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The big show is hosted on home snow

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Adaptive World Cup Finals open on Wednesday

On the same Aspen Mountain racecourse where Mikaela Shiffrin crushed the field during last November's World Cup slaloms, her childhood friend Thomas Walsh has gold medal plans of his own.

Walsh, 22, and a member of the U.S. Paralympic team, trained Friday on Strawpile, muscling through the slick surface left by the previous day's rain. A second-year member of Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club, Walsh won his first World Cup race on Jan. 22 in St. Moritz, Switzerland, and will be gunning for more gold when the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) Alpine Skiing World Cup Finals begin here Wednesday.

After three days of giant slalom and slalom races, the elite pack moves to Tiehack on Feb. 29 for speed training and finally, downhill and super-G races that conclude March 4.

"There will be 16 or 17 countries represented, including Sochi and Vancouver paralympians. Quite a few of the medalists will be here competing," said IPC North American Director Erik Leirfallom.

More than 80 competitors are expected for the technical events and about 70 skiers for the speed races, he said. One dozen guides for the visually impaired, including local Chris Tatsuno who skis with Kevin Burton, are also registered.

The finals are important for the world's best adaptive alpine skiers at the halfway point between the 2014 Sochi Paralympics and the 2018 winter games in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

The World Cup season to date has taken the teams to Kranjska Gora, Slovenia; Tarvisio, Italy; St. Moritz; Tignes, France and now Aspen.

Diversity

AVSC-affiliated athletes who have qualified for the finals, or received a wild card slot awarded to the host venue, are a diverse lot. They include veteran Laurie Stephens, currently second in season slalom standings, and standing skier Melanie Schwartz, a two-time Paralympian.

While the much decorated Chris Devlin-Young is out with a Winter X Games-related injury, the next wave of champions like Andrew Kurka, Walsh and Jamie Stanton are ready, willing and able to take the torch. About half of the national team trains with AVSC, which is under the direction of head coach Jonathan Mika.

"Team USA has a great future in the sport. But they're putting it down this year, too," said Kurka, who

could never be accused of leaving anything at home on race day. That's produced plenty of podiums, but also untimely injuries for the Alaska native (highlighted by a neck-breaking crash during a downhill training run in Sochi).

Recently named national champion in super-G, a healthy Kurka was reflective during Friday's training under bluebird skies as he offered a respectful nod to the "strong international field" that is expected for the IPC World Cup Finals.

On any given race day, there are about 10 different guys who can win, said Kurka, who likely has his eye fixed on super-G overall leader Roman Rabi of Austria.

Kurka's AVSC teammate, Marine Corps veteran Josh Elliott, is among those who are threatening the old guard; Elliott's made stunning progress over the past four years, culminating with his elevation last month to the U.S. Paralympics Alpine National Team.

Elliott's reputation as a force to be reckoned with was also raised in January during the thrilling finals of the 2016 Mono Skier X during the X Games. Finishing just off the podium for the roller derby style, head-to-head ski event has positioned him well for these alpine races.

To draft or not to draft?

Aspen locals Burton and Tatsuno are anxious to size up the finals competition, mentioning that American Mark Bathum was in their sights, as the visually impaired (VI) racer and guide embark upon the long road to Korea. In IPC competition, athletes with visual impairments ski behind guides who give them verbal directions, either through a headset or commands shouted out loud.

The distance between the skiers depends on the athlete's comfort level but they cannot be greater than two gates apart. Like in bike racing, "The ideal in speed events is to draft," said Brian Follett, a VI athlete who now coaches.

Burton's introduction to elite adaptive winter sports came in 2012 when he took part in the Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass. The former linguist for the U.S. Navy, identified for having strong potential, was recruited as a Nordic racer. Within two years he was representing the U.S. at the Sochi Paralympics in cross-country racing. Burton moved to Aspen last year and found early success with coach-turned-guide Tatsuno.

The entire Sochi experience was so memorable that "it gives me the fire to continue to be competitive," said the 33-year-old. If he and "Tats" were to qualify for the 2018 games in Korea, Burton could make history as a rare crossover winter sports athlete.

