



CLUBHOUSE RULES

Despite its ramshackle HQ on Golden Peak, Ski & Snowboard Club Vail sent a dozen athletes or alumni to the Olympics in Sochi—and hopes to mint even more world champions at Beaver Creek in 2015. Meet the club that's **the heart of America's home team.**

BY DEVON O'NEIL >>
PHOTOS BY ZACH MAHONE

Vail Ski & Snowboard Academy, one of Ski & Snowboard Club Vail's three academic partners, is the nation's largest snow sports-focused public school.

During a rare moment of fluster, Aldo Radamus, the longtime executive director at Ski & Snowboard Club Vail (SSCV), rifles through his desk for a lift ticket. He’s struggling to recall a date from five years ago—the first day of early-season race training at Golden Peak, enabled by a new, cutting-edge snow-making system—and he knows the elusive artifact will have the answer.

As he searches, he chastises himself for the memory lapse. “I should know that off the top of my head,” he mumbles. He is sitting in the club’s original and woefully outdated headquarters at the base of Golden Peak, in an office that he once used all the time but now sits empty most days. (Radamus, like the rest of the club’s employees, elects to work at newer, nicer digs in Minturn.)

The mid-1980s-vintage office furniture serves as a reminder that the clubhouse is slated for a multimillion-dollar redevelopment, complete with residential units that will help offset the cost of the project. For now, relics blanket Radamus’s walls, like the 1996 Hahnenkamm poster and the handwritten note taped at eye level that lists the five core values he ascribes to and expects his athletes to emulate:

**PASSIONATE
AGGRESSIVE
FUNDAMENTALLY SOUND
ATHLETIC
HOMEGROWN**

“Oh, here it is,” Radamus says, triumphantly plucking the lift ticket from a drawer. “November 3, 2009, was the first day.” Among the many events that have almost cosmically converged to propel the club’s recent ascendance—last spring the U.S. Ski and Snowboard



Association (USSA) named SSCV its Club of the Year for the second time in half a decade, and a dozen current or former SSCV athletes competed in the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, two of whom won gold medals—you could argue the most critical was the snow-making expansion, which essentially added a month and a half to Vail’s training season. That, as SSCV athletic director Brandon Dyksterhouse says, “is really an unfair advantage in a sport where everything is driven by time on snow.”

How this pivotal moment transpired involved a bit of kismet and cajoling. In December 2008, Radamus was visiting the VIP tent at the Birds of Prey World Cup races in Beaver Creek when a U.S. Forest Service official hinted that the club’s long-anticipated expansion on Golden Peak wasn’t likely to be approved due to hydrological concerns with the club’s proposed new terrain. (SSCV wanted to add 760 vertical feet to its course so the club could host FIS women’s downhill or men’s super-G races, and provide additional terrain for more acrobatic events like ski cross, snowboard cross, and moguls competition.) Demonstrating his first two core values, over lunch Radamus proposed an alternate plan: an early-season snowmaking system—automated and centrally controlled, to take advantage of key weather windows in October—that would allow on-mountain training to begin as

much as six weeks earlier than is the norm.

Less than a year later, not only did the club have its private preseason training grounds (paid for by a multimillion-dollar donation), but when it wasn’t using the course, it rented it (a commodity the club refers to as “lane space time”) to everyone from European World Cup teams to East Coast ski academies. These groups gladly flew thousands of miles to train on Vail’s snow, then flooded social media with reports on how good the conditions were.

“It was one of those serendipitous clouds with a silver lining,” says Radamus, who notes that over the summer the resort, which donated an 11,000-square-foot parcel of land to SSCV for its clubhouse redevelopment, also submitted a new proposal to the Forest Service that, if approved, finally would allow for the additional terrain and upgraded infrastructure the club has done without—and done well without—for so long. “By changing our focus after that disappointment, we actually created something that exceeded all of our expectations in terms of what it meant to the kids and the club, and how it attracted teams from around the world to come to Vail and train in November, when the only ones here are the mice and the locals.”

