

Elite athletes bond as they rise above everyone else

By Kathryn Reed

PARK CITY, Utah – It's more than training, dedication, drive, determination, athleticism and skill. It's about believing you are better than everyone else. That is what often sets a gold medal Olympian apart from others.

It's not that these select athletes don't have their doubts – even on game day – but it's the persistent confidence in themselves that keeps them going.

Mikaela Shiffrin admitted this week she gets nervous before most races. Her mom is a calming influence.

In nearly the same breath, though, she wasn't about to back down from her earlier claim that she could compete in five disciplines in the 2018 PyeongChang Games – and medal in them. The World Cup season that starts next month will help determine what events she will compete in in February.

She earned a gold in slalom at Sochi, Russia, in 2014; the youngest athlete in history (age 18) to do so. On the World Cup circuit last season, including at Squaw Valley, she was dominating the slalom and giant slalom courses.

Shiffrin along with more than 100 athletes are in Park City this week as part of the annual Team USA media summit.



Multiple generations – in athletic terms – make up the U.S. ski and snowboard team. From left are, Squaw Valley's Julia Mancuso, Laurene Ross, Jackie Wiles, Chloe Kim of Mammoth Mountain, Mikaela Shiffrin, and Kelly Clark of Mammoth. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Another common thread is they are having fun. Yes, being a professional athlete (the Olympics are long past being about amateurs) is a job, but, it's so much more. For the most part these men and women started out in their sports like anyone else. It might have been something mom and dad introduced them to, or friends were doing and they wanted to join.

Sometimes it was natural ability that pushed them along, or sibling rivalry, or wanting to keep up with or be better than a friend.

Joss Christensen and McRae Williams grew up together in Park City. Both hope to be on the freeskiing team that goes to South Korea in a few months. On Sept. 26, though, it was obvious their friendship and the camaraderie they have with other guys is what helps keep them motivated. It's not often

teammates can talk about how the other's mom drove them places in middle school.

Believing in each other is another motivating factor. If they aren't No. 1, they want their teammate and friends to be.

Maddie Bowman of Meyers, along with Maggie Voisin and Devin Logan all compete in the same event – halfpipe skiing. Bowman brought the gold back to Tahoe in 2014; in particular to Sierra-at-Tahoe, her home resort.

The three sat next to each other Tuesday. It was obvious theirs is a genuine friendship. They admitted to being exuberant when the others are in the pipe – they want to share in each other's successes. In some ways it's like being a team in an individual sport.

As with many sports, there comes a point when an idol becomes a colleague. Chloe Kim remembers when she was about 8 and for the first time saw Kelly Clark at Mammoth – where they both snowboard. Kim was giddy, Clark was encouraging. Today they are teammates. Kim couldn't compete in Sochi because of age restrictions. South Korea would be Clark's fifth Olympics.

“Hopefully, my ceiling becomes her floor,” Clark said of Kim and their respective achievements and places in history.