

EAGLE-VAIL, Colo. -- Sprinting from her small trophy-filled bedroom, Mikaela Shiffrin, the youngest American skier to be a World Cup champion, dashed around the kitchen looking for a headset to attach to her laptop.

In two minutes, a horde of European journalists would be linked via Skype to the Shiffrins' home here in the mountains, eager for insight from Mikaela, an 18-year-old princess of precision and a gold medal favorite in next month's Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

It was just past 8 on a mid-September morning and she was sleepy after a rare late-night shopping spree with her mother, Eileen, two hours away in Denver. Mikaela hurriedly combed her hair at a kitchen table as she made the Skype connection while Eileen rushed to wash dishes in the sink so the background would not look messy.

Mikaela, who graduated from high school a month earlier, was thoughtful and forthcoming with the reporters, but as soon as she finished and the laptop was shut, mother and daughter burst out laughing.

"Because she skis so efficiently, everyone perceives Mikaela as this perfectly prepped, organized little machine," Eileen said. "And here I am running around in the background as the world watches me clean my countertop and stove. If they only knew that we don't know what we're doing half the time.

"People think we've had this master plan to produce a world champion. We have no plan."

Nevertheless, Shiffrin, who is often called the next Lindsey Vonn, will be a featured personality at the Sochi Games, especially on American television now that the injured Vonn has withdrawn. With a gleaming smile, long blond hair and no pretension, Shiffrin is a star in waiting.

The only hard part may be waiting until the last few days of the Games for her events, giant slalom and slalom.

But one of the final, lasting Alpine images of Sochi may be Shiffrin's Olympic debut. She could become the face of a new generation of ski racing champions, a gold medalist raised in Colorado and New Hampshire who is already known throughout Europe by one name: Mikaela.

As Roland Pfeifer, her Austrian-born coach, said: "Mikaela is a once-in-a-lifetime talent. One day, she could beat everyone at everything."

Dominant in Slalom

Shiffrin has already done a good job beating everyone in slalom, her best event.

Racing in Europe since she was 15, she not only won last year's world slalom championship before 30,000 screaming Austrian fans -- most of whom were rooting for the second-place Austrian finisher -- but also awed the ski community with her dominance in the World Cup slalom standings. In the last year, she has won six World Cup slalom races and finished second or third in two other races.

In the last three months, she has stunned the World Cup circuit anew in giant slalom. With a second-place and a third-place finish in World Cup races, and two other top-10 finishes, she has demonstrated that she will also be a contender for Olympic gold in giant slalom.

But the Shiffrin phenomenon is about more than winning races. It is about her rapid improvement. Although some of her competitors have 300 more World Cup starts, Shiffrin began winning by implausibly large margins last season.

To put her accomplishments in perspective, consider that Shiffrin was a world champion at 17; Vonn was 24 when she won her first world championship gold medal. In a sport defined by the speed one can go downhill, Shiffrin's ascent in women's skiing has almost defied gravity.

A wunderkind since she was 11, she is neither physically imposing (5 feet 7 inches, 145 pounds) nor especially aggressive nor intimidating (an aw-shucks smile seems to be her natural expression). On skis, she does not appear to be going that fast. Her upper body is virtually motionless, her eyes are quiet and she does not create particularly dynamic angles on the snow with her skis.

The only thing that truly stands out about a Shiffrin race is her finish time.

"It's about the purity and serenity of her form," said her teammate Ted Ligety, a four-time world champion. "At top speed on an icy, steep racecourse, the hardest thing in the world is making it look effortless. Mikaela does that."

That is why they call her the Mozart of ski racing. But that only adds to the mystery. Because how does one nurture a prodigy?

"The question everyone asks me is: How did she get so good so soon?" Eileen said as Mikaela made scrambled eggs after the Skype interview. "There is no exact answer. People tell me I should write a book. I laugh, because you know what I would put in the book? How Mikaela got good because she had to shovel cow manure for weeks with me when we were replacing our lawn one summer.

"It was 90 degrees and she was 10 years old and she worked so hard without complaining. So she's a good ski racer because she did all kinds of different developmental things -- like learning a good work ethic -- but none of them were part of a plan to make a world champion."

