



MIKAELA'S MOTIVATION

THE GREATEST RACER OF ALL TIME STAYS ON TRACK

Mikaela Shiffrin celebrates on the podium in Flachau, Austria, in January 2023. She'd have to wait a few more weeks to break Lindsey Vonn's all-time women's World Cup win record, but the points helped propel her to another World Cup overall title (her fifth).

Words **MEGAN MICHELSON**
Photos **MIKE "DAWSY" DAWSON**

IT was nearing midnight and six giant bags of luggage still needed packing. Earlier in the day—on a sunlit Saturday last March—American ski racer Mikaela Shiffrin had beat Ingemar Stenmark's 86-win record for the most World Cup victories, racing slalom in Stenmark's home country of Sweden. But there was little time to stop and reflect. For Shiffrin, the record breaker was a race like countless others. That night she stuffed gear into duffles, while her brother, Taylor, and his wife, Kristi, who were jet-lagged after a surprise visit from the U.S., fell asleep on Shiffrin's bed.

It had been one of her best slalom performances ever, finishing nine-tenths of a second ahead of runner up Wendy Holdener, from Switzerland. As soon as she crossed the finish line, Shiffrin spent the entire afternoon in one media interview after another. It's true Lindsey Vonn had put the U.S. back on the global ski map in the 2010s, but a 27-year-old from Colorado beating the World Cup win record felt like something else entirely. Stenmark wasn't there, though he was watching the race on TV. "Four years ago, I predicted Mikaela would win 100 races and you can tell I was right," Stenmark later told journalists. "She deserves all my admiration."

the next morning for the World Cup finals in Andorra, so late-night luggage was her only companion. At one point that evening Shiffrin asked, "Do we have any wine—or anything?" But there was nothing in the apartment except a box of Capri Suns. (Shiffrin almost never drinks alcohol, but the occasion seemed right.)

Later, her physiotherapist—who was staying in the same apartment as her—found the fixings for a celebratory gin and tonic and delivered a drink to Shiffrin while everyone else in the house slept. Sometimes, being the greatest athlete of all time is a lonely affair. Nobody understands that better than Shiffrin.

Shiffrin was late for her team dinner that night and she had to leave early





off season? Save for a couple of weeks between race
on and training (and the occasional media tour), Shif-
frin dedicates herself to her craft. Summer slalom turns at
Snow Mountain, CA, in August 2023.

“YOU COULD TELL SHE UNDERSTOOD MORE THAN A NORMAL TEENAGER WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A COURSE. I WAS SO IMPRESSED THAT I PREDICTED BACK THEN: SHE’S GOING TO BE THE BEST SKI RACER OF ALL TIME.” —GORDY MEGROZ

AS A JOURNALIST who covers the world of skiing, I’ve been following Shiffrin’s career from her early days as a teenage ski racing sensation. She started racing on the World Cup a day before her 16th birthday, when she was turning heads for her raw talent and racking up impressive results for her age. Gordy Megroz, a freelance journalist and former ski racer, wrote what was arguably the first mainstream story on Shiffrin, back in 2011 in a short profile for *Outside*. She was just making her World Cup debut then and nobody outside of ski racing knew her name. Megroz’s brother-in-law had been Shiffrin’s coach at Vermont’s Burke Mountain Academy, and he told Megroz to look out for this young upstart, a smiley teenager with unprecedented promise.

“I’d heard she was winning junior races by many seconds, but I was still skeptical,” Megroz recalls. “Then I watched her train, and it was obvious even to an untrained eye how solid her technique was. You could tell she understood more than a normal teenager what to look for in a course. I was so impressed that I predicted back then: She’s going to be the best ski racer of all time.”

Megroz’s clairvoyance was spot on, but it would take a decade for her to get there. Over those years, I interviewed Shiffrin a handful of times for various media outlets. During my first interview with her, she was candid and open, and we chatted for an hour. That was 2016. She’d recently won her 18th World Cup race and made her Olympic debut at the Sochi Games two years before, where, at age 18, she became the youngest slalom gold medalist in Olympic history. “I always put a lot of importance on being young and doing groundbreaking things,” she told me back then.

