

Mikaela Shiffrin, the Alpine ski racer, should win at least one gold medal at the Olympics this winter in South Korea. She might even win three. It's a fair bet she'll get the Wheaties box and the full-on Up Close and Personal. She's a bright, affable American who dominates her corner of the sport with the kind of predictability and grace that draws in casual viewers, awes the experts, and inspires a lot of super-slo-mo check-that-out. There's something about transcendent talent that causes people to root for it, no matter their allegiances or their usual embrace of the underdog. Excellence creates its own weather.

Yet so much can go wrong. For skiers, the Olympics are a brief fever dream in the middle of the five-month odyssey of their season. There are a lot of chances beforehand to get hurt. In a short race, anyone can make a ruinous mistake (lose an edge, hook a tip, choose the wrong line) or encounter bad luck (equipment malfunction, snow squall, gust of wind). And what about food poisoning? Or even geopolitics: the time would seem inopportune for an international sporting carnival on the Korean peninsula.

Athletes are taught, and sometimes even born, not to think this way. Control what you can. Eliminate distraction. Preparation is perspiration. Yet even Shiffrin, a stone-cold killer on snow, has recently found herself more susceptible to the whisperings of "what if." "I never used to feel nervous," she told me. "Just excited. But this past season I got so nervous I had to throw up a couple of times." The first wave of her new anxiety came a year ago, when the International Ski Federation (F.I.S.) World Cup tour came to the Eastern United States, for the first time in a quarter of a century. The circuit typically passes over New England's relatively diminutive mountains and variable conditions in favor of the sunny, chalky Rockies. But the Northeast has the higher concentration of racers, the deeper ski-racing history, and the more fanatical fan base. It is also, in a roundabout yet essential way, Shiffrin's home turf. (She lives in Vail, Colorado, but her formative training years were spent on the East Coast, where her forebears are from.)

The races, held at Killington, in Vermont, over the weekend of Thanksgiving, attracted thirty thousand fans, far more than you'd ever get out West. They were there to see Shiffrin win both the slalom and the giant-slalom races. "Killington was a lot of pressure, and I didn't realize it till I was there," Shiffrin told me. "I was kind of freaking out." Her extended family, including her grandmother, who was ninety-five, came to watch her race. The scrutiny brought on self-consciousness. "Instead of just answering questions, I started to hear myself answering them," she said. She took fifth in the giant slalom, a disappointment. She won the slalom, as she almost always does, but by less than a second, which was, by her standards, a narrow margin.

A pattern was developing of Shiffrin's dominating in training but encountering nerves and some tactical indecision on race day. Her mother, Eileen, her de facto coach, taskmaster, and wingman, suggested that she talk to a sports psychologist. Shiffrin had a couple of consultations, via Skype. "It didn't feel like I was seeing a shrink," she said. "It was a reminder that sometimes it's better to be oblivious, but I'm not oblivious anymore, so how do I handle that?"

Shiffrin, who is twenty-two now, was fifteen when she first appeared on the World Cup tour—the top international tier of racing, as big in Europe, you might say, as Nascar is in America. She'd been routinely obliterating her peers in the ski-racing equivalent of the minor leagues

by several seconds—a lifetime in the sprint of a ski race. (The margins are typically tenths or even hundredths of seconds.) A few weeks later, at just sixteen, she became the youngest skier ever to win a U.S. national championship. At seventeen, she started winning World Cup slalom races in bunches. (Lindsey Vonn, the greatest American skier ever, won her first race at the age of twenty.) By eighteen, Shiffrin had won a gold medal at the Sochi Olympics and become something of a household name. She has won all three slalom World Championships she has competed in and four of the past five World Cup slalom titles. (She was injured for half the season the year she didn't win.) Last March, at the World Cup finals, in Aspen, Colorado, she also clinched the over-all title—compiling more points across all the disciplines than anyone else—the ultimate prize, in the eyes of practitioners, far greater than Olympic gold.

I first heard of Shiffrin the winter of her first World Cup race. Ski-racing people spoke of her with the same astonishment that greeted the kid-phenom incarnations of Wayne Gretzky and Tiger Woods. Once she hit the tour, I tuned in when I could, eager to see a manifestation of genius. What I saw was a skier who looked flawless and smooth but not revolutionary or enthralling. She was so good at going fast that she didn't look fast. Technique disguised athleticism.

Did I know what to look for? I'd been admiring the top racers for years. I raced (poorly) in high school, in New Hampshire. My grandfather skied in the Olympics, in the thirties, and his sister was a slalom world champion. (Ski racing may be the only sport in which women have been competing alongside men, on a fairly equal footing, from the get-go, a century ago.) So, watching Shiffrin on TV, I'd venture remarks about her fine balance, composure, and edge control. Strong ankle pressure. But I was mostly full of it. The subtler mechanics of the ski turn are obscure, even to most people who know how to make a good one.

My presumption was that her excellence was innate. One sometimes thinks of prodigies as embodiments of peculiar genius, uncorrupted by convention, impossible to replicate or reengineer. But this is not the case with Shiffrin. She's as stark an example of nurture over nature, of work over talent, as anyone in the world of sports. Her parents committed early on to an incremental process, and clung stubbornly to it. And so Shiffrin became something besides a World Cup hot shot and a quadrennial idol. She became a case study. Most parents, unwittingly or not, present their way of raising kids as the best way, even when the results are mixed, as such results usually are. The Shiffrins are not shy about projecting their example onto the world, but it's hard to argue with their findings. "The kids with raw athletic talent rarely make it," Jeff Shiffrin, Mikaela's father, told me. "What was it Churchill said? Kites fly higher against a headwind."