

KIKKAN

The women's U.S. cross-country ski team has always been second-tier, but that's changing thanks largely to Alaskan nordic star Kikkan Randall, a pink-haired skate-skiing powerhouse who trains harder than anyone on the planet—and has everybody else following her lead.

BY GORDY MEGROZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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Randall training near her home in Anchorage

NOVEMBER IN ANCHORAGE

is bleak. The sun doesn't come up until around nine, and it sets before you've had your second cup of coffee. Today there's black ice on the roads and a damp chill in the air. Ashen fog covers the city's front range, and the sky spits freezing rain.

None of this seems to bother Kikkan Randall, a cross-country ski racer who grew up here. The 34-year-old pulls into the parking lot at Hilltop Ski Area—a small mountain on the city's outskirts, with just one chairlift—and hops out, smiling and cloaked in fabric joy. Her vest, watch, and ski poles are all bright pink. Even her blond hair is streaked with the color.

"As a kid I hated pink," she says. "But then I thought, Man, people think cross-country skiing is boring. I want to show the fun side of the sport, and pink is fun."

There's a reason Randall is so cheery: she's the best cross-country skier America has ever produced. Since 2007, she has reached the podium 28 times on the World Cup tour, winning 13 races. She has been particularly dominant in skate sprints—short, high-intensity races that typically cover a kilometer and a half.

Randall might have a point about people's perceptions of cross-country skiing, but skate-skiing is actually fun to watch, thanks to its roller-derby-like nature. Instead of the classic nordic technique—sliding one foot in front of the other—athletes push their skis side to side like ice skates while throwing elbows and jockeying for position over a long, winding course. Randall has won three overall titles in this discipline. She has also nabbed silver in the individual sprint at the 2009 World Championships and, with teammate Jessie Diggins, claimed the first nordic gold ever won by an American squad, in the team sprint at the 2013 World Championships.

Randall takes equal pride in her role as a booster for American cross-country skiing. For nearly three decades, starting in the mid-1980s, Team USA was bad—Cleveland Browns bad. "It bothered me," Randall says as we click into our skis. "I ran cross-country in high school and loved the way it felt to win as a team."

Starting in 2006, she stepped up as a sort of player-coach, passing along valuable lessons to her teammates—everything from how to train more effectively to race strategy to technical tweaks. And it's been working: since 2013, six women have landed on the podium in World Cup races a total of

34 times. In doing so, they've earned a place alongside the powerhouse Scandinavian teams to rank among the best in the world. (Randall's energy has rubbed off on the men, too, who've scored several top tens.) Matt Whitcomb, the head coach of the U.S. women's nordic program, puts it succinctly: "She essentially built this team."

Last year, before the season started, Randall found out she was pregnant. She took a break from racing and in April gave birth to a boy named Breck. But as we glide over the icy cross-country trails, there's no sign that the time off cost her any speed. At five-foot-five, 135 pounds, she's compact and powerful—a loaded spring of a woman—and she gets massive thrust out of each push from her legs and plant of her poles.

A long tour through the woods is only the start for today. This afternoon she'll go on a two-hour run. Twice a week she heads to the gym, where she squats a remarkable 300 pounds and does sets of pull-ups with a 45-pound weight dangling from her waist, building sprinter-like quads and lats.

It's a heavy training load, for sure, but Randall is motivated. In late February, she'll race at the World Championships in Lahti, Finland. Next winter she'll compete in Pyeongchang, South Korea, for an Olympic medal, the one piece of hardware that has eluded her.

"You want to run with me later?" she asks as we complete a lap. I decline. Cross-country skiing is brutally taxing—someone at Randall's level burns roughly 960 calories per hour. She's been taking it easy on me for about 90 minutes, but my triceps are burning and my feet are cramping, so I leave her to ski on her own.

"Let me know if you change your mind!" she shouts, heading off. I watch her vanish into the woods, at a pace that would cause most mortals to collapse in a puddle of lactic acid. Damned if she isn't smiling.

THERE'S A FORMULA for building a transcendent athlete like Kikkan Randall—a special brew of genetics, heroic bouts with

adversity, and thousands of hours of workouts. Her determination showed up early. At five she told her father, Ronn, a former parks and rec employee, and her mother, Deborah, a lawyer, that she was going to the Olympics—as an alpine ski racer. "I wanted to be the next Picabo Street," says Randall.

"We didn't doubt her," says Deborah. "She's tenacious. When she wants something, she goes for it." Her grit earned her a nickname: Kikkanimal.

But Randall's destiny was in cross-country skiing. Her mother's brother and sister had both been Olympians in the sport. In 1999, at 15, she qualified for the Junior National Championships in McCall, Idaho.

She'd only started racing two years earlier but finished fourth in the 5K skate. "That's when I thought I'd go to the Olympics as a cross-country skier," she says.

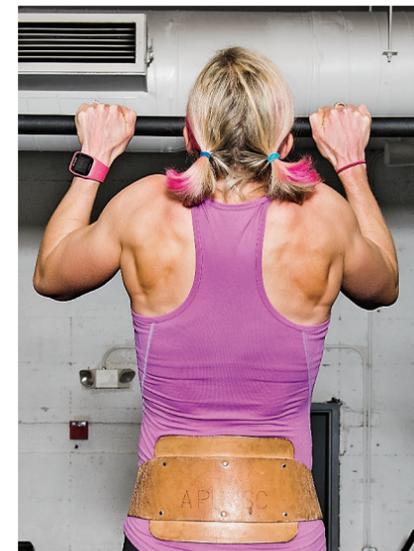
Her epiphany happened at a perfect time. Skate sprint races were about to debut in the 2001 World Championships, and a new coach had come to town. Jim Galanes, a Vermont native, had raced on the U.S. Ski Team in the late seventies and early eighties, the last time it was any good. He'd skied with Bill Koch, who won America's only Olympic medal (a silver in 1976), and in three Olympics, where he collected a couple of respectable eighth-place finishes. His theory was that American ski racing had lost its edge. "There were talented athletes but not enough focused

coaching," Galanes says.

