigged a bedspring to one of the hundred-foot cedar trees. Even now, there is a Tom Sawyer quality of kids playing freely in the outdoors and it isn't hard to imagine Spider and his best friend, Jimmy Ellsworth, running barefoot in the summer and screwing their boots into their wooden skis in the winter.

We walked to the Sabich house. There was a chain across the circular driveway with a red marker hanging from the middle, and the home was set about a half-acre back from the freeway. The big trees in front obscured most of the home. It was a nice place, for Kyburz or anywhere else. The home was good size. It was difficult to tell how big without invading the privacy of the present owners. The lines of the roof were neat and practical, cut at an angle to let landing snow drop to the ground. The craftsmanship was evident even from a distance. Spider's dad built the house from a design by a friend and neighbor – the same guy who taught Spider and Jimmy how to ski.

In those days, in a place like Kyburz, people did whatever needed to get done.

The next street was a right turn that took us another quarter-mile or so to the small school built against a hillside. The wooded lane and stunning mountain backdrop provides the same view the kids in Spider's class had when they walked to school. There was pride and some bemusement that the original school was a one-room bunkhouse that Jimmy Ellsworth's dad managed to get donated by a logging company. The emphasis on education worked because the school did teach, and out of Spider's and Jimmy's eighth grade graduating class of four, three of them would earn college degrees.



The first portrait of a man who would have his picture taken all over the world. Spider was two.

The kids who went to school there were mostly the children of the people who owned the eateries and bars that were the last stop for people either going to or returning from the four ski resorts in the area and the casinos across the state line in Nevada. It was common for slot machines to be set up in the bars and in the back rooms of the restaurants until the authorities – some bureaucrats who came from someplace else and didn't do much good or bad for Kyburz – remembered that gambling was illegal in California and didn't want the tourists driving through to the casinos to

be compromised by any sinning.

The new school – the second new school since the old bunkhouse was replaced – had an actual school bus, a van really, parked outside. The school is small, three or so rooms inside, and looking through the windows on the front door we saw two framed pictures hanging on the wall.

They were old black and white photos. The somehow perfect smile with the crooked front tooth was recognizable. The kids in Kyburz were being reminded that if they got lucky in life they too could end up being like Spider Sabich.

There is a lot for teachers to say to their students if they use Spider's life as a lesson plan.

His real name was Vladimir Peter Sabich, Jr. The nickname came from his old man seeing him just after his premature birth and mentioning that he was all arms and legs.



Mary and Spider Sabich (1949)

It would no doubt be impossible for those who knew him in his salad days of Aspen, Colorado, when he built one of the first great homes near his friend, the equally doomed, singer John Denver, to realize that he didn't come out of the womb instantly impressive. Spider would give the gangly arachnids a romantic image they don't deserve.

Spider was one of three Sabich kids. They were good students. It was expected. There wasn't much outside influence in the early years and their folks encouraged them to read, and they talked to them about what they were reading. Some of it was consistent with the adage of praying together and staying together. Most of it was a household where they liked being with each other. It was love, simple enough, sustaining, a purposeful decision to secure the bonds of family.



Steve Sabich (center) and friends in Kyburz, CA (1962)

Not to state the obvious, because maybe it isn't so obvious in our busy world anymore, but Spider's parents were major influences in his life. Spider's mom and dad were both born at a time when the more metropolitan areas ridiculed the capital city of Sacramento as a place of pick-up trucks and gun racks. Vlad Sabich, Spider's dad, landed a job at twenty-one as a resident Highway Patrolman, working outside of his home because his district two hours above Sacramento was isolated. If something went wrong on the winding foothill roads it was

probable that Vlad Sabich was going to be there soon enough to deal with the problem.

At the beginning of World War II, Vlad volunteered and impressed the military enough to be made a fighter pilot. He was eventually shot down over Siberia, and after being released by the Russians, made his way to North Africa where the allies flew him back to the States. He continued in the service as a test pilot at the air force base in Sacramento until he and his wife, Fran, four years older and as unassuming as he was gregarious, moved back to Kyburz. He resumed his job with the Highway Patrol. His kids grew up accustomed to calls in the middle of the night and sometimes going with their dad to emergency scenes.

Fran lived a long life. She outlived Vlad by a couple of years, both of them giving way to old age. She was pretty, although the devilishness and appealing features Spider inherited seemed to come more from his father. Silver-haired even when the kids were still small, Fran was the postmistress in Kyburz and was involved on an almost daily basis at the school. She was physically active, demanded the same from her kids, espoused the credo of the day that there was no future without college, and remained strong into her ninetieth year.

Mary was the oldest Sabich child. She would grow up to become a doctor. Her contributions would be cut short when she died from a brain tumor at only forty-five. Spider and his younger brother, Steve, who was twenty months younger, would always be close friends. Mary got braces on her teeth because Fran thought a girl needed them. Her sons could do without. The boys were good with their hands. Steve went on to become a successful builder before his own death from melanoma at 57.