Of course, this winter the world’s best ski racers will descend on the Vail Valley chasing bigger stakes than enhanced stamina in



their quadriceps. When the 2015 FIS Alpine World Ski Championships commence in early February, if all goes as planned, SSCV alumnae Lindsey Vonn and Mikaela Shiffrin will headline the American hopes, supported by a host of lesser-known SSCV athletes and veterans. And behind the scenes, as they have done at local World Cup races for years, a collection of SSCV athletes, parents, and supporters will handle the grunt volunteer work that enables every big event. Local kids, many of them wearing the club’s signature lime green anoraks, will watch their heroes become world champions on the hills they ski every day.

The gears will turn, as they have for more than half a century in Vail, where a tiny ski club grew up to be the biggest and baddest in America, for better or worse.

Before Ski & Snowboard Club Vail approached the 600-kid barrier (including nearly 300 alpine racers), before it felt ordinary for Vail athletes to claim 10 of the top 15 spots in a race, and before joining the club became an alternative to joining the national team, SSCV was just like dozens of other clubs around the U.S.

Founded in 1962 to enable Vail Mountain to host FIS races, the club (one of the valley’s first, and oldest, nonprofits) accepted



its first junior members five years later, when it operated on an annual budget of \$16,000 and charged a \$65 annual program fee (\$1.2 million and \$483, respectively, in today’s dollars). Now the club operates on a \$4.5 million annual budget, and annual program fees range between \$1,800 (for a local 6-to-9-year-old future star athlete who trains only on Saturdays and competes in the free Steadman Clinic Vail Cup on Sundays) and \$13,000 (for a full-time out-

of-state FIS alpine racer)—not including travel, equipment, ski tuning, and a variety of other camps and services that can be added à la carte, and usually are. (Radamus notes that program fees cover less than 80 percent of SSCV’s annual budget, and that last season, the club awarded scholarships totaling \$170,000, doled out to one out of every five athletes.)

At a time when many ski clubs are losing

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TIMELINE

The evolution of Ski Club Vail



Ski Club Vail is founded so the new resort, which opened for business on December 15, can fulfill plans to host international races. Local legends **Pete Seibert** and Dick Hauserman are on the board of trustees.

1962

First junior racers sign up with the club. Annual budget: **\$16,000**. Program fees: \$65 per child.

1967

60

SCV's original **clubhouse**, serving 60 athletes, is dedicated.

1977

As membership expands to **118 athletes**, a second floor is added to the clubhouse.

1986

Vail Valley Academy is founded by Teresa Herbst with six students and five teachers.

1993

SCV coach **Crawford Pierce** is named USSA Coach of the Year.

1996

Club enrollment reaches **257 athletes**.

1997

SCV named USSA Alpine **Club of the Year** for the first time.

1999

16-year-old Lindsey Kildow makes her **World Cup debut** in Park City.

2000

SCV adds a **freestyle moguls** program, with 31 skiers.

The club's **annual ski swap** breaks triple digits for the first time, netting \$105,000.



A **5-year-old Mikaela Shiffrin** joins SCV.

Aldo Radamus is hired as executive director.

2003

The season starts without **Mikaela Shiffrin**, after her father accepts a job in New Hampshire.

Club enrollment reaches **425 athletes**.

Vail Ski & Snowboard Academy becomes the **first publicly funded snowsports academy** in the nation, launching with 31 students.

2007

The **first early training season** begins on November 2, thanks to an SSCV-financed \$3 million snow-making upgrade on Golden Peak.

2009

SSCV alumna **Mikaela Shiffrin** makes her World Cup debut at age 15.

2011

585

Club enrollment reaches **585 athletes**.

2013

Club alums and members shine at the **Winter Olympics in Sochi**: **Mikaela Shiffrin** wins a gold medal in slalom, **Kaitlyn Farrington** wins a gold medal in halfpipe, and **Ayumu Hirano** wins a silver medal in halfpipe.



1973

Rudd Pyles become the first SCV athlete to be named to the U.S. Ski Team.

1981



SCV racer **Mike Brown** (who was recently inducted into the Colorado Ski & Snowboard Hall of Fame) is named to the U.S. National Junior Team.

1990

Aldo Radamus, the club's future executive director, is named USSA Domestic Coach of the Year.

1995

SCV adds a **Nordic Program**, then disbands it after a single athlete enrolls.



Lindsey Kildow joins SCV.

1998

The club's **annual ski swap** breaks triple digits for the first time, netting \$105,000.



A **5-year-old Mikaela Shiffrin** joins SCV.

