

GOOD AS GOLD

America's Winter Olympic hopefuls on Pyeongchang 2018, life as an elite athlete, and what they listen to before competition

Text by KEITH GORDON

The United States dominated in Sochi in 2014, finishing first in overall medal count (after the host Russians were sanctioned for institutional doping that would put the East Germans to shame). If the U.S. squad hopes to top that performance at the 2018 Games, in Pyeongchang, South Korea, it needs its biggest stars to shine their brightest. *Maxim* spoke with a few top contenders about their chances.

NICK GOEPPER | Freestyle Skiing Slopestyle
The 23-year-old Indiana native won a bronze medal in 2014, the first time slopestyle became part of the Olympics



Nick Goepfer

Returning as a veteran Olympian: I honestly didn't have a good time at the last Olympics. There were so many stressful factors and things out of my control that frustrated me. Winning a medal was incredible and an experience I will never forget, but there were a number of things I would have done differently to really enjoy the experience to the fullest. There are so many things I'll do differently in Korea. I'll make sure to dial in my sleep schedule, for one. Two, I will be more strategic about the run that I'm planning for the competition. Finally, I will make sure to focus on what's important, and let all the little distractions go.

In the spotlight: The Olympics are crazy. You're treated more like a celebrity. It's almost like you are a human commodity that everyone wants a piece of.

It takes a village: The Olympic Village is a huge cluster of hotels, and in those hotels are hundreds of badass athletes at the top of their sport from around the world. It's quite a cool thing.



Sarah Hendrickson

Everywhere you go you automatically have a certain level of respect for everyone because of their athletic achievements.

SARAH HENDRICKSON | Ski Jumping
The 23-year-old, who was crowned 2011-12 World Cup champion in her rookie season, was the first woman to jump at the Olympics when the women's event was added in 2014

A unique skill set: Ski jumpers are quite lean. Weight is a factor we have to pay attention to. We're actually the only weighted Winter Olympic sport, so we have rules and regulations to make sure that we're not too light. On the flip side of that, we also need strength and power. You have to use your legs to get into your flight position; if you don't jump, you basically will just fall on your face.

Returning to the Games: Now I know the atmosphere of the Olympics, because it is a lot different from our normal competitions and the World Cup. It's a really powerful event that



Sarah Hendrickson

Hendrickson training in a state-of-the-art wind tunnel. Opposite, top: Hight competing at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: RON JENKINS/GETTY IMAGES; VITA BREVIS/RED BULL CONTENT MEDIA; POOL; RON JENKINS/GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PA IMAGES/ALAMY; STOCK PHOTO; RON JENKINS/GETTY IMAGES; HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES. LAST PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RON JENKINS/GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIAN PONDELLA/RED BULL CONTENT POOL; RON JENKINS/GETTY IMAGES



Elena Hight

brings the world together. I have grown up a lot in the last four years, and faced even more injuries, so I'm just super happy to be going into it healthy and more prepared.

Having a positive perspective: Yes, I have a gold medal in my head. But I don't want to walk away from these Olympics if I don't earn a medal and be disappointed, because I've been dealt very difficult cards with injuries. I still want to be proud of how I've fought back, and just to be jumping after all those injuries is an accomplishment in itself.



Elena Hight

ELENA HIGHT | Snowboard Halfpipe

A 2017 X Games gold medalist in snowboard superpipe (a 22-foot-tall halfpipe), the Hawaii-born veteran competed in the 2006 and 2010 Olympics

Under pressure: The Olympic Games definitely have their own feel. Unlike other big events, every athlete knows that the chance to compete here again will not happen for another four years. That time stamp adds a lot of pressure, but also excitement, to the entire event.

The biggest stage: There is nothing that compares to the Olympics. It's the world stage on a level unlike any other event, which can be super intimidating. From my past experience, it can be very hard to block out all the external things that come along with a stage like this. I just try to stay grounded in the same way that I do at other events: surrounding myself with my support team, my friends, and making sure to stay focused on the reason why I'm there, which is to be able to compete at my highest ability.

Pre-run prep: Typically, I'll have a plan for my contest run in advance, which allows me to practice that run and feel comfortable with it before dropping in for my contest run. However, there are always times when things don't go as planned and I end up switching up my entire run as well. The last thing I focus on before dropping into a contest run is taking a deep breath and becoming as present as possible. There are so many distractions at every contest, and being able to focus solely on the moment without any of the noise is when the magic happens. I listen to all types of music when I snowboard. Everything from Led Zeppelin to Rihanna and Beyoncé to G-Eazy or Kygo. I just like to have a good beat and something that keeps my energy up.

