

# Opinion: It takes a support system to create an Olympian

By John Rice

To create an Olympic level athlete you need first a gifted, talented athlete, then a strong sense of family support, a good support system of friends, a good coaching base, a great playground to hone their skills, financial assistance and sponsors for coaching, travel and fees, and a community that supports them in their overall education and growth as well as roots them on to success.

Some kids are just born with it, get the breaks and stay healthy, and ultimately have great timing when it comes to being at their best when the games come around. Support comes in many forms, and financial support is only one kind. I would argue that the other forms of support are more important to building the whole athlete.



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How many times have you seen talented kids burn out, or make it to the big event and cant deliver.

Sierra has produced four Olympians since 2000, an impressive statistic for a smaller boutique resort that does not boast a million dollar support system. At Sierra, athletes are not pressured into performance, or subjected to the politics of racing and competitive organizations. Sierra simply provides

the resources they need, and “removes the rocks” from their path.

It starts with the athlete having a dream, they have to want it, and they will ultimately make many sacrifices to get to the narrow part of the funnel. The resort can help shape that journey, but the athlete and their support system are key to their chances of getting to the next level.

If the kid has a dream, they have the talent and the family support, what can the resort do? Here are five things we do to provide the support that a driven, talented kid needs to make it to the top:

1) Commitment to a great playground -- the resort where the kids grow up has to have the dedication to providing the place to play, whether it be a groomed race course, a terrain park or a halfpipe. The resort needs to commit the resources and personnel to keep these areas consistently in great shape for their athletes. There are days when a race or event might close the trail or the park to the public -- a tough decision to make, but important to show the commitment. Kids will learn to have fun first, can be taught the right way to shape their skills if the playground is built and maintained. That means commitment to snowmaking, grooming, terrain, race hills. They have to have a place to play. In the off season it might be helping them with physical training, gymnastics or Woodward style camps. It might be building that special jump for them to learn the new trick on. At Sierra we have seven terrain parks for all abilities and levels. It helps to keep it fun and challenging at the same time.

2) Support youth competition programs -- from the very beginnings, developmental programs in the ski school and competition services should be focused on fun. Terrain based teaching helps them learn at the earliest stage how to use the mountain to turn, slow down, speed up and stop. Animated, themed learning terrain is best to keep their attention and

fun factor high. At Sierra, the Riglet park (Star Wars themed) and the adventure zones (history of California themed) give instructors a fun/interactive environment for learning skills. The next level of learning comes with Buddy Werner (volunteer coaches) weekend programs and the Rippers (ski school developmental, paid coaches) programs where kids showing abilities are given a place to start light competition against their peers. Sierra identifies those with higher skills and will encourage the parents to consider the D-team. The next level has costs associated with it, but there is a 501(c)3 in place called the Sierra at Tahoe Education Foundation that provides financial assistance for event fees, coaching and other costs as the kids move up the system. Incentives are given for podium finishes, with the goal of becoming one of Sierra's amateur athletes.

3) Hire and keep great coaches and instructors -- key to the athlete development, instructors and coaches not only teach the kids how to ski and ride, they become mentors in many ways. At teen years kids find it hard to accept authority figures, parents and teachers, but they listen to their coaches. Sierra has developed a team of coaches in all disciplines who understand the focus needs to be on the whole development of the athlete, how to be a good winner and a good loser, how to be their best when their best is needed. At Sierra we often give our young athletes access to our pro athletes. Jamie Anderson, Maddie Bowman and Hannah Teter have ridden and skied with the kids, sharing the fun aspects as well as mentoring the kids.

4) Hosting event at the resort -- Sierra has historically hosted USASA weekend events of all kinds: pipe, slopestyle and boarderX, Tahoe league and other alpine racing events to expose the athletes to the first stages of competition. These local events give the young athletes a foundation for learning to compete against friends, against other mountains, and ultimately try to make it to Nationals. The level of parent

and coaching support for these programs makes it much more than simple competition, the social aspects, rooting for each other, sharing condos and meals, helps shape the kids in many ways. Having home resort events helps the kids and their families keep the costs in check as well.

5) Advocate for the athlete -- Help them find the right sponsors, agents and opportunities to move to the next level. That can be as simple as finding them equipment, or as complicated as helping them secure a contract to help defray the cost of their travel. Once the kids start to win events, they start to build their brand, and we help them by including them in video and facebook posts, photo shoots, incentives, and other means to share them with the world. We support their causes, their charities, we care about their goals and help them reach their dreams beyond simply wearing a logo and competing. Getting on Team USA isn't automatic, negotiating the political challenges of that process can be distracting. At Sierra we help get the kids to right high profile events where they can get the attention of the team. Finally, showing up at the events and rooting them on, bringing the support of the mountain and the community lets them feel the joy of representing not only their mountain but their home.

There are stories within the stories, but this is the framework for how we have done it. Our first two time Olympian (Nagano and Park City), Travis Cabral was the youngest ever to win the U.S. Freestyle Championships and the Overall World Cup at age 15.

Hannah Teter came to Sierra before her first Olympic Games and asked for us to be her home training grounds (she is from Vermont), and then went on to compete in the next three Olympics (Torino, Vancouver and Sochi) winning two medals.

They paved the way for Jamie and Maddie to not only compete in Sochi, but come home with the top prize in their disciplines.

The low pressure, high support style has proven to be a winner. As we look on our next generation of future athletes, we hope to see some of them follow in their footsteps.

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