



THE WORLD CUP

COMES EAST
Killington Plays Host for the
Fourth Winter

Story by Mark Aiken

Vermont may be a small state, but in the world of ski racing it is a heavyweight. As it has for the past three Thanksgiving weekends, Vermont hosts the HomeLite Killington World Cup from November 29 to December 1, 2019. Forget Kitzbuhel, Lake Louise, Åre, and other famous skiing venues; the Killington event has drawn the largest and most enthusiastic—okay, let’s call it like it is...the most rocking—crowds on the entire women’s World Cup circuit. 39,000 spectators turned out for the 2018 event.

One of those spectators has been sixth-grader Sofija Vanovac, 11, who races for the Mount Mansfield Ski Club and Academy (MMSCA) in Stowe. “It’s so fun,” says Sofija. “I like seeing them come down, and I like watching their technique.”

Sofija’s mom, Micheline Lemay, junior program director for MMSCA, has brought her children to all three Killington World Cups. “For the kids in our club—not to mention my own kids—to see this talent, this strength, in person is an unbelievable experience,” says Micheline.

Sofija’s favorite racer is Olympic gold medalist Mikaela Shiffrin, who at 24 has won more than 50 World Cup races. Mikaela feels similarly about Killington. “It’s more than a World Cup race,” says the world’s best skier. “I think it sets the standard for the tour.” Mikaela often hears from children like Sofija that they want to be just like her. “That is limiting,” she says. “They should shoot to be better. Most important, they should always stay true to themselves.”

In the case of Killington, Vermont, that is exactly what happened. In 2016, when the Thanksgiving weekend slot opened up on the World Cup calendar, naysayers argued that Vermont was an unlikely World Cup host; that the mountains were too small, the weather too unpredictable, and the infrastructure too underdeveloped. These doubters underestimated Yankee ingenuity, motivation, and character.



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Rather than try to be Park City or Aspen, Killington leaned on its own proven characteristics, including its snowmakers, experience in event planning, and the passionate ski community in Vermont (and surrounding states) that flocks to Killington to celebrate and host the world's greatest female skiers on winter's biggest stage. The results have been memorable for spectators, competitors, and organizers alike.

Small Town, Big Beast

With a population of less than 900, the town of Killington is small. Killington the resort, however, is not. Noting the resort's 155 trails and 28 lifts, Killington spokesperson Courtney DiFiore invokes the resort's longtime nickname: "We're the Beast of the East," she says.

Even a beast, however, might cover in the face of the logistics involved in hosting an event on the scale of a World Cup ski event. Killington has hosted its share of events: Spartan races in the off-season, mogul competitions on its famed Outer Limits bump run, and the Dew Tour, a nationwide snowboarding series. "The World Cup brings everything to another level," admits Mike Solimano, president and general manager of Killington.

From a logistical standpoint, Tom Horrocks of Rutland Town, who serves as the U.S. Ski Team's chief of media for the event, knows the resort and the town are up to the challenge once again. "It's about the Three Bs," says Tom. "Buses, bathrooms, and beer." On Thanksgiving weekend, spectators park in any of the Killington base area parking lots, and buses transport them—without long waits—to the event venue at the base of Superstar trail at Killington's K-1 base area.

Organizers understand another demographic that needs to have a positive experience: "Without the athletes you don't have an event," says Tom, noting that World Cup racers live out of a bag as they globe-trot for five months. "If we can provide an outstanding experience for them—the food is good, the transportation is easy, the hospitality works—then you have athletes who can perform at their best."

There's one other final consideration: weather.

"Most eastern resorts are just trying to get open in November," says Mike. They aren't committing thousands of dollars and countless hours to covering a single

trail with enough snow to meet World Cup specs. But Killington has distinguished itself through the years with early-season openings and late-season closings. So Killington focuses on two areas: readying their business as usual on a holiday weekend and getting Superstar ready for the World Cup. Both are big jobs.

Mikaela, who now calls Vail, Colorado home, and who cut her teeth at Vermont's Burke Mountain Academy, is completely undeterred by the unpredictability of Vermont winter weather conditions. "Some people may think I'm crazy, but I really enjoyed skiing in the east (rain, sleet, and all)," she says. "The hard surfaces and the variable weather conditions set me up for the ability to excel in any conditions." She recalls a race in the Czech Republic in which many of her colleagues and rivals didn't appreciate less-than-ideal conditions. "It reminded me of skiing at Burke. It felt familiar and kind of like home," she says.

