

Winter sports thaws tensions between U.S., Russia

By Kelly Whiteside, USA Today

Political relations between the U.S. and Russia have been especially icy this year, but eight months before the start of the Sochi Olympics, the relationship between the countries' skiing federations continues to be warm.

"We'll see how it plays out in Sochi itself, but the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association has created a great relationship with the Russian skiing federation, where there's exchanges. They come over here for early snow and our athletes spent extra time on the hill in Russia," U.S. Olympic Committee sport performance team leader Kelly Skinner said Tuesday.

Away from the slopes, there's been considerable tension. After the U.S. took steps to punish Russians accused of human rights violations, Russia passed legislation barring Americans from adopting Russian children and recently released its own list of Americans banned from traveling to its country.



Ted Ligety

Even though a bit of schussing diplomacy isn't expected to smooth out these political moguls, the partnership will likely benefit both teams at the Olympics next February. Russia gained insight into the factors behind the United States' success by training with the Americans at Copper Mountain in

Colorado and in New Zealand. In exchange, Russia gave the Americans special access to the Olympic venue.

After the world championships where he won three gold medals, U.S. skier Ted Ligety spent five days in Sochi testing out the venue. "That's a huge opportunity," Ligety told USA Today Sports on Tuesday. "They are not a huge Alpine nation at this point (two Russian men earned World Cup points this season compared to 14 American men) but they've become a lot better the last couple of years as they've put more money and attention to it."

With just one winter world championship remaining, men's hockey which begins Friday, the U.S. has reason to brag. The Americans won 34 medals at world championship competitions, including 14 golds.

The season before the 2010 Vancouver Games, the U.S. won 28 medals at world championships, including 13 golds. In Vancouver, the U.S. won a whopping 37 medals. It was the first time the Americans won the overall medal count in the Winter Games since 1932 in Lake Placid.

It will be difficult for the U.S. to match its record medal haul since Russia won't offer the same comforts of home, in language and culture, as Vancouver did. But the ski team's extra time at the Krasnaya Polyana mountain venue and other test events at Olympic venues can help. Mikaela Shiffrin, the world champion who also won the overall World Cup season title in slalom, trained on the Olympic venue along with slalom specialists Resi Stiegler and David Chodounsky.

Ski jumper Sarah Hendrickson won her first World Cup of the season in December in Sochi. "That gives me a lot of confidence going into the Olympic year and getting a feel of what the conditions are like and how that hill is different from others," said Hendrickson, who won gold at the world championships. "I'm definitely keeping that in the back of my

head.”

Other standout U.S. performances this season: In addition to Ligety and Shiffrin, Lindsey Vonn also won a World Cup title while the Alpine team produced 33 World Cup top-three results from 10 different athletes, including 18 golds. Success on the slopes also led to prominent sponsorship opportunities, with Ligety and Hendrickson becoming the latest winter athletes signed by Kellogg’s.

Hannah Kearney won the overall World Cup moguls title. Cross country skier Kikkan Randall won the World Cup sprint title.

Biathlete Tim Burke ended the USA’s 26-year medal drought with a world championship silver. Ice dancers Meryl Davis and Charlie White won their second world title. The women’s ice hockey team won gold after beating Canada. As the short track speedskaters struggled, Heather Richardson claimed the overall World Cup title in long track.