Process and Family

To the Shiffrins -- including her father, Jeff, and her older brother, Taylor, a college ski racer -- Mikaela's journey to the top of the mountain is what they call a succession of not mere coincidences.

The family moved regularly for Jeff's job as an anesthesiologist, shuttling between Vail Valley in Colorado and northern New England more than once. The relocations were fitful and sometimes distressing, with the children occasionally begging to leave one place or the other. But looking back, the Shiffrins insist that every step was essential to Mikaela's development, even when mother and daughter helped to rebuild the lawn in front of their house in New Hampshire.

"I really developed some shoulder definition from that," Mikaela said with a laugh.

Not surprisingly, any predetermined strategy was remarkably elemental and always focused on process, not results. Jeff and Eileen, former college-level racers, believed in basic tenets, like keeping a light race schedule for their children as they loaded up on practice days filled with deliberate, skills-based drills and exercises.

And, they said, it was imperative to keep family close by.

Yet, these were controversial theories in the ski racing community -- both when Mikaela was starting out and when she advanced to the World Cup.

Youth coaches were livid when Mikaela, faster than skiers several years older, chose to stay close to home to practice with her family instead of chasing the prestige of distant championships. Several years

later, Eileen said, the United States ski team was adamantly against her accompaniment of Mikaela on the World Cup circuit in Europe. Eileen went anyway, and the Shiffrins paid for it for three years.

"Our plan produced the first 17-year-old World Cup champion the U.S. has ever had," Eileen said. "They should thank us for our \$500,000 donation to the U.S. ski team."

The message, the Shiffrins insist, is that their approach, which stressed skill development and shunned goal setting, and always involved the family, has been the secret. If there was a secret.

"If you look at it, what we always sought was normalcy," Eileen said.

Jeff recalled: "These top-level coaches would tell me that Mikaela was just ripping up a racecourse. And I would say: 'Yeah, I agree, but she's just 9 years old.' And they'd say, 'What are your plans for her?' And I'd answer: 'Plans? Well, tomorrow she's trying out for a part as the angel in the Christmas play.'"

"We didn't have plans. A million things could have happened."

Moving East

A million things did happen. They just seem to have produced the best 18-year-old skier, male or female, in United States history. To hear the Shiffrins speak of the many twists and turns in Mikaela's path, it began when they left the ski mecca of Vail, Colo., and moved to a New Hampshire town they had virtually never seen and a remote new house that Eileen and Mikaela had trouble finding after a cross-country drive.

"I hated it in the East at the start," Mikaela said, sitting in a gym outside Vail after a workout in September. "My parents said the East and the West were totally different, so they wanted us to know both so we understood the diversity of places. But the differences were tough to adjust to. It rained a lot in New Hampshire, and when I skied the snow was icy and hard, and the mountains were small. The people, the schools, the clothes -- everything was different."

Jeff Shiffrin took a job at the medical center in central New Hampshire operated by Dartmouth College, his alma mater. Eileen, a former intensive care unit nurse, turned her focus to raising Mikaela and Taylor.

She said: "We had moved from a nice house in a Colorado resort town to a tiny house in the country, and while we had a lot of land, which was great, the New Hampshire house was in terrible shape. So we started working 14-hour days repainting the entire inside and outside of the house and fixing everything up."

Then grubs destroyed their lawn.

"So we rebuilt the lawn, too," Eileen said.

Mikaela said: "The whole experience turned out to be really educational. We were on our own, and we found out there's a way to fix everything -- usually through hard work."

When Taylor did not make a travel soccer team with all his new friends, the reaction of the Shiffrins was emblematic of their approach to almost everything.

"My mom went on Amazon and bought about 10 different World Cup soccer DVDs," Mikaela said. "And she bought 12-foot-high rebound nets and bungee cords and all these contraptions so we could set up our own soccer complex in the backyard. Every day that summer, we had our own soccer camp for six or eight hours."