We spoke again a few years later, and Shiffrin was as kind and effusive as before. At the end of our interview, I asked if she’d be willing to record a short greeting for two young ski racer girls I know, who are big fans. She obliged my request, reciting an inspiring message to these two youngsters. “Hi Addie and Juniper. I just wanted to say hello, I heard you love skiing,” she said. “Keep ripping on the mountain. Maybe sometime, I’ll meet you. Until then, ski fast and have fun.” The girls were ecstatic.

Shiffrin’s star power has grown a lot since then. It’s understandable—she’s nabbed every prize possible in the sport of ski racing: six consecutive World Championship titles, 88 World Cup wins (and counting), the record for most World Cup victories in a single season. She’s also the only person to have won a World Cup race in ski racing’s six disciplines (downhill, super-G, slalom, giant slalom, combined and parallel). This past winter, she had a 35 percent victory rate at each World Cup race she entered. That’s unheard of. The Olympics don’t matter as much to ski racers, but she’s nabbed a couple of golds there over the course of her career, too.

These days, getting an interview with Shiffrin is like securing a time slot with the Pope. When I reached out to her publicist, Megan Harrod, who formerly worked as the press officer with the U.S. Ski Team before taking the job as Shiffrin’s personal PR manager, to request an in-person interview for this article, Harrod very kindly told me she didn’t have any time in her schedule for the next two months, and what time she did have was reserved for sponsor commitments and mainstream media outlets like *The New York Times* or *Sports Illustrated*.

Fine, I thought. She’s busy and it’s hard being the best.

"THE THING THAT SEPARATES MIKAELA IS SHE'S CONTINUALLY STRIVING TO IMPROVE, TO MAKE THE PERFECT TURN, TO STUDY THE SPORT, TO STUDY OTHER RACERS, TO PUSH THE ENVELOPE OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE." —PAUL KRISTOFIC

TO WATCH SHIFFRIN ski is like watching water flow down a river—fluid, fast and in their most natural environment. She started skiing as a 2-year-old, sliding down her Vail, CO, driveway on plastic skis from Safeway. When she turned 8, her dad, an anesthesiologist, got a job in New Hampshire, so the family, including older brother, Taylor, moved back East. Her parents, Jeff and Eileen Shiffrin, had both been high-level ski racers from the Northeast; her dad skied for Dartmouth. It would be a serendipitous homecoming.

By ninth grade, Shiffrin was enrolled at Burke Mountain Academy, an elite ski racing school in Vermont. As a youth, her parents decided that training was more important than racing. So, she focused on drills and training gates and often would skip race days where athletes got a lot less time on snow. "Repetition is key was always the idea," Shiffrin told me in one of those early interviews. "Emphasize the training you do and put the investment in and that will pay off in the long run." When she did race, she'd win by huge margins in a sport often won by hundredths or tenths of a second. Clearly, something was working.

In her early teens, Shiffrin started strength training regularly and trained on snow extensively in Europe, where she met Austrian ski racer Kilian Albrecht, her eventual agent. "My parents emphasized skiing well with proper technique," Shiffrin once told me. "The theory was if you're going to ski fast, then you better ski well so you're safe. If you're going to do this sport, you better know how to do it properly. That was the motivation."

Shiffrin's first-ever World Cup win, in December 2012 at the age of 17, was in Åre, Sweden. It was a night race, with light snow falling, and Shiffrin told reporters it felt like a fairytale. Though she missed a lot of high school due to racing on the World Cup, she graduated on time, in 2013. "I joked that I was studying abroad," Shiffrin said. A year after graduating, she won her first Olympic gold.

When she wins a race—and she wins many of them—there is no fist pumping, no throwing of skis like other racers do. Shiffrin is thoughtful with her victories, rarely celebrating in a visible way. Early in her career, photographers used to complain that she didn't make good pictures, because she wasn't triumphant enough in the finish corral. In 2013, after her first FIS World Championships win at Schladming, Austria, a then 17-year-old Shiffrin kneeled in the finish area, her head bowed, for minutes. It was the humble introspection of a young champion. Photographers finally got their image.

Routine and repetition have always been Shiffrin's secret weapon. On her backpack, she's written a gear checklist (lift pass, boots, mouthguard, headphones...) in Sharpie so she never forgets. "The thing that separates Mikaela is she's continually striving to improve, to make the perfect turn, to study the sport, to study other racers, to push the envelope of what's possible," says Paul Kristofic, the head coach of the U.S. Women's Ski Team.