The Sabich children were junior skiers. Their parents would regularly drive them four or five hours each way to competitions. All of them were winners. Spider was the one you watched. Spider was good enough in high school that he quit football to concentrate on skiing. His friends say he was average size, slight, yet muscular, and he gained a reputation for speed before he mastered finesse.

The kids from the east coast learned about Spider in the early '60s. The Tahoe region skiers were known for dressing better than their competitors and being willing to try anything on the slopes. Skiing has its own vernacular, and the seven different types of ski racing have names like mogul and slalom, words that don't fit quite right anywhere else, but explain in their own way how the hills are groomed or the jumps are created. Like many of the Californians, either through recklessness or because the cost was so great and he wanted a return for his parent's investment, Spider competed in every race at every opportunity. In simple terms, he would become a great downhill racer – the fastest skier to get from the top of the hill to the bottom. The lessons he learned young would someday allow him to earn a fortune in prize money and endorsements – more

than \$150,000 in 1972 alone, big money for the day – big enough money to make luxury affordable.

After raising their children, Fran and Vlad remained their biggest cheerleaders. At the 1968 Olympics, Vlad would be standing behind the line with the other fans in the fog of Grenoble when Spider ran one second behind the gold medalist, Jean Claude Killy. It was the moment when Spider emerged as the American skier of the future. Vlad did not leave Europe empty handed. They were a family that hunted and fished. They lived in an area where even the children knew how to handle a gun responsibly. Vlad bought a European twenty-two-caliber pistol as a souvenir for Steve.

Spider was just eighteen when he left Kyburz to take a skiing scholarship offered to him by Coach Bob Beattie, the brilliant enfant terrible at the University of Colorado and considered by experts to be the godfather of competitive American skiing. The rough, ebullient Beattie would net his own level of fame as the voice of Winter

There would be women – and one woman who would ruin it all.

upbringing when folks thought a person's character should be evident, his good manners were ingrained. His humor was inherent. His mistakes were manageable. There was the flirtation with the University of Colorado lineman's girlfriend that ended up with the 300-pound football player finally sharing with Spider the ludicrousness of the situation and playfully pushing him away. He ran Jimmy Ellsworth's car into some garbage cans. He shook the lift on the way up a hill and ended up falling thirty feet and breaking his leg. He fit in easily when partying temptations were enjoyed. It is true he would not be freed if charged with vanity and hubris. He had a wandering eye for fun. A New Year's Eve celebration in France was



“25 years of ski experience is represented in this group of youngsters, receiving advice here from Lutz Aynedter in preparation for downhill racing. From left, Jimmy Ellsworth, Spider Sabich, Judy Frassinetti, Steve Sabich, and Mary Sabich.” (1957 local newspaper)

Sports for ABC. He was still young when Spider was young, and they would become best friends, one of several best friends who would take pride in being close to Spider. They were kings of the hill. They were noticeable. They belonged in the icy solitude where their sport is its most challenging.

In retrospect, the Coach marveled four decades after recruiting him to Colorado how Spider balanced his life. In public and private he lived scandal free. It was not a life of innocence. Instead, his was a life at ease with himself, a guilt-free life that, like his folks, was based on making his own way.

Spider subscribed to the notion of expected conclusions: hard work meant being rewarded. Consistent with his

capped off with a spirited dispute over the tab. It landed Spider and his favorite teammate, Billy Kidd, in jail – not the best way to end the night, but there was enough laughter involved to keep it from being ugly and it is remembered as an adventure. There is a rumor, probably more wistful and wishful than true, that a love affair with a beautiful girl resulted in a daughter. Yet, there is no evidence that Spider had any capacity for hurting people. There was remarkable depth – a world-class athlete, a fledgling businessman with incipient plans toward participating in the development of the burgeoning Colorado communities, a spokesperson for corporations – and a colorful image that made him the premier draw of pro skiing. The quote that documentarian Ken Burns used

to describe Henry Clay is apt for Spider also: “He had all the virtues indispensable to a popular man.”

The story of course is that in spite of all the possibilities, Spider was ultimately a skier. He overcame terrible injuries. A broken back kept him off the hill for only six weeks, and even the dyspeptic Frenchman, the peerless Jean Claude Killy, visibly flinched when word came down after one spectacular fall that Spider had broken his neck. Luckily, if anything about possible career-ending injuries can be lucky, it was only two compressed vertebrae. The fall would be one of hundreds throughout his career. Spider became familiar with the work of the orthopedists, of which at one point, in the '70s it was remembered, correctly or not, that there were five orthopedists out of the seven doctors practicing in Aspen.

Steve Sabich, in an article in the Sacramento Bee on one of the anniversaries of Spider's death, would mention that everyone noticed when Spider was out late enjoying himself. Steve said Spider had his dad's appreciation for the moment. What people missed was the following morning when Spider got up early to take his twenty-five runs down the hill.

