

Women's World Cup slides into Squaw

By Susan Wood

The best of the best in the world of skiing will descend on the home of the 1960 Winter Games in Lake Tahoe next month, with Squaw Valley set to host the sport's premier event.

The top women's alpine ski racers in the world are preparing for the Audi FIS Women's World Cup giant slalom and slalom races along with other seasoned competitors for the Toyota ProAm Ski Challenge to round out the weekend's festivities slated for March 10-12.

It's difficult to gauge who will win the most from the endeavor.



"It's with pride we bring World Cup skiing back to Tahoe." — Andy Wirth, Squaw Valley CEO

Beyond California's ski industry association, Squaw's celebrity ambassador, and Truckee's city officials, no one could be giddier with excitement than the ski resort's head honcho Andy Wirth.

Squaw's chief executive officer began the quest to host the event about three years ago with Olympic ski racer Julia Mancuso, whose home resort is Squaw.

Even an emboldened Wirth admitted to being skeptical because the FIS calendar is “tightly held.” Thankfully, he knew the right people and made it happen with Mancuso’s help.

It was like the spirit of Alex Cushing was smiling down.

“It’s with pride we bring World Cup skiing back to Tahoe. World Cup is very unique – it is to skiing what the Masters is to golf. And this is the last World Cup for women before the finals,” Wirth told *Lake Tahoe News*. The finals are set in Aspen March 13-19.

Wirth noted the event has a major purpose for him that goes beyond bringing an obvious enhanced image of Squaw Valley to the world.

“We want to inspire the next generation or two of ski racers from this mountain that come out to ski Lake Tahoe. We’re thrilled to host this,” the skiing enthusiast said, adding the move “has nothing to do with television exposure.”

“When we watch Mikaela (Shiffrin) and Julia come through that finish line – that makes it real,” Wirth said. Shiffrin is a favorite, along the racing circuit with Vail Resort’s Olympic medalist Lindsey Vonn and Mancuso.

The race route for GS and slalom will be set up off the Red Dog run, “the exact same track of the 1960 Olympics with a different gate and different turns,” Wirth said.

Wirth beefed up workers to manage the event with 2,500 paid staff and volunteers.

He expects his season passholders won’t be impacted as most of the mountain will be open for business – much the same way Wirth’s former resort Whistler was when it hosted the Winter Olympics in 2010.

Squaw’s chief anticipates more than 15,000 spectators in two days.



Red Dog will be reserved for World Cup athletes March 10-11. Photo/LTN file

An economic boost for region?

That's like music to the ears of Truckee Town Manager Tony Lashbrook, who expects a residual economic boost in the city on that weekend.

"We look forward to it. We're expecting downtown to be very busy. The hotels should be full. We're treating it like a holiday weekend. We may have traffic issues on (Highway) 89 and (Interstate) 80, but we have a heads up on that," Lashbrook told *LTN*. "But we have great snow, that's so nice to showcase."

Agreed says California Ski Industry Association officials.

"We are having an amazing season here in California, so it's a great time for this event to make its way west," association Executive Director Michael Reitzell told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He sees the same long-term benefit that Wirth does in getting the ski racers of tomorrow jazzed about someday joining the ski team – perhaps to compete in the World Cup.

Reitzell used Squaw Valley's own Travis Ganong as an example of a resort-bred men's downhiller who competes and wins in races.

"He, along with the fantastic women who will race at Squaw Valley in March, show every one of those young racers that reaching the top from California is possible," he said.

To be what you want to be

Just ask Squaw's own ambassador – Olympic gold medal freestyle skier and World Cup champion in mogul skiing Jonny Moseley.

The homegrown skier, who is considered one of the most influential skiers of all time, knows the dream and lived it. He single-handedly changed the sport of freestyle skiing – albeit quite different than the downhill discipline. Nonetheless, like Mancuso, Moseley honed his skills at Squaw Valley and believes Wirth is the right man to put on an event of this magnitude.

"As long as there's alpine skiing, people have wanted to go. It's World Cup or nothing," Moseley told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It's going to be a great event and provide income to the economy. The whole Tahoe area has Olympic high-end racers."

The last time World Cup was staged here was 1971.

Moseley offered a word of advice to the World Cup competitors.

"Keep in mind, I'm a freestyle skier. But from my general bank of knowledge in what I've seen on Red Dog is it has off camber features with many twists," he said as a quasi-skier scholar.

Moseley added the run makes for an interesting race considering it starts from the top of the chairlift.

The surface will command slick conditions, meaning cold enough temperatures to "impregnate water into the surface and freeze overnight," he said. The ski resort waters down the run before

a race to give it that slick feel.

“If we get an atmospheric river right before or throughout – that might be a problem,” he said of the latest meteorology term describing constant wet storms.

But it can't be all serious work and no play. There are the parties. And then there are the sideshows.

Moseley and his Olympic gold medalist counterpart on the downhill side, Daron Rahlves – who retired a few years ago from sanctioned competition, plan to race after the World Cup races.

It's like the battle of the ski legends, Olympic style.



Squaw Valley's legend will grow with a new generation witnessing its iconic steeps. Photo/LTN file

Looking beyond

The whole World Cup series of events may also serve another long-standing purpose.

“Squaw getting the World Cup is huge news for our region in a

variety of ways. It's a tremendous venue in that the Tahoe region continues to harbor the dream of bringing the Olympics to Lake Tahoe (again)," former Nevada Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki told *LTN* from Washington, D.C., by phone.

Krolicki, who also hails from Tahoe, serves as the chairman on the commission to deliver the Winter Games to the Reno-Tahoe region.

But timing is everything.

Since connected to the Olympic system, Krolicki added his group respects taking a backseat for the U.S. Olympic Committee with the Summer Games slated for 2024. Host countries don't often get the Games back to back, but that doesn't mean the idea has no chance of materializing.

Baby steps.

"For now, we'll just tuck it away and hope there's a way to host another Olympics. The World Cup showcases our region and infrastructure. This could be a piece of the puzzle as we go forward," Krolicki said. "To have the world's elite in Tahoe is an important part of the story going forward."