

Vonn inspiring a generation of young girls to ski

By Lori Knowles, Canoe.ca

She's the fastest female skier in the world.

U.S. alpine racer Lindsey Vonn – born in Minnesota, now based in Vail – is a four-time overall World Cup champion in ski racing and an Olympic gold medalist. Vonn, 28, is a female force so dominant, she made a recent bid to race against men at the Lake Louise World Cup in late November. (The request was denied.)

What makes Vonn want to ski so fast?

“I met (former Olympian) Picabo Street when I was 9,” she says. “As soon as I met her, I knew I wanted to be an Olympian.”

Which is why, two decades after meeting Street, Vonn has found her own way to inspire young female skiers. She has developed a learn-to-race program called Ski Girls Rock on the slopes of Vail.

“I know how much of an impact female role models can make,” Vonn says. “Picabo made a huge impact on me. She was so positive, so charismatic. But when I was young I also met some people who were not so friendly and it traumatized me as a kid. Picabo was the perfect role model for me, and that's what I'm trying to give back with the Ski Girls Rock.”

Ski Girls Rock is a day camp aimed at girls – from 7-year-olds to teenagers – vacationing in Vail this winter. In a program designed by Vonn, coaches use fun and fast skiing to inspire girls to push beyond their comfort levels – to race slalom gates, to try steeper runs, to improve edging, and to learn

techniques that will make them more aggressive and more successful on the ski hill.

“It’s not about a structured program,” Vonn insists. “It’s not about ‘ski school.’ Ski Girls Rock is about girls getting out there, being active, building self-esteem. I think that’s most important for girls this age.”

A day in the life of a Ski Girls Rock camp goes something like this: In a flurry of pink, intermediate and advanced skiing girls meet their female coaches – former competitors trained personally by Vonn to impart her philosophies. The girls are given white-and-pink ski racing bibs (numbers), then in a massive pack, they take off down Vail’s soft-powder-filled runs, dipping into the trees, jumping over bumps, whooping and hollering their way down the mountain.

While the girls are at many different levels – some ski like experts, others still novice – the coaches manage to keep the group together. The girls eat lunch as a group, engage frequently in giggling and tickling sessions, and high-five each other en masse when they make it successfully down a Vail slalom course. The girls are also given tips from Vonn on how to improve race times, what she thinks are the most effective training exercises and stretches – even what tunes she likes to work out to.

The World Cup champion drops in on the Ski Girls Rock program when she can, mostly in the fall and spring when she’s not active on the World Cup circuit.

In her absence, Vonn has added a new element for the 2013 ski season, which what Vail calls “EpicMix Racing” courses.

Girls are given an opportunity race a special EpicMix course, then compare their pace with Vonn’s. EpicMix (a mobile and web application to track and share ski data) adjusts the girls’ finish times according to age and ability, and assigns each racer a “Seconds Behind Lindsey” score.

When asked for whom Ski Girls Rock is best suited, Vonn says it's a day camp for all girls, regardless of their ski-racing background.

"There isn't an ideal ski girl," she says. "They're all here having fun and that's the exactly the point. It's about them going out there and finding out who they are, and what they want to do, and just being girls."