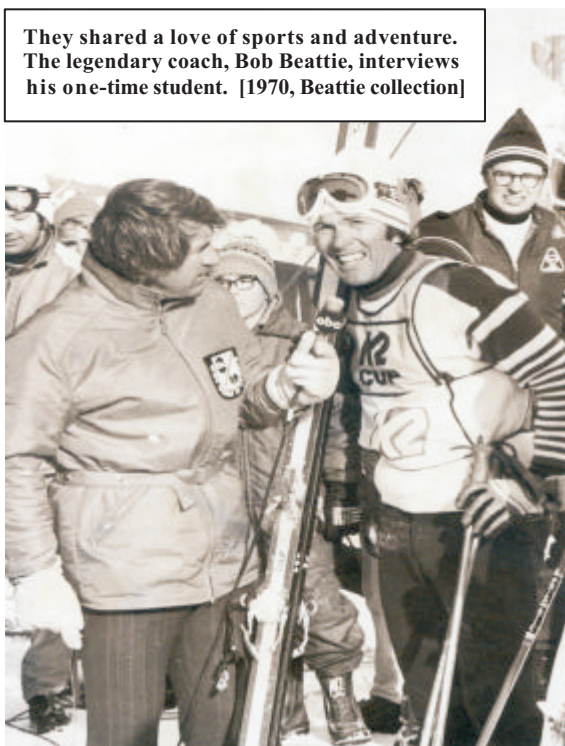
In skiing, where greatness and being in the middle of the pack can be separated into fragments of a second, Spider prospered on the pro circuit. The competition was not against the clock but two skiers racing down the hill in which the winner survives to race again and the loser is knocked out. It is a grueling format that requires as much consistency as excellence. On those cold days Spider beat men who were legends in old countries with snowy peaks and ancient histories. Spider Sabich became famous for his ability to handle the Europeans at the sport they mastered first, and he helped make skiing a pastime in the playfields of the rich. His two world championships in 1971 and 1972 place him in ski history as one of the best.

Spider's coach was not the only one who remembered Spider's studied approach to discovering the quickest route down the hill. His competitors refer to him as a powerful man who skied softly and had an ability to literally fly across the rutted courses that are inevitable in the professional format. There is also the constant mention of his golden boy good looks – there was the longish blonde hair and the intelligent smile, and an outdoorsman's ruddiness that only added to him being impossibly handsome. There was so much to like, even to envy, about Spider Sabich. His athleticism and daring turned him into a star, and there was an endearing rakishness that makes a story of him jumping from table to table while spraying

fiery blasts of 151 rum from his mouth sound funny instead of obnoxious.

It is interesting that so many years later, people talk less about his victories and more about his popularity among the competitors themselves. Sandy Liman, a distinguished skier in his own right and now an executive with K-2 Sports, said Spider was such easy company that he never heard of anyone who didn't make an effort to be around him. At a time when cool was the thing, according to the eastern-born Liman, Spider had a joyfulness he ascribed to being California cool – an ease in competition and an adeptness at socializing.

They shared a love of sports and adventure. The legendary coach, Bob Beattie, interviews his one-time student. [1970, Beattie collection]



“Skiing is an individual sport and it brings out big personalities,” Liman said. “There are a lot of ten personalities, what would be called A-types now. Spider was a seven personality. It's just that at every party all of the people – the tens to the ones – ended up sitting around Spider.”

In films now more than thirty years old, Spider's easy grin compliments his good-natured comments to crowds of reporters. He grew up fast enough to jettison any small-town aw-shucks pretense, yet it is easily imaginable to see him sitting and laughing, the most daring and best looking in the bunch, with the present day X-game

daredevils.

Maybe because Spider believed that the next race is the most important, he was consistently optimistic. His voice was calm, even after an exhausting race at high altitudes, and without trying to make it part of his charm, he was gracious. He wasn't self-conscious about celebrating his victories, and he was equally at ease explaining a fall or giving credit when someone beat him. The best always won in Spider's world. He knew he would get his share. For someone who had every reason to act spoiled, there was a sweetness to his disposition that is unlike the high profile athletes of subsequent generations.

It was in most respects an ideal life. There would be women – and one woman who would ruin it all. He would help design a house in Aspen that his brother would build, and for which his boyhood friend, Jimmy Ellsworth, would truck the wood that was needed from Kyburz to Colorado. Spider never hesitated looking over his shoulder to remember family and friends. He would be featured in magazines. He would fly his own plane to exotic places. He would become familiar with different languages and

customs, always remaining comfortable wherever he traveled. Until the very end, Spider would accelerate the luck of driving his favorite blue sports car. He chased the speed that comes from motorcycles and flying down a mountain on a bicycle. Billy Kidd, who along with his University of Colorado teammate, Jimmy Huega, became one of the first American males to win medals in Olympic downhill racing, said Spider Sabich made being a skier seem like the most fun one could have in the world. Unlike Sandy Liman who went into an eight-year tailspin when Spider died, a struggle that he directly ascribes to losing a best friend who meant so much to him, Kidd says the only thing tragic about Spider's death was that it came too soon.

