

Sierra, Squaw turn Olympic dreams into reality



Squaw Valley racer Marco Sullivan competed in four Olympics. Photo/Eric Schramm Photography

By Susan Wood

When the Winter Games in PyeongChang, South Korea, surge into our consciousness next month, retired alpine ski racer Marco Sullivan's snow-filled mind is sure to drift to another mountain.

Sullivan, like many before and expectedly after him, grew up gracing the slopes of Squaw Valley.

Squaw, like its southern Lake Tahoe counterpart – Sierra-at-Tahoe, has an uncanny knack for cultivating Olympians. Combine Travis Ganong, Julia Mancuso, and Jonny Moseley on one shore

with Jamie Anderson, Maddie Bowman, Hannah Teter and Travis Cabral on the other – and you’ve got a powerhouse assortment of Olympic medalists and contenders.

“I’m really proud to say I’m from Squaw. Maybe it’s a similar vibe at Sierra,” Sullivan, a 37-year-old Truckee resident, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “There’s a long tradition of people in the valley, ex-ski team, who have established a vibe.”

To those associated with these athletes, there are various reasons why these no-holds-barred, homegrown resorts crank these top-of-their-field competitors out of the gate. Unique qualities ranging from the magnitude of the training program and the terrain to the abilities of the coaches and desires of the parents and resort management were cited from a host of people on the periphery. Plus, health care support like that found in Barton orthopedics is also commendable, U.S. Ski and Snowboard Chief of Sport Luke Bodensteiner outlined for *LTN*.

This year is no exception.

“I think we have the best team going,” Bodensteiner said boldly. There’s a whole crop of kids looking to carry on the tradition of excellence from the American team.



Tom and Todd Kelly are part of Squaw's skiing heritage.
Photo/Provided

And for Tahoe, it's part of a history dating back as far as 1960.

For his part, Sullivan dreamed of competing in a World Cup race as early as age 5. The ski team member traded good grades and his traditional physical education class at North Tahoe High School for hours on the mountain in the afternoon. As the ski team head coach, his late uncle Mark "Sully" Sullivan saw something in Marco that groomed him for competition.

“The guy paved the way for me,” Sullivan said. “I never questioned going to the U.S. Ski Team. It was a given.”

The rest is history – a storied one filled with trials and tribulations. He competed for 15 seasons and made 105 World Cup starts – the most of any American racer. Podiums were hard to come by – four total. But the memories carved an indelible mark on his life, proving the journey is as important as the destination.

When he retired from racing, it was emotional.

“I ended a big part of my life. It’s not something that came easily,” he said. “I guess looking back I wished I would’ve won (a World Cup race). When you’re getting in 15th place, sometimes you forget you’re representing your country. I appreciate it all now.”

He now sees that fire in the eye of teenagers while running the American Downhill Ski Camp. The last large outing brought out 30 bright-eyed hopefuls between the ages of 12 and 19, along with a superstar staff including the most decorated downhill racer-turned-skiercross competitor Daron Rahlves, also from Truckee and retired. Sullivan also works as a NASTAR pacesetter on tour. Essentially, the job coaxes the competitors to meet and exceed the race-time threshold of a veteran.

As the Olympics go, he competed in four – Salt Lake City, Turin, Vancouver and Sochi.

He likes the chances of the women as well as his Squaw comrade Bryce Bennett this year.

When the teams are announced Jan. 20, it will mark almost six decades since Squaw Valley hosted the Games. That date comes only a month after the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association announced a five-year agreement with the legendary North Lake Tahoe resort as an official training site of the U.S. Ski and

Snowboard Team. While hosting the FIS World Cup Championships last year, Squaw joins the ranks with Mammoth Mountain, Deer Valley, Copper Mountain and Timberline.



Sue and Maddie Bowman prove the power of family is strong at Sierra in so many ways. Photo/Provided

It takes a village – a familial one

An extraordinary ski team program is as crucial as the culture that created it, Squaw-Alpine Ski and Snowboard Team Director Todd Kelly insists.

Let's face it, when you have kids who see the exhilaration and

temptation for greatness as young as age 4, it's tough to deny their shot. And Squaw sees many. They learn early on who is Tamara McKinney, a four-time World Cup champion, and they see stars.

The program trains those who "bleed blue" (their uniform colors) in three disciplines – GS "giant slalom," slalom and downhill. The development segment runs from ages 4 to 9.

"You can spot these kids here and there at age 5 to 7 – the ones that can ski great," Kelly said.

Racing starts as early as age 7, and they grow into three age categories. From there, it takes a mature mental toughness.

"You definitely have to believe in yourself that you can win on that day," Kelly told *LTN*.

He should know. Kelly, 48, went through the ranks and made the same declarations more than three decades ago – at this same mountain. He competed from 1986 to 1994 and was rated as the top U.S. super-G skier.