2002

The club **adds snowboarding** as a permanent program and changes its name to Ski & Snowboard Club Vail.

Ali Levy becomes the first current SSCV athlete to be named to U.S. Freestyle Ski Team.

Alumna Lindsey Kildow makes her **Olympic debut** in Salt Lake City.

Club enrollment reaches **315 athletes**.

2004

SSCV adds a **Nordic program**.

Halfpipe rider **Broc Waring** becomes the first SSCV athlete to be named to the U.S. Snowboard Team.



SSCV alumna **Heidi Kloser** is named to the U.S. Freestyle Team.

2010

SSCV alumni **Lindsey (Kildow) Vonn** and **Chris Del Bosco** win Olympic downhill and X Games Skier X gold medals, becoming the club's first Olympic and X Games champions, respectively.

A \$122,000 halfpipe cutter (financed by SSCV) begins servicing Golden Peak, the **new home to the Burton U.S. Open**, which moves to Vail from Vermont after 30 years.

2014

The Minturn Fitness Center, a \$2.5 million partnership between SSCV and the Town of Minturn, opens as a training center for elite snowsports athletes at the club, VSSA, and local residents.

With a record enrollment of 174 students, VSSA is now the **largest ski and snowboard academy in the United States**.

traction in their communities and seeing their memberships dwindle, especially among teenagers, SSCV basically decides how much it wants to grow every year. Before a full-time athlete can join SSCV, the club's admissions committee screens all applications, then prospective candidates must complete an in-person interview, submit school transcripts as well as coach and teacher references, fill out a handful of essay questions, then pass a skills evaluation on snow or a trampoline. Not everyone makes the cut, and only members of the club are eligible to attend the Minturn-

based public school it partners with, Vail Ski & Snowboard Academy (VSSA). The process weeds out all but the most serious competitors. In addition to overall USSA Club of the Year awards in 2010 and 2014, SSCV was also named USSA Freeski Club of the Year the past two seasons, USSA Snowboard, Alpine, and Freestyle Club of the Year in 2014, and USSA Nordic Club of the Year in 2013. To support the growth that followed the awards, Radamus created two new, high-level positions at the club in 2013. Mike Trueblood, a finance and operations guru

who oversaw more than 1,000 employees at Comcast (and was an all-American slalom skier for the University of Colorado), started as general manager a few months before Dyksterhouse, the 1997 NCAA champion in giant slalom, took the AD job. The club hierarchy also includes a small army of program directors and coaches, as well as high-performance trainers (one of whom, Erin Beskid, works full time as the club's "peak performance coach," a sports psychologist helping the kids learn to deal with the pressure of elite competition by belly breathing, among other tactics), academic aides (who

serve as tutors for kids who have intensive travel schedules that take them overseas and around the country for competitions), and even a professional chef. Yet it all starts with Radamus, the steel-blue-eyed face of the club. He looks the part with silver hair slicked back, his face weathered by decades of exposure to wind, cold, and sun. As the pack's alpha male, he encourages his program directors to be creative, he says, "but I'm also a borderline micromanager. I want to understand what's going on everywhere, and oftentimes I have no shortage of opinions."

Radamus's backstory makes for an unlikely ski-racing lifer. Born in Buenos Aires to Estonian refugee parents, he emigrated with his family to Golden Valley, Minnesota, at 7 when his father was offered a job as a violin maker and was granted a work visa that allowed the family to settle in the United States. Radamus had no connection to ski racing when, at age 11, his mother, noticing that he had been inspired by watching the 1968 Olympic Winter Games on television, took him to meet triple gold medalist Jean-Claude Killy at a public presentation in Minneapolis. After listening to Killy talk,

Radamus decided he was going to become a ski racer. He joined his high school team as a 13-year-old in 10th grade and went on to race in Nor-Ams and on the Peugeot Grand Prix Tour as a professional. After two years coaching at Wilmot Mountain outside Chicago, he took a position as head J-2 coach at then-Ski Club Vail in 1981. Radamus left the club in 1984 to coach the U.S. Ski Team's World Cup women's technical team for two seasons. He then ran the Steamboat Springs Winter Sports Club alpine program for eight years, returning to the U.S. Ski Team in 1994 to coach the men's

FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY VAIL RESORTS; COURTESY BOB BEATTIE; MATTY NEWTON; SHUTTERSTOCK (2); COURTESY USSA



An eight-year-old Mikaela Shiffrin (above); one of the club's first snowboard teams, circa 2000



World Cup technical team for two years before he was named alpine development director. In August 2002, he became SSCV's executive director, where he quickly built a reputation, especially internally, as a doer. His colleagues call him alternately the "best fundraiser I've encountered," "the hardest-working human being on the planet," and "the person for whom the phrase 'never rest on your laurels' was invented."

