

Gold

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In his book *Momentum: Chasing the Olympic Dream*, Pete Vordenberg explains: "Cross-country skiing places a higher demand on the cardiovascular system than any other sport, bar none ... (it) uses the whole body, all at once, hard, for a long time" so it can take years to develop the strength and stamina to sustain high-level racing.

In 28 races to date, the U.S. women's cross-country team finished on the podium more than a third of the time – unprecedented success for American cross-country. To fully appreciate their journey, consider starting from nothing.

In the first Winter Olympic Games in Chamonix, France, in 1924, Nordic – or cross-country – skiing and ski jumping were the only skiing events – but the American women did not field a cross-country team until the 1972 Olympics in Sapporo, Japan. Martha Rockwell finished 18th – but it would remain the best finish for an American woman for the next 30 years – the "dark ages" of the sport, according to Shinn.

No women were named to the 2005-2006 Olympic cross-country team.

A turning point came the year before in 2004 when Matt Whitcomb arrived at Burke Mountain Academy, a ski-racing prep school in Vermont's remote Northeast Kingdom, to coach a small cross-country team. He brought with him a coaching philosophy he inherited from his father, who stressed team community over the individual. Added to this was a school motto at Burke: "all leaders, no leaders" – that is, everyone was expected to be a leader.



Photo by TOM KELLY/U.S. SKI & SNOWBOARD

The women's relay team for the 2017 world championships, flanked by coaches Chris Grover and Matt Whitcomb.

How do you build a "dream team?"

It takes belief. Post the 2006 Torino Games, Kikkan Randall was the only woman named to the U.S. Ski Team's A team. Rosie Brennan wrote: "When I first started cross country skiing, there were no women on the U.S. Team and ... (as) I watched Kikkan continue with undying belief and confidence ... I suddenly began to see that future and moved to Alaska to train with her. ... I will forever be amazed by Kikkan's belief that this was possible when there wasn't even a women's team, but what I admire even more is her ability to bring so many of us with her."

It takes open-minded leadership. Whitcomb: "What makes Kikkan such a great leader is that she doesn't capitalize and

horde all the control. She allows others to lead ... for a lot of athletes ... other people's success casts a larger shadow on you. Kikkan welcomed other people's success and saw it as a wind at her back. She truly wanted her teammates to succeed."

It takes connection. The European racing circuit can be its own challenge as most European skiers live at home during the week then travel to races on weekends, while the American team is living out of duffle bags in hotels. Whitcomb held weekly meetings and encouraged members to express their emotions, creating an on-the-road surrogate family. Sometimes, it takes serendipity and spontaneity.

In February, 2012, in Germany, Kikkan and Liz wandered into a shop, spotted some red, white

and blue striped knee-high socks meant for a Pippi Longstocking costume. They bought four pairs. The next morning, at a relay race in Nove Mesto na Morave in the Czech Republic, Holly, Ida, Liz and Jessie donned the Pippi Longstocking socks, painted their faces and approached the starting line, with their staid, serious opponents looking on as if they had "jumped out of a clown car." The team finished in fifth place – but it felt like winning gold.

Sometimes it means doing the unexpected. For the 2012 World Cup season opening 10k freestyle race in Gällivare, Sweden, Kikkan was back from an injury, so one teammate had to sit out. As Holly, Kikkan, Liz and Jessie donned those Pippi Longstocking socks again and skied through arctic

twilight, Ida cheered them on. Henceforth, the team referred to the sidelined teammate as the "fifth leg" of the relay team. Liz: "To have the girl who should be really upset out there cheering louder than anyone, that was the moment when this became a full team."

Sometimes, team energy makes the impossible possible. In the FIS 2017 Nordic World Ski Championships in Lahti, Finland, Jessie Diggins was paired with Sadie. Their ability to inspire each other resulted in Sadie's first world championship medal and Jessie's fourth. Jessie: "When we put on our relay socks, we have the energy of the entire Team USA with us, supporting us. We know everyone is there. It takes a huge team to support just two people on the track."

In PeyongChang, the best chance for a medal for the Women's Cross-Country team was the 4 x 5k relay – the "dream team" finished 5th, just 1:20.5 behind the gold medal Norwegians, edged out by Sweden, Russia and Finland finishing 4th. Two-time Olympian Diggins, a 26-year-old from Afton, Minnesota, finished 5th in both the 15k skiathlon and the 10k freestyle – the best finish ever for a U.S. women's cross-country skier; she finished 6th in the sprint classic.

The last cross-country event will happen in three days, on Sunday, the final day of the Olympics – the 30-kilometer CL. The "Dream Team" has one more event ahead of them – but a bright future filled with team spirit and a passion for leaving a mark on the future.

Rosie Brennan: "I hope that every one of us girls on the World Cup can provide inspiration and motivation for girls around the country the same way Kikkan did and continues to do for us. I hope the belief grows stronger as more of us reach the podium ... we all share a continued belief that we can be the best and are willing to work hard to get there."

Keep an eye out for the Pippi Longstocking socks – all for one – and one for all!

With one last event and gold medals around the necks of Randall and Diggins, the sky is the limit! Who knows how or when the psychic power of teamwork can uplift a team beyond their wildest dreams. This team is now riding on that group energy that can transform the impossible. Who knows – this last cross-country event could be the most memorable yet!

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