Mikaela recalled that they bought a unicycle because Eileen had read that it was good for balance, which she considered a pivotal athletic skill. The Shiffrin children also learned to juggle to improve their coordination.

"We then started going around our block, which was two miles long, riding the unicycle and juggling at the same time," Mikaela said. "And if I was doing that, then Taylor would be behind me dribbling a soccer ball as he ran around the block."

Eileen was confident it would pay off, even as she worried what people were saying about her children.

"You would see the neighbors coming out to watch the Shiffrins going around the block juggling on a unicycle," Eileen said. "I'm sure they thought we were completely nuts."

But the next summer, Taylor and Mikaela made their travel soccer teams.

As Eileen recalled: "The coach said to me: 'What did you do? They're great now.' And I said, 'You don't really want to know.' "

Jeff said: "Some people might call our approach intense. But it's not, because the motivation is not to be better than other people at something. The motivation comes from a belief that almost anything can be mastered if you're willing to put in the hours to master it. If you're going to do something, do it as best as you can."

Determined at Young Age

Mikaela and Taylor, who races for the University of Denver, insist they were never pushed in athletics.

"I'd say it was the opposite," Mikaela said. "I remember as a little girl in Vail, it would be a powder day and my parents would say, 'Let's go free ski in the back bowls.' And I'd say: 'No, I want to stay on the racecourse and train. I'm working on my pole plants.' I wanted to get better at something every day."

Rika Moore, a longtime youth ski racing coach in Vail, recalled that Eileen coached on the race training hill when she was pregnant with Mikaela.

"They're all good athletes in that family, and they all love ski racing," Moore said. "But from the time she was 7 years old, Mikaela was very determined to ski clean arcs in the snow. A lot of kids are in the race program to be with their friends or because their parents want them to do it. Not Mikaela. She was a happy little kid, but she was unbelievably focused on making perfect turns, one after another."

But when the Shiffrins moved east in 2003, they traded safe, dependable packed powder for what racers call boilerplate blue ice. It can be perilous; Mikaela eventually saw it as an advantage.

"If you don't have excellent technique, you won't be upright on that hard ice for long," she said. "Those East Coast racecourses prepared me for the World Cup circuit because the snow in Europe and the racecourses there are very much like the snow and the racecourses in the East."

"If I hadn't come east as a kid, I might still be a World Cup racer today, but I wouldn't be the same World Cup racer. And there were cultural or geographic conditions in the East that helped me, too."

Mikaela had learned to be an all-around skier in Vail because of the vastness of its big-mountain experience. When she got to New Hampshire, she ended up at tiny Storrs Hill Ski Area. The vertical drop at Vail is about 3,500 feet. At Storrs Hill, it is 300 feet.

But a long line of American champion ski racers cut their teeth at small mountains. One of them was Vonn, who learned to ski on a bump of a hill next to a Minnesota interstate. Jeff and Eileen Shiffrin were volunteer coaches at Storrs Hill along with Rick Colt, the Alpine director, and they sculptured Mikaela five days a week, including three weeknights.

"We'd get out of school, do our homework on the 45-minute drive to Storrs Hill, then train on into the night," Mikaela said. "When it's a small place, you get up and down quickly. We'd get 25 runs through a course. You can't get that many on a big mountain. I learned to love it in the East."

Mikaela continued to keep a light race schedule, but when she did get in the start house she usually won. Sometimes by a lot. In racing circles, news of her prowess spread.

She laughed off the renown, although when the local newspaper asked what she did to relax, Mikaela said she watched videos of World Cup championship skiers. In the summer, Mikaela and Taylor used in-line skates to simulate skis. Eileen turned broomsticks into slalom gates and taught her children the intricate rhythm and tempo of hand movements needed to block and push them away.

A Special Outlook

Eventually, Mikaela and Taylor caught the eye of the best Eastern coaches. When Taylor enrolled at Burke Mountain Academy, a boarding school in northern Vermont for ski racers, Mikaela, then 11, went, too.

Kirk Dwyer, the Burke headmaster and coach, saw in Mikaela a perfectly balanced and confident skier -- riding the unicycle had benefits -- with a rare outlook on competition.