On race day, her warmup is scheduled to the very minute. She inspects courses on her own, with coaches spread along the hill if questions arise. She feels the snow conditions through her skis and takes a couple of turns. She arrives at the starting area at an exact time to warm up, listen to course reports and take a few quiet moments for breathing and visualization.

In February 2020, her family was dealt a tragic blow when Shiffrin's dad, Jeff, died suddenly in an accident. Jeff had instilled in Shiffrin so much of her ethos, and losing him was beyond hard. I spoke to her the summer after, during the height of COVID, when she was locked down and grieving. "First we had to make sure we could survive, taking care of all the things my dad did," she said at the time. "Then once you realize you can survive, you start to feel the absence of that person." She said the waves of sadness would hit right before she fell asleep at night.



If you don't want to get a beat down, there are just some places you avoid—like the slalom course at Cortina d'Ampezzo, with Shiffrin at the start gate.



Shiffrin's dominant performances have brought national pride back across the pond, and the Cup crowds, consistently Euro-dominated, are starting to change. Stars and stripes rolling in 2023.



Shiffrin and her boyfriend (and fellow World Cup racer) Aleksander Kilde slow things down in Portillo, Chile.



The big 8-7. Shiffrin broke Ingemar Stenmark's record for most overall World Cup wins in March of 2023, celebrating with her brother, Taylor, and his wife, Kristi (pictured here).



With 88 career World Cup wins, five World Cup overall titles and three Olympic medals to her name, Shiffrin is going to need a bigger trophy case.

During the pandemic, she got together (from a distance, at first) with Norwegian ski racer Aleksander Kilde, a two-time Olympic medalist. He'd reached out to offer his condolences on her father's passing, and the conversation between the two of them grew. "I'll always be the plus one when I'm around Mikaela," Kilde has said. In other words: He's a decorated athlete in his own right, but understands he'll always be second to his more famous girlfriend.

It would be nine months after her dad's death before Shiffrin was back in a starting gate on the World Cup, but things felt off. Favored to win multiple medals at the 2022 Beijing Olympics, Shiffrin was the poster girl for NBC. All eyes—familiar with the sport or not—were on her. That week, she fell in three races and didn't win a single medal. "Anybody, no matter how good they are, can have a bad week," says Paul Kristofic, her coach. "But it was heartbreaking to see that happen to someone who wholeheartedly deserved a better series than that."

Even when the stakes were as high as they were in Beijing and when the media was calling her Olympic performance a "disappointment," she remained steadfast. On TV, she sat for what felt like an eternity on the sidelines of a course she'd crashed out of in Beijing. "I can't only care about winning," she said. "If that was the case, I wouldn't be doing this. I have to care about all of it."

After that Olympics, Shiffrin went on to win the overall World Cup title in 2022. By the time 2023 arrived, she was on fire again, refocused with her eyes on the record books.

THE EMAIL SHOWED UP on a Saturday afternoon in June. It was from Shiffrin's publicist, Harrod. "In case you're still interested, Mikaela could give you 15 minutes

tomorrow around 3:45 p.m. if that works? That might be our only opportunity," she wrote.

The next day, nearing the end of the weekend, I mindlessly opened my email on my phone and nearly had a panic attack, realizing that just a few minutes before call time, I hadn't responded. I scratched out a speedy email to Harrod and suddenly, Shiffrin and I were in a Zoom room together. (Harrod was there, too, but with her camera off.)

I hastily worked up a list of questions as the meeting fired up, my kids still making noise in the background. Shiffrin, on the other hand, popped in with hair and makeup exquisitely done, a clean white backdrop of a well-decorated home behind her. Harrod had asked me to stay within the 15-minute mark, even though Shiffrin can sometimes be a little long-winded. I was jittery, but Shiffrin was too warm and friendly for me to stay shaky for long. It was early summer, and she'd just returned from a two-week trip to Maui with her family and Kilde. She and her boyfriend were still doing double sessions in the gym each day, but they had some time left for windsurfing.

"It's not free time necessarily. I'm careful with that word because people tend to assume 'Oh, you're free, like, you're not doing anything,'" she said. "But I have not had that really, ever. For the last 12 years, I don't think there's been a minute where I didn't feel like a chicken with my head cut off."