JOSS CHRISTENSEN | Freestyle Skiing

The 26-year-old Park City, Utah, native won the inaugural Olympic slopestyle event in Sochi. He suffered a torn ACL 10 months ago but hopes to be competition-ready for the Pyeongchang Games

Impact of injury: It sucks, because a lot of us, I mean almost everyone in our sport, experiences injuries multiple times in their career. You just hope that it doesn't have to overlap with the Olympic year. We're all gonna experience injuries—it's just part of the sport. But I think what allows an athlete to have a long, lasting career and be successful is how they deal with their injury. Don't let it get you down, because it's going to happen, and if you don't let it ruin you, then you're gonna succeed and continue on.

Friendly competition: The process for American guys to make it to the Olympics is almost harder than the Olympic event itself. Last Olympics, seven of the top 10 competitors in the world were American, and only four of us got to go. So technically, three of the top 10 slopestyle skiers in the world were not represented at the biggest competition in the world. There's almost more pressure and stress that we put on ourselves in the qualifying period than the actual Olympics. That's when we become the most competitive against our friends. That's the hardest part.



Joss Christensen

Getting pumped: I play music really loud. Hip-hop usually; just something that's more upbeat and gets me going but doesn't allow me to let negative thoughts travel through my brain. Just clear my head and remind myself this is something I've already done, like, a million times before.

MADDIE BOWMAN | Ski Halfpipe

Despite standing a mere 5'1", Bowman is larger than life in women's ski halfpipe, dominating the X Games and winning gold in the first women's Olympic halfpipe competition four years ago

A long four years: It was just such a cool experience to go in bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. It was so fun. The whole team was like that, and the excitement was there; the memories were great. And now, four years later, it's like everyone's a different person. Like no one's the same after four years, and it's interesting trying to find new reasons to push yourself for this Olympics. And you almost feel like a different skier.

The (unseen) dark side: The hardest part of being an Olympic athlete is coming back from injury; it's so hard. Because you identify yourself as a skier. And when you can't do the thing that makes you who you are, it's mentally so difficult. And it's so hard to look at your leg and basically see your femur and be able to pull your skin up six inches. Like, it sucks and it's crazy and I think maybe people don't see that aspect of it.



Maddie Bowman

Just another run: I don't listen to music. I get so distracted by things. So I just listen. They play music [around the venue] and I, like, listen to the crowd and it's fun. But my last thought when I'm about to drop into the pipe is just telling myself, "It's just another run." I've done so many halfpipe runs in my life. It's just another one. There's no reason to add extra pressure.

TORIN YATER-WALLACE | Freestyle Skiing
One of the top superpipe freeskiers in the world, the 22-year-old wunderkind is finally ready to compete at the Olympics fully healthy

If at first you don't succeed: I had a pretty horrifying injury [while qualifying for Sochi] but still got chosen as the fourth discretionary spot, which was really cool. The U.S. Ski Team had faith in me to go ski for them based on my previous years and success. It was really cool but



Torin Yater-Wallace

unfortunately, because I hadn't skied much, I definitely wasn't up to 200 percent. But I think just getting there to experience the whole thing, and seeing all the media and everything, it's definitely a nice thing to know going into this one.

Managing risk in a risky sport: What I personally do is just kind of dangerous, I suppose, and that's all there really is to it. There's a bunch of different facilities [for safer practice]: there's air bags, there's foam pits, there's water ramps; the tricks are repetitively trained before you do them on the snow. But personally I'm more of a fan of just trying it on the snow, because the more you don't do it on the snow the more scared you're going to be. I'm kind of with the old-school way of things and just do that, but like I said, you're doing a sport where you're

jumping up in the air, so it goes without saying, you're going to get hurt.

The air up there: The standard halfpipes we compete in around the world are 22 feet tall to the top of the wall. Then you get another 14 feet of air above that; somewhere around there. Some people are going 22 or 25 feet [above the top of the wall]. I'm always doing the same run. I like to have all my runs with tricks I'm really confident in, because what I find is most important in this sport of halfpipe is amplitude and style. The way your body knows the position and how controlled it is. You might not be doing the most technical run but if you're going at least 20 feet out [of the pipe] every hit, I think that's a whole different ball game when you're up there that high in the air.



Yater-Wallace competing in the superpipe at the 2017 Winter X Games