

Mancuso focuses training on Sochi Olympics

By AP

Julia Mancuso is holding her breath for the Sochi Olympics. So far, she can stay under water for more than a minute.

The Squaw Valley skier incorporated freediving into her training program this summer in Maui, plunging under the ocean's surface to collect shells and gaze at aquatic life.

Mancuso usually spends her offseason mountain biking and surfing the big waves around the island. Being an Olympic year, though, she's decided to stay "a little less radical in my other sports I do."

That's why she picked up freediving, which is like snorkeling, except without, well, the snorkel.

Later this month, Mancuso will swap the sea for snow as she ventures to New Zealand for camp with the U.S. ski squad.

After all, Sochi is just seven months away.

"It's approaching really fast," said Mancuso, who splits her time between Hawaii and Squaw Valley. "Just have to keep getting strong and stay healthy."

Mancuso is coming off a solid World Cup season, but one that was pretty much overshadowed by Tina Maze's amazing run. The Slovenian compiled a record 2,414 points to take the overall crown away from Lindsey Vonn, who sustained a season-ending knee injury in a February crash.

The 29-year-old Mancuso finished on the podium four times, all in the super-G. She wound up second overall in that discipline, behind Maze.

Given Maze's extraordinary season, though, along with Vonn's expected return from a torn ACL and the rise of U.S. teenager Mikaela Shiffrin, Mancuso realizes that she probably won't be among the favorites heading into Sochi.

That's fine with her. She hardly ever is at the Olympics, even though she typically saves her best for the biggest of stages.

Mancuso captured gold in the giant slalom at the 2006 Turin Games. Four years later in Vancouver, she stole some of the spotlight from Vonn, taking silver in both the downhill and super-combined.

"I definitely perform well under pressure," said Mancuso, who recently added ZICO Pure Premium Coconut Water as a sponsor. "I think it will be really exciting having a little more pressure going into Sochi.

"I've always thought of the Olympics like it's another race and just try to shine."

Rain or shine, she's been enjoying her time in Maui, even if she's curtailed some of her usual activities.

By this time of year, she's normally visited most of her treasured spots to surf and stand-up paddle. And by this time of year, she's also put plenty of daring miles on her mountain bike.

Not so much this offseason.

"I've been training really hard. But it's just a little more focused, like instead of going on a crazy mountain bike ride, I might ride the stationary bike and watch a movie," Mancuso explained. "Every summer I train hard, but it's more important to stay injury free. In the past, I'd just be playing and maybe hurt myself. A sprained ankle or something, or just little tiny things that kind of put you back a week in training."

And that's why she picked up freediving to fill her time. In the process, she's amassed quite a collection of sea shells.

"It's a lot of fun," said Mancuso, who's planning a vacation to Fiji later this summer to freedive with friends. "We have these really cool fins, three-foot fins, and we stay in the water for a really long time, dive and just search for shells."

These days, Mancuso is in a good place – more at peace and more relaxed. That has a lot to do with being healthy, which hasn't always been the case. For years after winning gold in 2006, Mancuso dealt with nagging back problems that fragmented her training.

"It's horrible trying to perform when something is hurting you. You couldn't train that extra day because something was hurt, couldn't push yourself as hard because you were holding back," Mancuso said. "But I've learned to take care of my body. Dealing with injuries is a big part of being an athlete and being happy."

There's also this: Things are well with boyfriend and fellow skier Aksel Lund Svindal of Norway, even if they don't see each other as much as they would like.

"We're so busy that it's fine. We're both really driven," Mancuso said. "That's just part of the game, when you have a lot of personal goals, when you want to win, and you live on other side of the continent."

"But it's cool to have a good friend on the World Cup circuit, a good friend who's your boyfriend."

Her new goal? Introduce Svindal to freediving.

"Maybe he will be into freediving. We'll see," Mancuso said. "This summer has been really good for me."