If there were doubters when F.I.S. (that is, Fédération Internationale de Ski, the organization that governs the World Cup) awarded the event to Killington,



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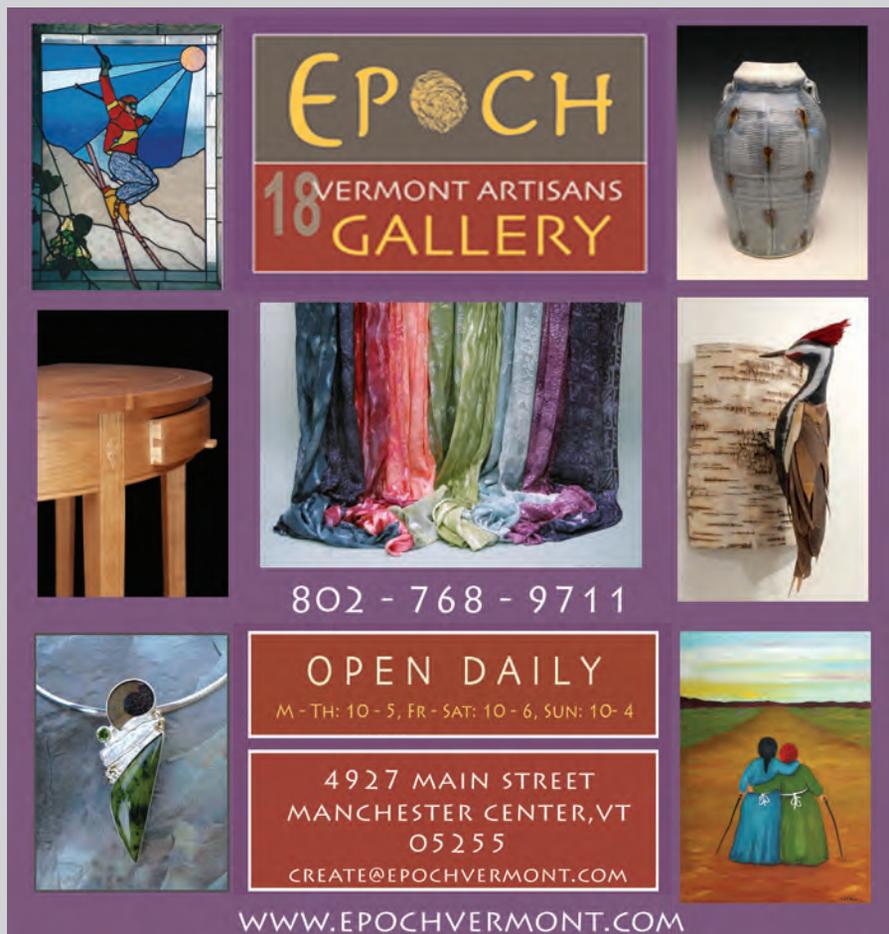
the doubts have been put to rest. “We’re known for our snowmaking and operations team,” says Mike. “If anyone can handle it, we can.”

A Vermont Event

“This isn’t just a Killington event,” says Mike. “It’s a Vermont event.” Thousands of Vermonters attend the event, as do visitors who love Vermont. Spectating is free, although there are ticketed areas and VIP areas, as well. The majority of spectators don’t pay, and they enjoy live entertainment and music before and after the racing—and during breaks in the action.

Meanwhile, locals are crucial to putting the event together. In addition to the Killington team and the organizing committee that hails from all over the United States, as well as Vermont, without the efforts and expertise of local on-snow volunteers, the event wouldn’t succeed. According to chief of volunteers Meg Horrocks, the on-snow race crew consists of 125 members who come from race clubs all over Vermont. To understand what’s happening on the hill, keep in mind that Superstar is a steep, expert, black-diamond trail. Organizers inject the snow on a World Cup course with water and they pour calcium chloride—also known as road salt—on the snow surface.

Different from a road, however, where the goal is to make things less slippery, the point of salting a racecourse is to cause melting and refreezing in order to create the hardest, slickest, most bulletproof surface possible—a surface capable of withstanding run after run after run of speeding, slicing, skidding, razor-sharpened race skis. Also, bear in mind that on all sides of the course are safety fencing, netting, hoses, snowmaking hydrants, signage, tools, race gates, and other equipment and gear. Not only do racecourse crewmembers need to have the knowledge and experience to maintain the course, judge the competitors, and keep the athletes safe, they also need to be top-flight skiers themselves to navigate the icy snow surface and the myriad hazards. The athletes are amazing, but also impressive are the highly skilled volunteers standing to the side and making the on-hill event happen.