Exceptionally fit for 57, Radamus works a room like a politician. He locks eyes in conversation and speaks with confidence on a wide range of topics. Just as he understands the perceived limitations of running a club with nearly 600 members—notably, how size might restrict indi-

vidual attention—it's not lost on him that higher numbers also give the club a greater statistical chance of success, a snicker that SSCV parents and coaches hear from time to time from rival clubs.

"Sometimes half the field is from Ski Club Vail," argues longtime Breckenridge coach John Leffler, who runs the Quantum International Team. "They are a goliath; they are very aggressive; they've got a lot of infrastructure that Aldo has put together. And I congratulate him on that—he absolutely is a junkyard dog; his tenacity is his biggest strength."

"But we call them infomercial ski clubs. Who has the best infomercial right now? It's just a numbers game."

Is it? Trueblood, the club's GM, grew up in Boulder and used to think so. Then he started working for SSCV and quickly changed his mind, dismissing the "numbers game" jabs with a shrug: "We just want to be the best we can be."

The club's longtime alpine director, Karen Ghent (a U.S. Ski Team veteran whose daughter, Abby, a SSCV/VSSA alumna, races on the U.S. Ski Team's Alpine B Team), says those who criticize the club's methods are missing the point.

"There was this noise out there that all we are is a training factory—gates, gates, gates," she says. "Yes, we train a lot, but we spend a lot of time freeskiing. That's what creates the passion. Freeskiing is just as important to us as gates."

To fully grasp the uniqueness of SSCV's model, it helps to visit the Vail Ski & Snowboard Academy, housed in Minturn's former middle school in leafy Maloit Park. Since opening in 2007 with 31 high school students, VSSA has grown nearly sixfold, with 174 students currently enrolled in grades 5 through 12. It remains the sole publicly funded school of its kind in America—one where students must meet certain athletic standards before being admitted. Only Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School in New York City, with an academic program geared toward gifted arts and music students (including alumni such as Jennifer Aniston and Al Pacino), compares with VSSA, says head of school Geoff Grimmer.

The academy is hopping on this early September day, teenagers buzzing between classes, coaches prepping their afternoon workouts in offices that the club leases from the school district. Once on-snow training starts, every student will ski or snowboard before class four mornings a week (Mondays are mandatory rest days), then bookend classwork with a dry-land session. Many of those sessions take place 100 yards away at the shiny new Minturn Fitness Center, a \$2.5 million partnership between the club and the town of Minturn that opened in August. (Lest any aspiring athletes grow lazy, they need only heed the example of Olympic downhill champion Lindsey Vonn, who has logged hours on the gym's specialized compressed-air-powered strength-training machines virtually every day since it opened.)

VSSA represents the most obvious differentiator between an East Coast ski academy—and its roughly \$50,000 starting cost per child—and a club like SSCV. It is why more and more families are relocating to the Vail Valley to support their children's

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COURTESY SSCV (2)