"She truly believed that the focus should be on the process of getting better and not race results," Dwyer said. "She does that to this day. Everyone on the World Cup says they want to race like they practice, but how many actually do it? Mikaela can because she's not thinking about trying to win. She's thinking about getting better."

When Mikaela was 13, her father got a job in Denver and the family returned to Vail.

"I love Vail, but at the same time I was depressed," she said. "I missed my friends and I missed my coach at Burke."

So Mikaela went back east, as did Eileen, who rented a condominium near Burke, about 25 miles from the Canadian border. It was the first of several winters that Jeff and Eileen lived apart.

"If I have to get on a plane to visit my family for the weekend, so be it," Jeff said. "It was not a sacrifice because it was the right move for the kids."

But it was a costly decision, especially when Mikaela started leaving Burke to ski in Europe, with Eileen in tow. The Shiffrins' house here is comfortable and homey, albeit nine miles from the pizzazz of the Vail resort village.

"Do I sometimes wish we had a bigger house and fancier cars?" Jeff said. "Yes, and sometimes there has been some material envy. But we've been willing to delay gratification knowing the return in the long run will be worth it."

Acclimating to World Cup life was not easy. The language and food were different, Eileen had to drive everywhere in Europe, and Mikaela was left out of the social scene.

"She was 15 or 16, she wasn't going to bars with the 28-year-olds," Eileen said.

Mother and daughter passed evenings watching romantic comedies on DVD, along with episodes of "Friends" and "Glee." Many an afternoon was devoted to home schooling Mikaela, with Eileen as tutor and study partner.

"But you know, it was all part of the growth experience," Mikaela said. "It's like getting down a tough racecourse. Things you don't expect come up and you have to adapt. You can't let it throw you off. You have to cope. Those are all really valuable skills, in life and racing."

Motto: Be Faster

Last year, Mikaela graduated from high school and brought a World Cup globe and world championship gold medal back to the United States. Others, especially Europeans, are astonished at what she has achieved in such a short time, but Mikaela appears unaffected by her success.

"I believe there is always a faster way to do things," she said in September after playing tennis with her mother. "Whether it's learning to hit a backhand in tennis, learning high school chemistry or getting better at ski racing, I really believe with hard work and analytic preparation, you can skip a few steps and find the faster way."

It is something of a family motto: Be faster.

Up next are the pressure and expectations of the Olympics, where she will be the odds-on favorite to win the slalom. Mikaela is not running from the attention.

"I know that in the United States, the Olympics are the only time millions and millions of people watch ski racing, so it means a lot to the sport and the country," she said. "So I understand the significance, but at the same time, it's not the end of the world."

"I will want to win. But the result of the race will not motivate me. I can honestly say that I am motivated by improvement, not results. That's a core principle."

Mikaela exchanges Twitter messages with Missy Franklin, the Colorado swimmer who won four gold medals at the 2012 London Olympics as a 17-year-old.

"I just think it's cool that Missy even knows who I am," Mikaela said, giggling. "But it is comforting knowing that someone has done it at 17 or 18. It makes me think that if she can do it, why can't I? It proves that I don't have to wait. Let's get this show on the road right now."

'I'm No Superhero'

Skiing's Mozart is ready for the big stage.

"I always roll my eyes at that Mozart stuff," Eileen said at the end of a typically long day in her energetic household. (On what Mikaela called an off day, she still lifted weights at the gym for more than an hour and played nearly two hours of tennis.)

"Did Mozart plan his achievements?" Eileen said. "Or did he maximize the opportunities in his life by working really hard? Did he just enjoy it? I feel like we've just stumbled upon some things and been in the right place at the right time with the right people helping us. But then we always made the most of those situations as they happened."

For someone so young, Mikaela takes the longer view.

"I'm no superhero, and how I got here is a crazy path that probably could not be replicated," she said.

"But it doesn't have to be replicated. I may have become a world champion quicker than most, but people should look at me and realize there are all kinds of ways to get where you want to go.

"Because we didn't plan it. We just did it."

New York Times. January 12, 2014. Bill Pennington