"Nobody lived more than Spider," says Kidd, who named his own son after Sabich.

Jimmy Ellsworth and the Kyburz Years

Jimmy Ellsworth never needed to go too far from Kyburz to find what he needed out of his life. He went to college, San Jose State, before the population growth in California turned the best farms into freeways, and then he returned home to the mountains to make a living. He started his own business. He got wealthy enough with his own lumber company to retire young, and he was just returning from a ten-day fishing trip when California Conversations caught up to him.

CC: You and Spider go back how far?

Jim: First grade. My father and a few others decided it would be good for the P.E. program to have us learn to ski. The first day we looked down this little hill, couldn't have been 50 feet, and we thought we were going to kill ourselves.

CC: How big was Spider?

Jim: He was probably 5'10 1/2" in his adult life. He was lean – about 165 to 170 pounds.

CC: When was he recognized as a great skier?

Jim: The first thing he won that was outstanding was about 8th grade when the Sacramento Bee newspaper sponsored a ski race and he beat kids that were 16 and 17 years old. As I remember, that was the first big jump for him.

CC: What made him so special?

Jim: He was fearless. He didn't hesitate. He had God-given coordination.

CC: Was he fun to be around?

Jim: A lot of fun. I think he recognized that he had a gift and the center of the universe wasn't wherever he happened to be standing. He was grateful for the gift.

CC: Did he get cocky?

Jim: In our sophomore year in high school I had homeroom early, first period, and the teacher told me that Spider wanted to talk to me. So I went outside and he was really upset. He couldn't understand why he didn't get invited to a big party. I said, you know, you've kind of gone through a period where you have a little "hotdogitis" or whatever the term that was used in those days, and he was stunned. He was really upset. I told him you know, you've got to knock it off. Boy, I'll tell you, that was it right there and I never saw it again. It never came back no matter what he was doing.

CC: Were you guys reading about him in Kyburz?

Jim: Yeah, and I talked to him quite a bit too. When we came home from college, he and I worked construction jobs. Sacramento Municipal Utility District was building dams and tunnels for their hydroelectric projects, and he and I would work there in the summer.

CC: He was a good worker?

Jim: Very hard worker. It was the culture of those times.

CC: What was the Sabich family like?

Jim: If you got out of line you heard about it. It didn't happen much. It was a fun house. Lots of laughs. They did lots of things with the kids. They'd go fishing, camping, swimming and we would cut Christmas trees together around Thanksgiving. I was always over at his house or he was at mine.

CC: Did the girls always like Spider Sabich?

Jim: There weren't many girls around most of the time and it wasn't always easy to drive from Kyburz to Placerville.

CC: I mean, the "Spider look" in "GQ" Magazine...(above)

Jim: There wasn't any of that stuff in high school.

CC: When did he turn into the famous Spider Sabich?

Jim: About the time he did the Olympics. He thought it was an opportunity where he could get endorsements connected to a paycheck. That sounded fine to him. He handled it well. He was a good salesperson for the ski industry.

CC: Talk about his travels?

Jim: He talked about the various countries and their conditions and so forth. I remember when surfing started to become popular he said, "I tried surfing and it's just like



a moving ski hill.” (laughs) When he’d come home, he would be one of the guys. Sometimes that meant telling stories and sometimes it meant listening to stories.

CC: The Spider of old.

Jim: Absolutely. We’d go fishing and drink beer and hang out.

CC: Do you remember him bringing girlfriends home?

Jim: No. The only girl I think he ever brought home was Claudine.

CC: Claudine Longet was the only girl he took home.

Jim: (laughs) I think so.

CC: Did you meet her?

Jim: I knew about her. When he was a pro skier, I was getting into the lumber business. A few guys and I started our own factory about thirty years ago. I’d say about 90% of the wood products for his Aspen house I put together.

CC: Steve built the house for him?

Jim: He and Spider built it. Then he called and said Claudine bought the lot next door. As it turned out, it wasn’t right next-door, but it was close by, and she was thinking about building a house. Spider told me he and Claudine weren’t getting along that well. I told him I could see us sending a truckload of specialty products to Aspen, then they break up and that’s it – I’m stuck with a truckload of wood and nothing to do with it. (laughs) He said not sending the wood was a good idea.

CC: Where were you when you heard Claudine shot him?