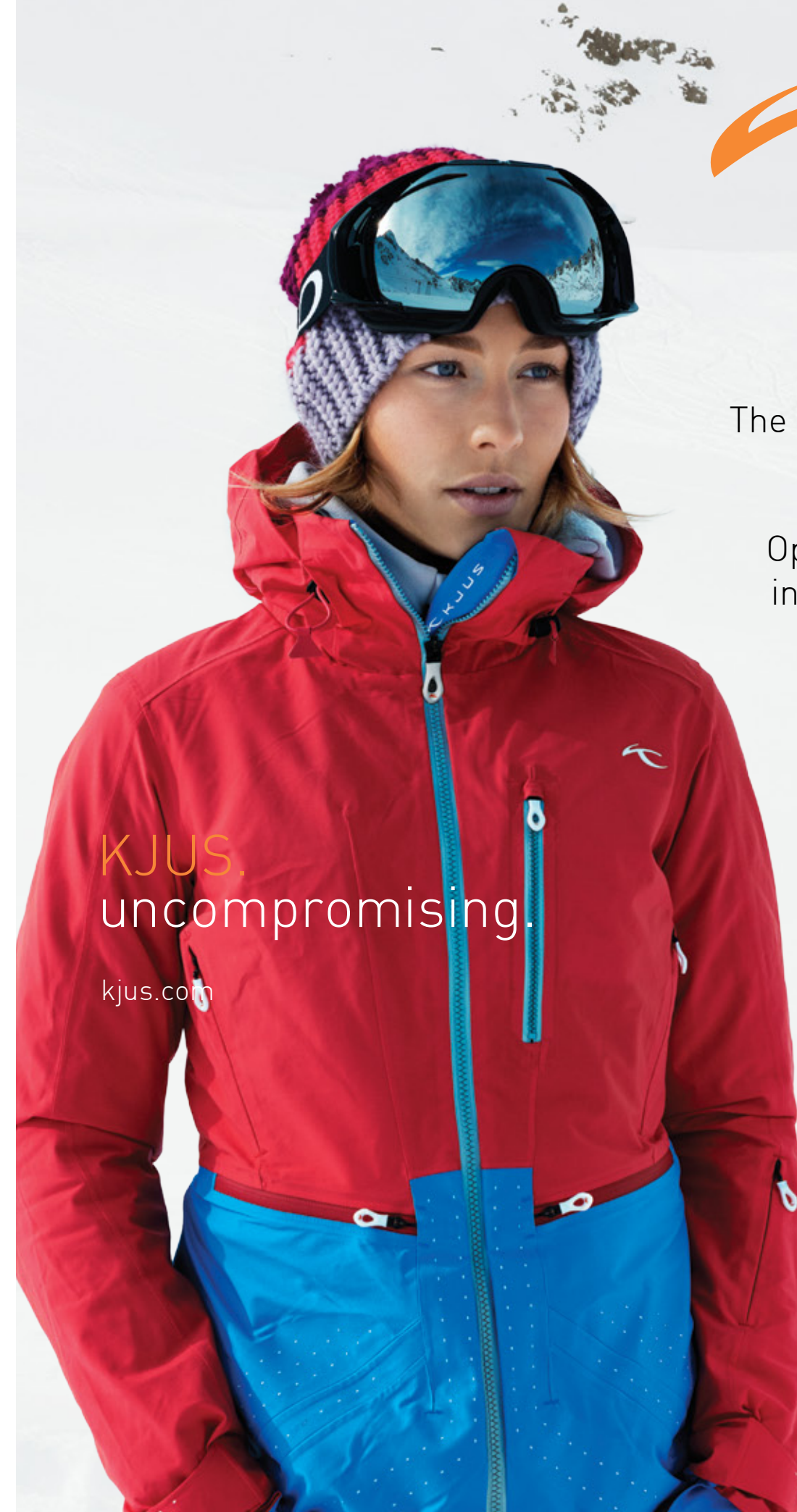


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The gym at Ski Club's clubhouse (this image); the workout floor at the club's new Maloit Park training center (above right); alums Florian Szwebel (now on the U.S. Ski Team's alpine development squad) and Sean McCormick with head alpine Men's FIS coach Ben Babbitt, after forerunning at the 2013 Birds of Prey World Cup



winter sports aspirations: by removing private school from the traditional sports-academy model, SSCV has basically halved the cost of maximizing young athletes' potential. (Vail Mountain School, a private school in East Vail, also tailors programs to work with the club.)

Yet the school itself can't possibly be the sole reason why SSCV outperforms the traditional ski academy—after all, local girl Shiffrin left Vail to attend Burke Mountain Academy in Vermont and has since won a world championship, two World Cup crystal globes, and an Olympic gold medal. But those who have experienced SSCV's system up close swear by it.

"It was groundbreaking to have a public school with a specialty," says Cindy Suplizio, VSSA's assistant headmaster and a former teacher and coach at Green Mountain Valley School, another Vermont ski academy. Suplizio moved from Telluride to Vail four years ago and has two kids enrolled at VSSA. "It could be a soccer academy, a ski academy, or a chess academy—I came because of the model," she says. "I wanted to be a part of it."