According to history provided by the IPC, adaptive ski racing's roots followed the end of World War II, providing a diversion as "injured ex-servicemen returned to the sport they loved. In 1948, the first courses were offered."

Also that year, the "first documented championships for skiers with an impairment were held in Badgastein, Austria, in 1948 with 17 athletes taking part," it continued. "The introduction of sit-ski allowed people using wheelchairs to begin to ski and race."

More than a generation passed before the first Paralympic Winter Games were held in Sweden in 1976 and included the disciplines of slalom and giant slalom. Downhill was added in 1984, the same year sit-skiing was introduced as a demonstration sport in the Innsbruck Paralympics. It became a full medal event at the 1998 games in Nagano, Japan, with the sport seeing steady growth since then.

“More people are discovering it, more coaches are finding out it’s a really viable ski racing sport,” said Leirfallom. And that’s opened the door for staging Paralympic races on some of the same, challenging venues that host able-bodied World Cup skiing.

“It’s amazing watching a one-legged person carry just as much speed down the track as an able-bodied racer,” he said. “The sit skiers are really fun to watch too.”

Big win

To the casual observer, standing skiers like Thomas Walsh and Jamie Stanton may appear indistinguishable from able-bodied racers. Walsh is something of a rarity in that he was an accomplished USSA competitor before a 2009 cancer diagnosis resulted in a partial pelvic amputation.

While Walsh said that in slalom he feels at “a disadvantage because I don’t have as much control on my right leg,” slalom was the event in which he recently won his first World Cup gold medal.

“That was very cool, the biggest win I had in my life other than beating cancer,” said the Vail native.

Stanton, also a national team member who is new to AVSC this year, was behind Walsh in that race but ahead of Austrian Martin Wuerz.

These elite winter athletes all arrived here through a different trail: Some, like Walsh, had cancer; others were injured during a war or training exercises; others may have been born with a deformity.

And then there are skiers like Kevin Mather, easily identifiable by his red hair and never-give-up attitude.

A wild card entrant to the finals, “This is my first big show,” said the third-year AVSC athlete who came to adaptive sports by way of a spinal cord injury suffered after being struck by a truck during a half-Ironman event in Los Angeles.

Though a triathlete at the time of his injury, Mather has been humbled by ski racing but has kept at it with a tenacity that once earned him “most improved skier” honors from AVSC. In a typical year, Mather skis at least 150 days, he said.

Mather has been spending time in Denver lately as a volunteer at Craig Hospital where he works with new spinal cord injury patients through a program connected to the Triumph Foundation.

No longer the new guy among his AVSC teammates, Mather is a role model for skiers like John Goettge.

“Kevin’s dedication and commitment to training is something to aspire to,” Goettge said.

After a rough start to the 2014/15 season, suffering a back injury and upon recovery, crashing and breaking some ribs, this year’s been better. Goettge said he feels strong after a decent fifth place finish in a recent combined race (which takes one run of super-G and a run of slalom)

“Peer-to-peer coaching is one of the best assets of being in the club. You ski with the best and you learn from the best,” Goettge said.

A veteran of the 2010 Paralympics in Vancouver as well as 2014 in Sochi, Melanie Schwartz is used to high profile events. Still, this is the first competition of this caliber where she’ll be able to sleep in her own bed.

“I’m super excited for this first big international race on home Aspen snow,” Schwartz said.

Walsh, whose first coach was Mikaela Shiffrin’s mom Eileen, brings a unique perspective as someone who excelled as a alpine skier in able bodied and adaptive events.

“I think the able-bodied ski world could learn a lot about teamwork and life if they came out and skied with us for a couple of days,” he said.

Following the IPC World Cup finals will be another elite series of alpine races on the traditional Aspen Mountain course. On March 10-18 are the NorAm Finals, considered the test event for the 2017 FIS World Cup Finals, as well as a steppingstone for athletes who aspire to the elite level.

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Melanie Schwartz is looking forward to competing on home snow for these IPC World Cup Finals races.

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