

Lindsey Vonn

CHILD'S PLAY

Ski-racing powerhouse and red-carpet fashionista, Lindsey Vonn has a new plan in the works to empower girls, and she's not afraid to use her goofy side to get it done.

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| *Shot on location in Vail, Colo.* |

SNOW PRINCESS
Lindsey Vonn likes to dress up and play, even in wintertime at the top of Vail.

LOW RES





SNOW FUN Vonn has spent many a race day in subzero temps. What's a little snow to a ballgown-wearing fashionista?



Lindsey Vonn is sitting in a leather lounge chair in a private room at the base of Beaver Creek Resort on a bluebird spring morning. She's been awake since 5:30AM rehabbing her knee at the gym and is nursing a latte while a shy paparazzi of 30 or so awestruck little girls in predominantly pink skiwear sit at her feet, still too intimidated to start snapping photos. They are at Beaver Creek to participate in Ski Girls Rock, a ski-school program Vonn designed. It's the last session of the season, and Vonn has popped in for a surprise visit.

"Are there some good freshies out there?" Vonn asks to break the ice. The girls silently nod their heads.

"Are there any Minnesotans in the crowd?" Vonn tries again.

One little girl finally pipes up. "I didn't come from Minnesota; I came from Wisconsin."

"Oh, that's OK," says Vonn. "My grandparents are Cheeseheads."

The girls giggle; the ice breaks; and the volley of questions begins: How do you visualize before a ski race? (In bed, the night before.) How fast have you ever skied? (93 mph.) Do you always crash? (Yes, when I was a girl, I knocked out my two front teeth.) Do you like to golf like Tiger? At that question Vonn playfully rolls her eyes.

"Even the kids ask!" she says. But Vonn goes along with the line of questioning, clearly having fun with it. "I do golf. I even got a hole-in-one. I can hit the ball very far, but not very straight."

The girls are getting a glimpse of another side of Vonn. What people see at the start of a World Cup downhill is the laser focus of a famously competitive elite athlete. The side people don't see—the goofy, playful Vonn—comes out when she's surrounded by kids. Today, Vonn is just one of the girls.

"I started this program because I felt like it was a good chance for you to have girl time," she confides. "My goal is for you to have a good time and ski with

amazing women instructors. You don't have to be with the boys—who needs boys?"

As the most decorated skier in American history, Vonn, 29, was the first American female to win Olympic gold in downhill and has won 59 World Cup races, four overall World Cup titles and five World Championship medals. She's also bilingual, a fashionista, *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model and paradigm-smashing celebrity idolized by little girls and ogled by men. And while her first love is going fast, Vonn has another passion in her life: inspiring girls.

Vonn was crushed to skip the Sochi Olympics in order to rehabilitate her torn right ACL and meniscus, but the injury gave her the opportunity to think about life beyond ski racing. She had a few

brief months to reflect on the future before her knee would be healed enough to start training hard for the 2015 World Cup Championships at Beaver Creek and the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics.

So what does life beyond skiing 93 mph look like for Vonn?

Primarily, it involves empowering girls. Vonn knows she has the potential for impacting the next generation of skiers through programs like Ski Girls Rock. Now she's ready to expand on that concept. Her vision is to create the Lindsey Vonn Foundation, a nonprofit

organization that will inspire young girls to be confident, challenge themselves and follow their dreams, whether it be on the snow or off.

"I'm still working on the structure," Vonn tells me after she says goodbye to the girls, elevating her right leg while furiously signing postcards that will be handed out later that day. "I want to do camps where I work with a team of people to create a curriculum that will involve sports psychology, goal setting, nutrition, working through obstacles—all the things I felt I could have used when I was a kid and all the lessons I've learned since," she says. "We'll have

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-LINDSEY VONN

a camp during the summer of 2015 and also some activities during the World Championships." Vonn hopes to kick off the first fundraiser in the fall.

But Vonn isn't just providing a celebrity name to a sports camp. She plans to be at the camps. "I want to be there and teach girls how to communicate, not just through social media, but verbally as well," she adds. "A lot of times, when girls are grouped up with boys, they don't come out of their shells, even if their skill level is higher," she says. "When I spend time with these girls, I'm encouraging them to come out of their shells."

One way she's likely to engage is through the time-honored summer-camp prank. Last April, a mischievous Vonn posed as an employee-in-training at the ticket sales office in Vail. (Watch the YouTube video at vail.com/LVUndercover.) Taking a page from Ashton Kutcher, she punk'd guests, getting them to sing "I love Vail" at the top of their lungs for free tickets and talking about herself in the third person: "I hear Lindsey Vonn is on the mountain today!" Vonn was also caught in a now-viral video ambushing Tiger Woods at a President's Cup golf tournament by setting a tame squirrel on his shoulder.

Vonn's comfort zone with kids is not surprising given that she grew up as the oldest of five. She started skiing at age 2 at Buck Hill, Minn., and moved to Vail at age 11 with her mother, Lindy Lund (then Linda Kildow), to pursue her Olympic dreams. It was a tough move. Lund's four younger kids, including three 5-year-old triplets, were still back in Minnesota with her husband, Alan Kildow. Eventually the entire family moved to Vail.

"The move was all for her, and she knew that," says Lund. "The pressure was unspoken, but I know she felt it." The move disrupted the family's lives, but they remain tight. "Her siblings all love her," says Lund, "They idolize her, and they always have."

Despite the family's support, making an Olympic debut at age 17 didn't leave much room

for a normal childhood for Vonn, which is perhaps another reason she's so intent on helping to steer the next generation.

"I've always loved kids," says Vonn. "I see myself in those girls. I was in awe of Picabo Street when I was 9. She was like a cartoon superhero to me, and if I can give my experience back to kids, that would be amazing."

On Saturday afternoon, Vonn steps into the sunlight at the base of Beaver Creek to award medals to winners of the EpicMix Lindsey Vonn Race Series. Throughout the season, skiers from age 1 to 100 competed in Vail Resorts' high-tech, 21st century version of NASTAR, racing against Vonn's pace-setting time from the start of the season.

As Vonn takes the stage, a crowd of hundreds sends up a raucous cheer, and the emcee begins to announce the long list of EpicMix race winners, starting with a child so small that Vonn has to pick him up off the podium and hand him back to his mother. As the older male categories are announced, the guys all give Vonn massive hugs and cozy up for selfies.

At the end of the awards ceremony, a throng of kids rushes the stage, swarming Vonn to autograph helmets, T-shirts, ski suits and even foreheads. Vonn attends to

as many as she can before her handlers signal her to get off the stage so she can rest her knee before her next appearance in Vail.

One tiny gold medalist, Camille Natter, who raced in the 5-to-6 age group, came from Michigan and already looks like a pro in her green-and-white-checked speed suit. Too shy to approach the stage for an autograph, she hangs back with her mother. I ask if Vonn inspires her.

"I don't know what that word means," she replies. I rephrase: "Do you want to be like Lindsey?"

"Yeah, I want to be in the Olympics. I want to be just like Lindsey when I grow up."

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-CAMILLE NATTER



ROLE MODEL Clockwise from top: Vonn is always game to mingle with ski racing's next generation; high-fives at a pep rally in Vail; Vonn encourages a young racer in the EpicMix starting gate.

HIGH FIVING PHOTO BY DOUG HANEY/U.S. SKI TEAM;