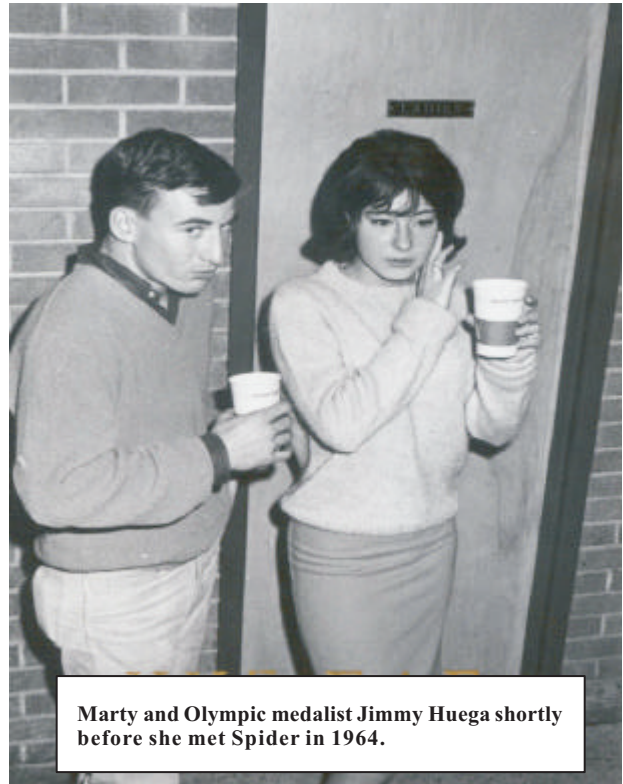
Jim: Sitting in my house where you’re talking to me right now. Spider’s mother called my mother as soon as Steve called her. Then my mother called me and said Fran wanted me to be one of the pallbearers.

CC: Steve brought him home?

Jim: I believe so, yes. It was a big funeral. They had speakers in the parking lot so everyone could hear.

CC: What would Spider have been like today?

Jim: I’ve thought about that a fair amount. First of all, he’d be the same person. He’d still be having fun. I think at some time he’d want to marry and have children. He really liked kids. In fact, at the professional ski races, a good friend of ours, a guy we graduated from high school with, said Spider spotted his younger brother and sister through all the people surrounding him. He broke off and sat at a picnic table with them. He talked to them and



Marty and Olympic medalist Jimmy Huega shortly before she met Spider in 1964.

signed things for them. Nothing ever changed with Spider.

CC: How did his parents recover?

Jim: They were strong people but it was difficult. They moved from Kyburz over to Colusa within a few years. I don’t think they ever got over it. You never get over it. But, they dealt with it with dignity. They had a lot of Spider’s things in their home, pictures and trophies – actually, from all three of their kids. It was a real tragedy, you know. Spider was killed and then his sister died. She’d become a physician and had brain cancer. She was recovering at her folks’ house, and had a seizure, and drowned in the bathtub.

CC: It was a hard luck family.

Jim: They did everything right and it didn’t work out. And Steve, he was two years younger, so he was like my little brother. He’s gone now too. All of the Sabich’s are gone.

Boulder

“My friend called and said Spider was killed. Spider was killed. Then I looked up on the TV and there was a picture of Spider.”

It is easy to imagine Marty Mains Sabich as the seventeen-year-old beauty who left Kansas City in 1964 to attend the University of Colorado. Sitting at the oak table that used to be in Spider’s kitchen in Aspen, she manages easily to be impish and stunning. There is a fondness that is more graceful than longing to the way she remembers being very young. She dated Spider and maintained a close friendship that spanned the last twelve years of his life. After his death, she began dating his brother Steve. They had a marriage that lasted more than two decades and produced two sons.

Steve had died three weeks earlier when she sat down with California Conversations.

CC: Do you remember seeing Spider for the first time?

Marty: In 1964 I was at what they call "a function." In the afternoon the sororities and fraternities would have a keg party. He asked me to dance.

CC: What was the style in 1964?

Marty: Well, he had short hair; kind of Princeton-type hair and looked like everybody else. He was you know, better looking than some.

CC: Didn't stand out yet.

Marty: Oh, he stood out.

CC: The first time you went skiing, you went skiing with Spider Sabich?

Marty: Yes, I did. (laughs) I don't think he enjoyed having to wait around for me to get my balance.

CC: Was he outgoing?

Marty: Not to the point where he was hysterically funny or anything. He was just somebody you felt good being near. He liked to laugh. People had a good time around him. He was aware of what was happening, and he liked listening to people who had something to say. And, he was active and always willing to go outside and do something fun.

CC: Was he someone instantly recognized in Aspen?

Marty: I always remember going to dinner with him and lots of people stopping off and talking to him.

CC: You dated Steve after Spider died?

Marty: Yeah, I never went out with him until after Spider died.

CC: Did anybody think it was odd that you dated one brother for many years and then married the other?

Marty: (laughs) Not in Aspen. Everybody dated everybody in Aspen.

CC: (laughs) Is that true?

Marty: Yes.

CC: How big was Aspen?

Marty: Well, when I moved there, there were 500 people, dirt roads and a hitching post. That was in '67 or '68.

