

# Sierra – a breeding ground for top level athletes

By John Rice

We are keeping our fingers crossed that our athletes earn a chance to compete for their country in the Olympics. Our program to groom athletes at Sierra is newsworthy I think, as it is not accidental that our athletes fare so well against the competition.

I started my career at Squaw Valley, which had a long tradition of producing world-class athletes and attracting those who were looking for a big name mountain to train. In the summers I worked for the U.S. Olympic Committee at Squaw in operations. I did everything from fix the athlete residences to drive them to their training sites. From that experience I learned a few simple lessons:

1. The best of the best share certain characteristics; they are conditioned, focused on goals, generally have good nutrition habits, are confident, have a support system, and are free of distractions. They weren't always the biggest, the fastest, the flamboyant, or those who come from money.



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2. The support system behind the most confident athletes extended from their family and friends to their home resort. Even if they were training out of Squaw, they were loyal to

their home.

3. They had good coaches, who worked on the whole being, not just the athletic side.

We try to provide all those things to our athletes, which may be part of why we have so much success. When I started at Sierra in 1993, I was approached by two young boys named Travis Ramos and Travis Cabral, then 9 and 11. They told me they had dreams of representing their country and being on the winner's podium. I asked what they needed, to which they replied "a season pass, a locker, and a shovel to build their course".

As the young boys honed their skills, and their fathers found coaches to take them to the next level, the two remained committed to their goals. Result, both were crowned U.S. Freestyle Champion at nationals in different years, and Cabral won the overall World Cup, the youngest to ever accomplish that feat.

Cabral also competed in the Torino Winter Games.

The two boys came from modest homes, had great support from their parents, coaches and from Sierra. They had a strict diet and workout regimen, and both were focused on their goals. Sierra gave support in the way of reimbursements for gas and groceries, event fees and an occasional plane ticket to help get them to the events.

The return on investment was huge, and it forged the way for other athletes to believe they could come from a mid-sized mountain and go against the best in the world some day.

Travis Cabral was concerned he was missing out on educational opportunities because of his world travel schedule as a teenager, so Sierra joined some of the local season passholders in starting an educational fund for him at the local Bank of America. That kind of support allowed him to

finish his studies and find his way after his competitive run.

We found the best support to be tailored to the individual, what are their needs, their goals, their challenges, and how can Sierra help. It starts when the kids are little.

Sierra is a supporter of youth recreation and education, and as such Sierra banners can be found at every soccer, baseball, swim meet, football or other facility in the region. By supporting the feeder system, young talented kids can get to know Sierra and stay in shape. Through support of education, Sierra is able to attract many talented kids, as many students over the years have earned free season passes and become part of Sierra's race teams.

The feeder system brings quality to the resort, and the various step functions along the way provide a path for focused athletes to excel through the programs and reach their peak performance. It's no secret that athletes remain loyal to the resort they learn at.

When winter comes around, the Buddy Werner ski program offers local kids from Tahoe and the West Slope the chance to hone their skills and compete with each other at a young age. Coaching is voluntary, and from the Buddy Werner ranks come some of the high school team's best athletes. It is common to see the top skiers in high school racing with roots in the Buddy Werner Program.

Sierra hosts five high school teams, which allows the athlete/students to compete against each other and train with the best. There are junior ski programs in place like Rippers, and the competitive teams in skiing and snowboarding.

Finally, Sierra hosts a number of competitions that allow the athletes to test their skills. On the ski side, Sierra has training facilities and ski trails that are wired for timing, combined with top talent in the area that produces high quality events like Far West races and high profile freestyle

events. Some of the more talented athletes move on to USSA racing and travel, and some have gone to college on scholarships in winter sports.

The best of the best, however, go from local events to national and then world-class events. Sierra has been fortunate to be a proving ground for winter sports athletes over the years. From training programs to hosting world-class events – even national championships – Sierra has provided opportunities to kids to realize their dreams of competing on the world stage.

A great example of athletes moving through the programs is the current successes shared by the Anderson sisters. Both grew up at Sierra, were part of the development teams, won their events locally and then went on to win gold medals at the Winter X Games. Jamie is currently ranked the No. 1 female snowboarder in the world, was honored by *Transworld Snowboarding* and *Snowboarder* magazines last year with that title.

The two sisters received the same kind of support the two Traverses shared in their young career, from reimbursements to scholarships on the race teams. While either one could easily sign a contract with another resort for the money, both are loyal to Sierra because of the support they have received over the years.

Jamie is vying for a spot on the U.S. Team for the Vancouver Olympics, while Joanie is aiming for the X Games next month. If they qualify, great, if they don't, they are still both world champions. We have no expectations of them other than to have fun and do their best.

Beyond the hype of the Olympic Games, in winter sports the contest is one more in a series of season long events. There is no denying that it is high profile and a gold medal can lead to lifelong endorsements for the athletes, but we try to

keep it in perspective.

So, why would a gold medal winner from the Torino Games, Hannah Teter, call Sierra her home mountain? Call it luck or destiny, the Teter family found a home in Tahoe, and looked around at the various resorts to find a place to train and call home. Elijah and Abe Teter both came to Sierra for a day in the powder and asked if they could ride for the day. Finding it to their liking, the brothers approached us to see if we would support them as athletes. They weren't asking for much, passes and a halfpipe.

It led to much more than that, including a movie spot and training support. When Hannah was in town she asked if Sierra would be interested in supporting her as well. Sierra supported her by donating to her charity through the sale of Hannah's Gold Syrup, and she gave back in numerous ways including advertisements like the famous Burton "love affair" ad where she talked about why she loves Sierra.

The relationship has blossomed to where the level of trust between the Teter family and the resort is at a high level. Sierra is fortunate to have them as loyal athletes. The deal clincher for Hannah was when Sierra proposed a personalized parking space next to the administration building. The Hollywood Walk of Fame style star that marks her spot was the least we could do to seal the deal.

Perhaps the biggest win for Sierra is having such talent to encourage younger athletes to follow their dreams. When a young 8 year old sits next to Hannah or Jamie, they realize they are real people, and that someday they can achieve the same success as these two world-class athletes.

Sierra supports four levels of athletes. Starting with amateur skiers and riders, those who podium at USASA or USSA nationals are given a free pass, some stickers, a team shirt, and attend events to represent their resort.

As they get more experience and begin to excel, they can move up to the Professional team. This level is comprised of skiers and riders who are competing in large scale events, such as the Dew Tour, Winter X Games, or other regional series. Some of the Pro team contract with photographers and filmmakers, and many have outside sponsors to help with their expenses.

Next comes the Elite team, which is comprised of the top echelon of talent like the Teters and the Andersons.

A new category was added last season, called the Legends division, to which Sierra's "retired from competition" athletes belong. The Travis duo and two-time world record holder Mark Bennett belong to this group.

Any of these athletes could find another mountain to sponsor them, even provide a lucrative package to claim that resort as their home. Sierra's philosophy has never been to "buy" our athletes, but rather to clear the path for them to excel. That may differ from athlete to athlete, some need financial support, others need training and coaching. They all ultimately want a resort to call home, one that appreciates who they are and will do what it takes to help them realize their goals.

As they move to the next level, maybe even the Olympics, Sierra will be rooting for them back home. Win or lose, they are champions.

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