

Squaw crowd cheers Shiffrin onto victory



Mikaela Shiffrin reacts after completing her second slalom race. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

By Susan Wood

OLYMPIC VALLEY – Steeped in tradition and prestige, the women’s World Cup at Squaw Valley delivered a grand, heated environment for thousands of festive fans who turned out Saturday to see on-fire American ski racer Mikaela Shiffrin on top of the podium.

The season wraps up in Aspen next weekend, where Shiffrin is expected to clinch the World Cup title. She has 1,523 points,

with Ilka Stuhec of Slovenia having 1,145 points. Stuhec was originally scheduled to race March 11 but did not. On Friday Stuhec crashed on her first run in the giant slalom.



Elisabeth Kappaurer of Austria competes in the slalom race March 11 at Squaw. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

If Shiffrin wins the World Cup title, she would join Americans Lindsey Vonn, Bode Miller, Tamara McKinney, and Phil Mahre.

The second day of competitive ski racing at Squaw ended with a fourth overall slalom title in five years for Shiffrin – quite a prelude to celebrating her 22nd birthday Monday.



Fans have massive cow bells on Saturday to make noise to root on the athletes. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

After raising her skis and getting high-fives from friends at the finish, a red-faced Shiffrin panted and shook her head as *Lake Tahoe News* asked what she thought of the course, which is considered the toughest on the race tour this year.

“Woo,” Shiffrin yelled out after realizing she won.

The Colorado skier’s second run of the day capped the weekendlong races that resulted in a cliffhanger at the finish, with Shiffrin’s second-to-last run and Swiss racer Wendy Holdener missing a gate near the finish. In the first run on March 11, Holdener was 0.02 seconds ahead of Shiffrin.



Bernadette Schild of Austria celebrates her third place finish on Saturday. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

As Shiffrin walked from the staging area, spectators chanted: "Mikaela, Mikaela, Mikaela."

On a spring-like, sunny day that had many spectators stripping down to one layer or less, many cowbell-toting, costume-clad enthusiasts – and their dogs – lined the sidelines to see the big-time spectacle set on the Red Dog course – the same setting as the 1960 Winter Olympic Games.



Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Thousands of people cheer on the racers March 11. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

The 38-degree slope proved challenging for the competitors, with only 38 of 57 finishing the slalom course in the first run, in which Shiffrin shined with a time of 47.46 seconds.

Shiffrin also won the giant slalom Friday. GS is known for more sweeping slope carving, which resembles downhill racing, while slalom is more characteristic of sharper turns.



Mikaela Shiffrin reacts to Wendy Holdener of Switzerland falling at the third to last gate after being in the lead. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Shiffrin said she had a tough time near the top of her second slalom run.

“I don’t think I found a rhythm. I was fighting to stay in it the whole time,” she said.

Still, the racing phenom pulled it off – winning back-to-back disciplines on the same weekend.

The last time the granddaddy of all ski events graced Squaw was in 1969.



On the podium Saturday were from left Sarka Strachova from Czech Republic (second), Mikael Shiffrin of Colorado (first), and Bernadette Schild of Austria (second). Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

The World Cup was an up and down emotional roller coaster for the competitors and their fans as the balmy weather conditions created a slushy surface that had the slipper volunteers cleaning the course after each skier.

By the second run it was so slushy the snow splashed some of the competitors' goggles.

When some racers fell, the crowd bellowed a loud moan in unison. When others crossed the finish line or when announcer Olympic freestyle champion Jonny Moseley called out an American competitor, the crowd erupted.



Squaw last hosted a World Cup in 1969. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

“I was bummed. I just hooked the gate,” American Resi Stiegler from Jackson Hole, Wyo., told *Lake Tahoe News* at the bottom of the course. “I love this hill.”

People crowded around racer Erin Mielzynski of Canada asking for her autograph. She fell on her run as well, but continued to smile as she signed helmets, shirts and posters.



Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Lena Duerr from Germany is dejected after not being able to complete the first run. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

“It’s pretty cool to be here with the fans and being in North America,” she said.

This is precisely why Squaw Valley chief Andy Wirth said he wanted to bring World Cup back to the Lake Tahoe-area resort. Having it here was like a gift, especially for the youth who grace Squaw slopes.

Wirth told *LTN* he was pleased that everything was going as planned, minus a less than favorable forecast that earlier had predicted rain for Saturday.



Fans show their support for their respective countries. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

“That would have been daunting,” Wirth said.

As it was, a lot of effort among 2,500 paid staffers and volunteers went into the event. At the Red Dog chairlift, one could tell crews had to dig out about 10 feet.



Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Megan McJames of Park City missed a gate on the first run.
Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Shiffrin commended crews, noting in a post-race press conference that workers did an “incredible” job.

“I’ve never seen so much snow in my life,” she told *LTN*. “I imagine people here are sick of it.”

She equated the drive up to Squaw as a trip “back into history” in which old photos highlight walls of snow.



Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Sarka Strachova of Czech Republic finishes second on March 11 in slalom. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

The racing sensation also said she respects the history associated with meeting the likes of American legend Tamara McKinney, a former World Cup alpine ski racer from Squaw Valley who won four World Cup season titles, and still lives and works in the area.

Shiffrin called her “a great inspiration,” and added she hoped to carry on the torch in the same way to the youth of today.

Bringing on a new generation

Jake Keil, 10, of Incline Village couldn't be happier at the prospect of witnessing such a monumental event. He hiked up the snowy hill to find a place along the course ropes on crutches. The youngster competes on the Squaw team. He hurt his knee a year ago at Mount Rose and is trying to recover.



Bernadette Shild of Austria screams to third place in the slalom. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

“We wouldn’t miss this,” his father, Kirk Keil, said with a beaming smile.

“Got your bell, right?” Keil said, turning to his son.

The father-son duo showed up to watch Shiffrin and Lila Lapanja because “she’s from Incline,” the patriarch said.

The crowd erupted when Shiffrin launched out of the gate.



Resi Stiegler of Wyoming crashes March 11 on the slalom course. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

“She should be extra careful (with these conditions),” Keil said.

“That was so fast,” the young Keil said, looking up at his father.

Eleven members and two coaches with the Mammoth Ski Team came up to witness their first World Cup event.

“It’s awesome that it’s so close to home – especially since we raced the same hill,” Kendall Lach, 15, said. The California ski team was pulling for Shiffrin, the star of the weekend.

The Colorado skier comes across as a natural who at age 7 won her first slalom event.

Her success was something notably expected by her agent Killian Albrecht, an Austrian racing legend in his own right.

Albrecht, who started representing Shiffrin at age 15, told LTN the course can be tricky. And it was.

That didn’t spoil the spirits of all who enjoyed the festivity-filled weekend.

“Anytime I get to see the best in the world, I try to do it,” said Berkeley resident Andy Bennett, who bought a VIP package that qualified him for early-morning first tracks. Bennett, who has a house in Tahoe City, often skis at Alpine Meadows, but loved Squaw.

There’s something about Squaw.



Slippers make sure the course is smooth as it can be between racers. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Coming in third in the slalom event, Bernadette Schild of Austria told the press she relished returning to a place where she has quite a connection. Her family is close to the Poulsens. Wayne and Sandy Poulsen were founders of the ski resort.

“It’s like coming home. I spent so many summers here,” Schild said, adding she appreciated the warm American welcome.

“The American crowd is amazing. They knew our names. I never heard anyone thank me in Europe for giving me a show like they did here,” she said.