CC: Spider was one of the first to build big in Aspen?

Marty: I think John Denver lived in Starwood before Spider built his home. (laughs) Spider had an interesting house. The front was windows. It was curved and had a balcony, and in the living room there was a waterbed.

CC: The waterbed was in the living room?

Marty: Yeah.

CC: (laughs) As a couch?

Marty: Kind of, yeah. (laughs) There wasn't much furniture. There was a curved rock wall with a fireplace

and on the other side there was another fireplace in his bedroom. His bedroom was all curves. You could only put a tiny dresser in it.

CC: Was he a clotheshorse?

Marty: I don't think anyone paid much attention to clothes in those days. You wore turtlenecks and jeans and boots.

CC: The casual ski look.

Marty: Yes.

CC: Aspen in the '60s and '70s?

Marty: I never saw anybody that wasn't between the ages of 18 and 30.

Marty, windswept, natural and beautiful. Aspen, CO (1969)



CC: And every night is a party night?

Marty: (laughs) Pretty much, yeah. It was a time for personal searching. Werner Erhard's EST – getting "it" and finding "who you are" was big, and there was drug-use, cocaine was around, but I don't think Spider cared about either.

CC: Was there a pecking order in Aspen?

Marty: If there was, I wasn't aware of it. When I first moved there, everybody was so helpful. There was one main street and the rest were all gravel. There was a hitching post outside the liquor store. The town

kept getting bigger and the homes kept getting bigger and the people kept getting snottier and snottier and all of a sudden it became like living on Rodeo Drive...all of a sudden the general store is gone.

CC: So Claudine comes into the picture. She and Spider were a celebrity couple?

Marty: I guess so.

CC: She had done her albums.

Marty: Her stupid little albums. (laughs)

CC: And she had been married to the singer, Andy Williams, who was big at the time.

Marty: Yes.

CC: You think Spider loved her?

Marty: I think he did. He was serious enough to take her home to visit the family.

CC: Did he talk about Claudine?

Marty: I was living half the year in Hawaii and half in Aspen. I remember running into him and he asked me if I wanted to have dinner. That's when he told me he could not get rid of her and that she was throwing tantrums.

CC: Were you in Aspen when he was killed?

Marty: I was meeting a friend at a bar in LA. My friend called and said Spider was killed. Spider was killed. Then

I looked up on the TV and there was a picture of Spider. I flew home to see if there was anything...

CC: Did he say how Spider died?

Marty: He said Claudine shot him. You know, in order to kill him she had to climb on a chair, get underneath Spider's ski sweaters, grab the gun, put a bullet in the chamber, go into the bathroom, and shoot him.

CC: Aspen must have been abuzz.

Marty: Every place I flew for months people were asking me if I knew Spider. The National Enquirer would get the number. I don't know how they did it.

CC: Was this a National Enquirer story?

Marty: Oh, it was always in the National Enquirer.

CC: So you go back to Aspen that day.

Marty: The next day.

CC: Was he gone right away?

Marty: He died before the ambulance got there. He had his toothbrush in his mouth when the police arrived.

CC: Have you been back to the house in Aspen?

Marty: They had a ten-year anniversary and a twenty-year anniversary. They developed a Spider Sabich scholarship and we went back when the boys were little. I think that was the last time I saw the house. I'm not sure if it's there. I think somebody bought the land and rebuilt.

CC: When you think of Spider, what do you think?

Marty: I picture him smiling. He put together a great life. He is missed a lot. His family missed a lot.

The Roommate, Friend and Fellow Traveler

Billy Kidd is one of the most familiar faces in American skiing. He became an international sports figure during the Innsbruck Olympics in 1964. Kidd is still an ambassador of his sport. Now, at sixty, he has seen most of the world and heard most of the stories.

California Conversations found him insightful and funny. It is easy to see why Spider Sabich considered him such a close friend. They were also competitive enough with each other that what Kidd remembers first about a picture taken with Spider and ABC Sports (right) is that Spider had only beaten him by seven-thousandths of a second. The California Conversations' staff had a bet among ourselves that if we asked Billy who was the best American skier of all time he would say himself. Kidd, unaware of our wager, hedged his response by saying *his family* would say he was the best.

CC: What makes a great skier?

Billy: An ability to get down a hill without falling. That's particularly handy in downhill racing when you might be going 90 miles an hour.

CC: Do different skiers have different styles?

Billy: Skiing is an individual sport. If you want to ski on one ski backwards and you can go faster than anyone else in the world, they'll give

you the gold medal.

CC: In 1964, you became the first American skier to win a medal at the Winter Olympics?

Billy: Almost, but I have to modify that a bit. First of all, American women had won gold medals. Secondly, when I won my silver medal, my teammate Jimmy Huega won the bronze.

CC: You and Jimmy Huega stayed active in skiing.