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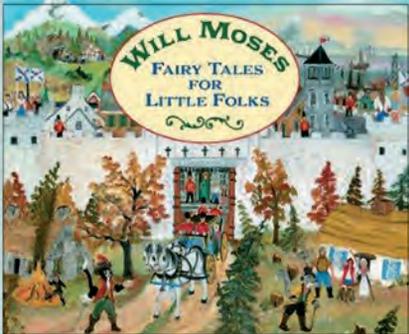
*“This isn’t just a
Killington event. It’s
a Vermont event.”*

—Mike Solimano

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The self-proclaimed "Beast Crew"—that is, nearly 200 more volunteers—is equally critical. "These are Killington ski and snowboard instructors, resort ambassadors, longtime passholders, families with children in the local schools, second-home owners, and retirees who moved here," Meg says. "Passion for the Killington community reverberates throughout the Beast Crew."

What do the volunteers do? They assist spectators, work in food outlets, serve as monitors at restricted access points, and operate the media center. They include on-site medical and team services personnel, award presentation crews, VIP area crews, sponsor support staff, and team and athlete registration personnel. "Some of the less obvious tasks are the ironing of national flags and picking up flowers for the awards ceremonies," says Meg. "Need I go on?"

The dedication of the community isn't lost on the athletes at Killington. "I love that the organizing committee and the volunteers pour their heart, soul, blood,

sweat, and tears into the event," says Mikaela. "You really can't beat Northeast racing fans."

Cheering for Skiing

On race day (and remember there are two race days, Saturday and Sunday), moments before the first racers ski, organizers hold a Club Parade. The parade honors young ski racers. On Saturday, the 20-plus member clubs of the Vermont Alpine Race Association (VARA) walk into the base area, which total nearly 1,000 young racers and coaches. On Sunday, ski racing clubs from neighboring northeastern states participate with the same number of kids. "Everyone cheers," says 11-year-old Sofija. "You feel like you are a part of the team, like everyone there is on the same team."

Sofija's mom Micheline walked with Sofija and the 30 Mount Mansfield Ski Club and Academy children. "They call your club's name," says Micheline. "And the kids walk out holding their club's banner. They are so proud." At the head of last year's parade walked former Olympian Tiger Shaw,



DAVID YOUNG COURTESY KILLINGTON RESORT

U.S. Ski Team CEO (and another native Vermonter).

At the conclusion of the parade, the race kids reunite with parents and the main event begins. In 2016, the crowd was thrilled when Mikaela won the slalom event. She won again in 2017. And again in 2018. "I don't know how she won all three years," says Tom. "It's like the Patriots winning six Super Bowls."

"To get that hat trick slalom victory in front of thousands of screaming fans at home is something I will never, ever forget," says Mikaela. "The crowd was so big, and so loud, I could actually hear them from the start gate."

Meanwhile, Sofija left the event inspired. Whether it's the talent of the field or the fact that World Cup racers ride up the chairlift just the same as anyone else, the access to the athletes is unique. "And I got Mikaela's autograph," says Sofija.

Judi McCormick

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While Mikaela was no doubt the crowd favorite, one thing that struck Micheline was the support for every racer. “The most powerful moment is when they come down one racer at a time,” she says, noting that the crowd cheers uproariously for every single athlete—not just the favorite. “It was like we were celebrating a sport we all care about. Everyone was cheering for skiing.”

“I love the sense of community on the East Coast,” says Mikaela. “I met people at Burke that I will be friends with forever. It’s really special and powerful, even more so in the ski community.”

One gets the sense that Mikaela still feels the same sense of camaraderie among her teammates and even rivals. When asked who to watch for (besides herself, of course), she could hardly bear to leave anyone out, mentioning all of her American teammates including former University of Vermont racer Paula Moltzan. “There are a lot of great racers,” she says. “It’s going to be a battle, and I’m looking forward to it.”

The best female racers in the world, led by Mikaela Shiffrin, will charge down the Beast of the East one at a time again this winter. Mikaela’s final advice to young Vermont skiers? “Don’t try to be the next Mikaela Shiffrin. Be the first you. Break new barriers. Create new ‘possibilities.’”

The HomeLite Killington World Cup does just that.

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