Fatigue is real at this point in her year. After her World Cup season ended last spring, she went straight to New York for a weeklong media frenzy, then she took a rare week off in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, with family and friends. "I was like, 'Oh, this is going to be great, some beach time. Wonderful.' Then I got really sick the entire time," she said with a chuckle.

WE'RE SEEING A MORE NORMALIZED VERSION OF SHIFFRIN, A FLAWED PERSON WHO BUCKLES UNDER PRESSURE JUST LIKE THE REST OF US. PERSONALLY, I THINK THAT MAKES HER EVEN MORE LIKABLE.

Yes, she's a seriously devoted athlete, but that doesn't mean she won't let loose occasionally. After securing the overall World Cup title this season, she danced—mostly by herself—in a popular après-ski bar in Kvitfjell, Norway. She's been known to send her coach out on donut runs. And though she's poised and media trained, she's also not afraid to speak up for what she believes in. She's been candid and honest about social justice issues like gender equality in sports and the Black Lives Matter movement, and she's talked about her period in interviews before. In 2023, Kilde mock interviewed her in front of the camera. It was later posted on FIS Alpine's YouTube channel and she was so giggly, she could barely answer his questions.

Shiffrin is part of the U.S. Ski Team, but has always operated a bit independently, traveling separately with her own crew. She gets her own house outside of the athlete village during the Olympics so she can have a quiet place free of distractions. "There's no shortage of media attention, hype, chaos. That can be overwhelming," Shiffrin once told me. This year, she started working with a new coach, Karin Harjo, one of few women head coaches at the national level.

She's not trying to be locked in an ivory tower, though. In many ways, she's turning a corner these days: less record-breaking robot, more relatable human. We're seeing a more normalized version of Shiffrin, a flawed person who buckles under pressure just like the rest of us. Personally, I think that makes her even more likable. These days, she's an elite athlete we can see a bit of ourselves in, versus the unbreakable machine. Somehow, she's still gaining joy from a sport that continuously demands more out of her, even when she's given it everything she has.

She's finding ways to connect more with her teammates, too. "With the position I'm in, it's not always easy to connect. Because I'm just kind of always on the move," she said during our Zoom call. "But our women's team is spectacular. These last couple of seasons, I've been trying to show

them support and connect and be a part of it. When you feel support, it's so easy to give support back."

These days, after her run, Shiffrin will return to the athlete tent and give a course report to the other women on the U.S. Team who are starting later in the pack. "She talks about different strategies, things we can't see," says Allie Resnick, a 21-year-old U.S. Ski Team racer who started on the World Cup two years ago.

"When people ask me what I do and I say, 'I'm a ski racer.' It's always, 'Do you know Mikaela Shiffrin?'" Adds Resnick, another former Vail kid who grew up around the Shiffrin family. "I feel proud that I get to say, 'Yes, I do, and she's great.' When we're older and her records will still be around, it'll be amazing to say I got to ski with her."

Europeans dominate the World Cup standings in ski racing. Even with Shiffrin atop the women's overall rankings last winter, below her were a smattering of Swiss, Italian, Swedish, Austrian and Norwegian racers. But the U.S. women's team is starting to gain more depth—American Paula Molten finished top 10 in the slalom standings and top 15 in the GS last year—and Shiffrin says the vibe feels different than it ever has: more camaraderie, more supportive, less competitive.

"We have so many girls who are right on the cusp," Shiffrin said. "It's an individual sport—we're trained to focus on ourselves. But there's an overall atmosphere that is competitive and supportive at the same time. It's the first time I've been part of a team this large with that kind of atmosphere." While Shiffrin is loving the new dynamic, her buy-in has impact, and may someday skew the podium in the Team's favor.

My 15 minutes with Shiffrin were up, yet she was still talking. Which means at some point, out of respect for her schedule and her PR agent, I will be forced to literally interrupt the Greatest Skier Ever and tell her I've got what I need. Quickly, I congratulated her on an incredible season, and I thanked her for her time. I wanted to add, I hope you have more free time soon, that you deserve a break from all this madness, but I didn't. I just smiled and waved goodbye. ■



Shiffrin, ready.