Billy: Right. Jimmy has MS (Multiple Sclerosis) and he skis by sitting in what's called a sit ski or a bi-ski. It's a fiberglass seat mounted on a shock absorber and attached to a ski so that he can go down the hill.

CC: You guys can't give it up, can you?

Billy: We don't want to. You get addicted to sunshine, powder snow, clear blue skies and the adrenaline rush of sliding down the hill.

CC: In 1962, you met Spider Sabich?

Billy: Right. We raced together, went to the University of Colorado together, traveled around the world together and went to the Olympics together.

CC: You roomed together at Colorado?

Billy: Yes. He was a great roommate. I think anybody that met Spider wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. He was so much fun. He was funny. He had a sense of humor and adventure and was very creative.

CC: What made him fun?

Billy: You've seen pictures of him, and in almost every picture, he's smiling. He had a great smile, a very easy smile. It was genuine. He was just a happy guy. I think anybody that was lucky enough to grow up in the mountains of California, with family that was very supportive, and with him being such a good athlete and being able to excel in a sport like skiing, that will make anybody happy. Spider was always happy.

CC: He matured as a skier, didn't he?

Billy: Yeah, he did. As a matter of fact, when he was



Spider and Billy Kidd on Wide World of Sports. [1971, from the Billy Kidd collection.]

young, he was very erratic with his race results. He would go as fast as he could and it was either he would win the race or fall down. As he got older he became very consistent. You probably have these statistics, but I think in '71 and '72, he was world pro champion. In order to win even a single pro race, you have to win run after run to get into the finals and then still win again. Then to win the overall title for the year, you have to be consistent throughout the year, racing where snow conditions are really challenging.

CC: The partying image of skiing aside, there must have been a tremendous work ethic?

Billy: We had a coach at the University of Colorado who was also the coach for the U.S. Ski Team. He helped everybody, and that was Bob Beattie. Bob was tough himself so he made sure his athletes were tough. The workouts at the University of Colorado were demanding. But to answer your question, ski racing is a lot of fun. One of the fun parts is when you start après skiing. Après skiing is the party after your ski day. I know Spider had a reputation for really enjoying party time. It was the time of top athletes having the reputation for partying and barely getting to the game on time and still winning. This is one kind of a glamorous reputation to have and Spider, because he was fun loving, had a reputation for staying out most of the night.

CC: Did he?

Billy: The stories were exaggerated. We were often roommates, and I would know how much he drank or what time we got to bed. But the stories were colorful. He loved the pretty girls and fortunately the pretty girls loved him. It was great for Spider's teammates to be able to hang around Spider because all the cute girls seemed to hang around him.

CC: What was he like in a room full of people?

Billy: First, he was just plain fun. He would not be funny by making fun of other people in a malicious or dishonest way. You know how some people can tell stories about anything, Jack Kerouac or Hunter Thompson can write about getting in the car and going down to get the gas tank filled and make it sound like this amazing trip you were sorry to have missed because it must have been so much fun. Spider was like that. He had a fun-filled and colorful life. And, when he described it, he made it seem like you were sorry you missed it. Just listening to Spider tell stories at a party was fun. Secondly, he enjoyed whatever he was doing. It didn't matter whether it was skiing, being on the beach, doing other sports or whatever; Spider always enjoyed the fun of it. He was a smart guy. He studied Aeronautical Engineering at the University of Colorado. In ski racing you have to analyze the courses and your competition and Spider was good at that. He was smart.

CC: After '68 when he became a pro skier, were you surprised by how famous he became?

Billy: No. There are people who become synonymous with their sport. Spider did that for skiing.

CC: An interesting time for skiing, wasn't it?

Billy: The '60s and '70s were when skiing changed the most. In the '64 Olympics, we had wooden skis, leather boots and the release factor in the bindings was when the screws pulled out of the ski. By the next Olympics, we had fiberglass skis, plastic boots and sophisticated release bindings. It was also the beginning of snowmaking and travel by jet and clothes that kept you warm and looked good too.

CC: Did fame change Spider?

Billy: I don't think it did. He was never difficult. I think anybody that worked with him, whether it was the people



The Winner – Vail, CO [1972, the Bob Beattie Collection]

that worked on his ski equipment or traveled with him, they would say he was easygoing. When he won races and became well known in the ski world, it didn't change him.

CC: Did you meet Claudine?

Billy: Yes, I did. I think everybody that knew them was surprised at it. We had no warning or indication of anything coming up like that.

CC: Did you think they had settled down?

Billy: Spider was not the settling down type. And at that age he had so many interests. He had an airplane, a house in Aspen, and he loved to travel. I know he loved her, but I don't know if he planned on settling down. He was at a time in a young man's life when thoughts usually aren't for settling down; more for traveling the world and living life to the fullest. That was the main thing about Spider; he really lived life well. You know some people who have everything, whether it is money or opportunity, and yet they are not happy. Spider, when he had everything, or when he had nothing, was still happy. He lived life to the fullest. It was one of the reasons he was so much fun to hang around with.

