

Woodward Tahoe instructor a judge at Olympics

By Eddie Pells, AP

KRASNAYA POLYANA, Russia – Phoebe Mills used to flip for Olympic medals. These days, she decides who wins them.

The 1988 U.S. gymnastics champion and Olympic bronze medalist is working in the snowboarding judging booth at the Sochi Games, giving marks in both the halfpipe and slopestyle contests at Rosa Khutor Extreme Park.

“It was sort of a way to remain involved in snowboarding once I stopped coaching and went into law school,” Mills said. “I had no imagination that it would lead to this.”

Gymnastics. Law school. Snowboarding. She was also a top platform diver in college.

Yes, it is a lot to take in, but the Mills family is, to put it mildly, very ambitious and athletic.

Phoebe is one of four world-class athletes among the Mills kids. Her older brother, Nathaniel, is a three-time Olympian in speedskating. Her younger sister, Jessica, was the junior world champion in figure skating in 1989. Brother Lucas was on the U.S. speedskating team for a few years. (Another brother, Whitaker, is a professional opera singer in London.)

Mills, 41, fell into snowboarding after college during a visit to Vail to see Jessica. It was the late 1990s, around the time the sport was introduced to the Olympics.

She returned to Vermont and took it up more seriously and a friend running the school at the Okemo Mountain Resort, snowboarding guru Gordon Robbins, recognized the talent and told her to go all in for the sport.

Mills did and became a teacher, which is still essentially her day job as director of operations for the Woodward Tahoe snowboarding school at Boreal.

A natural shift from gymnastics to snowboarding? Not really.

“I chose it because it was so different, more a lifestyle sport and outside in the environment,” Mills said. “After doing it for a while, I realized that, oh, some things do relate. I saw the connections. But in the end, it’s a pretty different sport.”

Mills got her law degree and practiced environmental law for a about four years before giving that up and heading back to teach on the slopes.

Meanwhile, she kept her hand in judging. She served as the lead judge for a handful of U.S. contests this winter leading to the Olympics.

Now, the ultimate honor – a spot on the six-person Olympic panel.

The slopestyle contest brought some griping from the riders about the judging, which favored more technical tricks over the biggest jumps. Mills knows that drill. She learned early in her gymnastics career to not put all her self-worth in what the judges thought. She advises the riders to take the same attitude, even though it’s her word they’ll be playing down.

“I knew what I was capable of doing, what was a good routine for myself. I’d coach my kids in the same manner,” she said. “But on other side of it, we are really focused on making sure the results are correct and people on the results sheet are in the right order.”