When the day's final period is over, kids stream through the building like fish from a breached dam. Some head into the trampolene room to train with SSCV freeski program director Elana Chase, one of the premier halfpipe coaches in the world. Others walk to the fitness center to lift weights. Gus LeBlanc, a baby-faced freshman who won the Junior Olympic super-G title last winter, enters the gymnasium to be tested on his vertical leap and broad jump. At 14, LeBlanc is one of a handful of club prospects who, coaches believe, could challenge for World Cup starts in the future. Better yet, he is homegrown (Radamus Core Value No. 5).

Asked about his goals, LeBlanc says he wants to win the Hahnenkamm downhill in Kitzbühel, Austria—the most famous ski race in the world—as well as an Olympic gold medal. He is already dedicating nearly every daylight hour to schussing down icy mountains, as have many of his classmates.

"Our social life is kind of taken away," LeBlanc says with a concessionary shrug, "but our passion means more to us."

That passion just might be the key to the club's success. And while it probably benefits the club more if a valley native represents Vail on the world stage—like, say, Olympic moguls skier Heidi Kloser, who famously hobbled on crutches alongside her teammates during the opening ceremony at Sochi after blowing out her knee during a training run—the club has made it clear it will consider any elite athlete who wants what it offers.

That is how snowboarders Kaitlyn Farrington, 24, a native of Sun Valley, Idaho, and Ayumu Hirano, 15, a pint-size missile from Japan, came to train with SSCV before winning gold and silver medals, respectively, in the Olympic halfpipe last winter. SSCV coaches Elijah Teter and Ben Boyd taught them the tricks they needed for Sochi—notably a Cab double cork 1080 for Hirano and a switch backside 720 for Farrington—then coached them from atop and below the Olympic pipe during the competition. On the freeskiing side, Crested Butte–raised halfpipe ace Aaron Blunck, 18, joined the club and enrolled at VSSA to train under

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ZACH MAHONE (2); COURTESY SSCV



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Chase on his way to Sochi, and Aspen-raised Nordic skier Noah Hoffman—the top U.S. finisher in all three Olympic distance races—was recruited by Vail program director Dan Weiland.

Radamus, who still uses many of the tactics he learned while working for USSA, says (with a hint of pride) that the club is not trying to usurp the national team (after all, his son, Ski Club alum River, skis on USSA's alpine development squad). "But," he says, "our goal is to support our athletes to the highest level that they aspire to and their potential will take them. Not get to a point where we say, 'Gosh, we can't help you anymore.'"

Vail's training atmosphere is so optimal—perfect snow, perfect weather, no outside distractions—that sometimes coaches will let a racecourse stand for a week or refrain from cutting the pipe overnight to steel athletes for the less-than-optimal conditions they will encounter elsewhere. "We're constantly exploring opportunities to make our venues less user-friendly," Dyksterhouse says.

It is easy to forget that every award, every superlative result, only heightens expectations in a place where success can be taken

Our vision is to be the best snow-sports club in the world—and to be recognized in our community as a place where kids can grow up.

for granted. "I think we need to consistently be the best in the country," says longtime SSCV alpine coach and former World Cup racer Dan Stripp. "If we don't do that, I think it's a flaw in the way our machine worked. The kids are here."

Soon, thanks in part to the land gift from Vail Resorts, SSCV will have a state-of-the-

art clubhouse below its state-of-the-art training venue, just up the road from its state-of-the-art fitness center and a first-of-its-kind public sports academy.

If you ask Radamus, he believes only one club in the world outshines Vail when it comes to performance: the famed Schigymnasium Stams in Austria, which has produced dozens of World Cup stars including Olympic alpine champions Benni Raich and Stephan Eberharter. It is no coincidence that three years ago SSCV began an exchange program with Stams.

Yet Radamus insists his club's mission is not strictly tied to results. "It's to provide an opportunity for growth," he says. "Personal growth, character growth. They learn those lessons of humility when they succeed, frustration and commitment when they fail, and perseverance when they pick themselves back up.

"Our vision," he continues, "is to be the best snow-sports club in the world—and to be recognized in our community as a place where kids can grow up."

If they happen to grow up and become Olympic champions and world champions, well, even better. 🍷



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