CC: Was there bitterness towards Claudine?

Billy: I don't know. There were so many people affected by Spider - people that met him, people that spent a lot of time with him and people that were involved in his life, like in the ski business, that I think there were probably people who were angry with her.

CC: You and Jimmy Huega are still such close friends. Do you think Spider would be part of that circle?

Billy: Oh, I think so. Fortunately, with a lot of the skiers in those days, even if we don't stay in touch constantly, we have stayed friends over the decades. With Spider, and his personality and intelligence, we would all be friends. Also, I think Spider would be at the top of whatever field he chose to really focus on, whether that would have been the world of skiing, business, politics, or anything. Spider would be at the absolute top.

Placerville

Unfortunately, there is no way to tell Spider's story without mentioning how it all ended. We drove early one morning to an old gold-rush town that is famous for a downtown hanging and is surrounded by graveyards, the resting places of men and women who came from all over the world to find their fortunes. It is twenty-five miles south of Kyburz, and is the same town where Spider and Jimmy went to high school. There are no cemeteries in Kyburz. They put their dead to rest in Placerville. We pulled into the Shell gas station and asked the attendant if he knew where Spider Sabich is buried.

"Oh man," he answered, his fifty-year-old eyes taking on a caffeine brightness. "I remember when that happened. They buried Spider in the Old Union Cemetery."

He gave us directions to the cemetery. There is a sign in front of the narrow driveway explaining that the cemetery is an historic landmark. We walked the entire area. We found the graves of Mr. and Mrs. Kyburz. We did not find Spider. We went back to town. A policeman, old and fat, a reluctant tour guide, informed us in our very short conversation that Spider was a Catholic and was buried in the Catholic cemetery. He gave us the directions. We got lost. We saw an older couple taking a leisurely walk, a tall man with a white beard and his attractive, athletic-looking wife. We asked them if they knew where Spider was buried.

Side Story - Downhill Racer

In the August 8, 1997 edition of the *The New Yorker*, the writer James Salter tells wonderful stories about his long career. Included is an anecdote of his 1968 travels in Grenoble with Robert Redford, then a relatively unknown actor, as the two of them prepared for a ski film called "Downhill Racer."

Salter writes:

"At dinner one night, I remarked that I saw Billy Kidd as the main character. Kidd was the dominant skier on the U.S. team and, in the manner of champions was somewhat arrogant and aloof. He was tough - from a poor part of town, I imagined, honed by years on the icy runs of the East.

Redford shook his head. The racer he was interested in was at another table. Over there. I looked. Golden, unimpressable, a bit like Redford himself - which should have marked him from the first - sat a little known team member named Spider Sabich."

Friends remember Spider and Redford having a physical resemblance, but say the film failed to capture Spider's personality - a joy that rival Klaus Obermeyer described as the enthusiasm of a man drinking life out of a full cup.

"The skier?" the man said. "I haven't heard that name in a long time."

"My cousin was in school with Spider and went to his funeral," the woman said. "I'll call her."

She borrowed my cell phone. We were given directions to a third cemetery. We found it easily, the only place in the confusing mix of winding mountain roads that we found without problems. We were taking pictures of the entry when the older couple pulled up in a white car and said we were in the wrong place. They took us to a fourth cemetery, a modern park with a nice driveway.

The woman's cousin had a good memory. We found a bronze marker planted in a long row without any notice on a small hillside. It was sad seeing his name there. His parents had added in the limited space that Vladimir Peter Sabich, Jr., "Spider", was an Olympian, the 1968 U.S. Downhill Champion, and two-time world champion.

Jimmy Ellsworth said he's never gotten over the fact that Spider found himself in the situation where his life came to a pointless end.

By November of 1974, when Spider was on the cover of *GQ* magazine as the richest racer in pro skiing, he and a pretty, petite French singer named Claudine Longet were a couple. She was familiar to the American people from the Christmas specials when she and her famous husband sang carols with their children. The trial after she killed Spider in March of 1976 was brief and the introduction of evidence was limited.

We know Spider had been skiing with Bob Beattie that afternoon. Spider went home to change so he and Beattie could go out to dinner.

Claudine had been partying with friends at a local bar. She says she followed Spider into the bathroom because he'd agreed to show her how to use the pistol his father purchased for his brother eight years earlier in Grenoble. There doesn't seem to be any dispute that the gun had a hair trigger. The timing of the lesson raises questions. Claudine shot Spider. She was found guilty of a misdemeanor and was sentenced to thirty days in the Aspen County jail. She would later marry a member of her defense team. Claudine has lived quietly in Aspen since Spider's death.

I guess after looking at Spider's grave it becomes clear that no matter how well a person lives his life, it is tragic when he dies at thirty-one. In a single instant sorrow became an equal partner to splendor.