The village is indeed a family.

Marco's uncle "Sully" was Kelly's mentor before he died three years ago. So the connections run as deep as a healthy Sierra dumping in February.

The simplest argument is the culture breeds ski royalty from Truckee to Squaw Village.

"When you make a right or a left turn into the valley, there's a culture for skiing and a passion that you learn at (age) 3 or 4," Kelly said.

Of course, it helps when your father paves the way.

"Basically, it's the mountain," said Tom Kelly, a giant in his own right.

The two men provided a father-son perspective about Squaw with *Lake Tahoe News*. Their views were intertwined.

The elder Kelly, the resort's 69-year-old building services manager, was a former Olympic and U.S. Ski Team coach.

He points out that even if the conditions vary, (take the unseasonably warm slush World Cup competitors navigated through last March at Squaw), the systematic support makes all the difference to a ski area bringing an athlete up to par.

"They need tremendous support from the people who run it," he said with a nod to Squaw chief Andy Wirth.

Kelly and his son not only cite Wirth, the person at the helm of their resort, but Tom Kelly is quite familiar with the unbreakable reputation of John Rice at Sierra-at-Tahoe.



Jamie Anderson, Maddie Bowman and Hannah Teter celebrating in 2014 at Sierra. Photo/LTN file

The power of place of Sierra

After the last Winter Games, Sierra-at-Tahoe hosted a huge community party to honor three women who have all won gold medals for Lake Tahoe.

Snowboarder Teter, who earned hers in an earlier Olympics, with snowboarder Anderson and free skier Bowman having achieved theirs from 2014 – all say the same thing when asked where they honed their exceptional skills on snow. Sierra-at-Tahoe, a smaller resort than other properties owned by a conglomerate, is their home resort.

They let that be known in various ways.

Teter, who hailed from Vermont, released her version of maple syrup in an event at the Sierra Pub.

Anderson speaks often of freeing her in-demand mind by cutting loose in the stashes of Sierra.

Bowman, well, she's rather engrained in the culture – as her mom knows so well.

How many teenagers do you know would take the time to deliver homemade fudge to the employees spread out all over a ski resort during the holidays?

Maddie's mother, Sue, a volunteer coach who is celebrating her 52nd year skiing, makes 16 pounds of it. The mother-daughter duo thinks nothing of stuffing the secret recipe into their packs and making the rounds. It's gotten to the point in which the staff counts on it, waiting for the days when the younger celebrity takes time out of her busy schedule to come home.

The tricks Bowman performs on skis are only matched by her humility. That's because she knows where she comes from and lives by those died-in-the-wool, mountain-community ethics that make Sierra-at-Tahoe something other resorts may not get.

For one thing, the resort groomers and terrain park builders are known to move heaven and earth to create a masterpiece challenging enough for Olympians to be interested.

For another, General Manager Rice implemented a program at Sierra-at-Tahoe years ago that provides free ski passes for students at Lake Tahoe Unified School District making a 4.0 grade point average. Hundreds of passes have been doled out, students have excelled, and Rice set a benchmark for teens like Bowman to become the role model she is today. Bowman attributes part of her success to that program.

Then there's the attitude that starts from the top down. Sue Perpall told *LTN* she'll never forget when her daughter was about to make her debut on a Dew Tour in her "tore-up" ski pants. Rice took her to one of the resort's retail shops and bought her a "presentable" pair.

"When someone helps you out like that, it boosts your confidence," Perpall said.

Perpall has tried to put things into perspective because it's common for parents "to think their kids are superstars." Maddie was proving it on the Buddy Werner team among others, and Rice saw it.

"It never occurred to me (she would be a contender). But John skied up to me one day and said: 'I want to back her,'" she said. "How many general managers can ski up to somebody, first find their mom, then know when someone has promise?"

Bowman just thought she wanted to hang with the boys as sometimes the only girl in a daredevil group destined for greatness. They'd challenge her, and she delivered.

"She was always a tomboy from Day 1. When she's on top of the halfpipe, she brings it," Perpall said. "And Sierra bends over backward to build its halfpipe when it can. It's been amazing what they've been able to do."

Perpall emphasized the lack of dedication from other resorts.

That commitment is also noticed by the industry.

“Sierra is different. With Sierra, it may well be the culture for Hannah, Maddie and Jamie. I think the stuff they do when it comes to the Olympics fits with Sierra – that laid-back style,” California Ski Industry Association President Mike Reitzell said.

Then, there’s the obvious.

“I think Squaw is a no brainer. When you host the Olympics, you’re forever entrenched as the place that’s going to attract the Olympians. And Squaw totally embraces its Olympic heritage,” Reitzell told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s evident when you first see those Olympic rings off Highway 89.”

The Winter Games start Feb. 9.