Randall joined Galanes's Alaska Pacific University (APU) team when she was 16. (The team is attached to the college, but it's a club group that anybody can join.) Galanes put her through hell. Before, Randall's training had consisted of hourlong runs. Under Galanes, she was grinding out three-hour runs, lifting weights consistently for the first time, and, in the off-season, spending several hours a week on roller skis (short cross-country planks on wheels), propelling herself up hills and over the hot pavement using only her arms. "I'd fall asleep at seven o'clock on Fridays, even though I wanted to go out," she recalls. "But I was getting stronger and having fun."

She was also developing an amazing pain threshold. One day I watched her sprint up a dirt trail at nearly full pace for three minutes. "She enjoys the pain cave," said Mike

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Clockwise from top left: Randall with son Breck; training with teammate Rosie Brennan on Turnagain Arm Trail; weight work at Alaska Pacific University

Matteson, one of her coaches, as we looked on. "You have to in this sport, but her resilience is exceptional."

Randall puts it another way: "It's a game. When you win, it's the most exhilarating feeling."

THE OTHER KEY to Randall's progression was simple: more skiing. Sounds obvious, but it meant finding snow in summer. That required flying to Eagle Glacier, about 20 minutes by ski plane from Anchorage, in the Chugach Mountains. In the mid-eighties, the U.S. Biathlon team built a small training facility there, a no-frills construction perched on a 5,000-foot cliff.

Randall would make the trip several times per summer, roughing it with her teammates. "We have pretty good running water," Randall says of glacier living. "But it depends on runoff, and sometimes we end up having to take sponge baths."

The team skis five hours a day, which can be challenging. Clouds tend to sit on the glacier, creating a vertiginous sea of white, but

Randall embraces it. "When the conditions aren't perfect, when you have to fight for your balance and be mentally tough and just grind through it, that's what helps the most," she says. "And you know somebody else is out there working just as hard if not harder." The training paid off. In 2000, when Randall was 17, she was named to the U.S. Ski Team. Two years later, she competed in her first Olympics in Salt Lake City. By 2006, with new APU head coach Erik Flora in place, she increased her training load even more. "By 35 percent," says Flora. "That put her on par with the Scandinavians." In 2008, Flora dialed things up again.

"The year of intensity," Randall calls it. "You hadn't trained hard enough if you hadn't started crying."

Randall also had to deal with something no amount of training could overcome. Historically, cross-country skiing has been a dirty sport in terms of performance-drug use, nearly on par with cycling. Six Austrian skiers were busted at the 2006 Olympics in Turin, Italy. And in 2014, a dozen Russian cross-country skiers were accused of being part of Russia's state-sponsored doping program while competing in the Sochi Olym-

pics. This fall, Norwegian star Therese Johaug tested positive for clostebol, a synthetic steroid, which she claims was in a doctor-prescribed lip cream she was using. ("I know her," says Randall. "I've seen her lips and they're always terrible. So to me, it's believable that it was a mistake.")

Randall, who is tested around ten times each year, says she's petrified of making a misstep like that. "I triple-check everything I take," she says. And she contends that nordic skiing's testing protocol and crackdown on cheaters has been effective. "I think the sport is a lot cleaner than it was," she says, noting that a more level playing field has been important to her success. "I won't go as far as to say it's totally clean, but I believe it's pretty clean."

As it happens, cheating has been the least of Randall's worries. In March and April of 2008, she suffered through three health episodes brought on by a blood clot in her leg. The clot was caused by a combination of two rare genetic disorders and her use of the NuvaRing

birth-control device. (NuvaRing's manufacturer, Organon, now owned by Merck, has since been accused of concealing health risks associated with the device, including the risk of blood clots.) The third time Randall was admitted to the hospital, she thought her career was over. "The doctors didn't know why the clot had come back so quickly," she says. "They were afraid they'd need to put in a stent, which would have caused swelling that could have made it hard to walk, let alone train." Fortunately, Randall responded to blood thinners and was able to start skiing again a few weeks later.

In 2014, she entered the Olympics in Sochi as the favorite in the sprint. But she had strained her lower back a month earlier and was bounced in the quarterfinal heat. As a result, her 2015 season was a bust. "I felt like I wanted to go out and prove to myself that I could still be world champion," she says. "So I overtrained." She was left off the World Championship team-sprint squad and was unable to defend her title.

Her response to setbacks is typical. "You have to stay positive," she says. Then she switches the focus from herself to her teammates. "They **continued on page 92** →



probably get sick of my anecdotes,” she says. “But it’s lessons they can learn to make them stronger. Make them better.”

ON ANOTHER DRAB morning, I’m watching Randall dole out lessons. Flora had gathered the APU team on the trails near Hilltop for a sprint workout. “Take a lap and then I’ll pair you off,” Flora shouts to the group.

“How about today we pick our own partners?” Randall shouts back.

Flora concedes and Randall chooses one of the younger members of the APU team, passing over Rosie Brennan, a World Cup skier who’d likely have pushed her harder during the workout.

On the first lap, the difference between the two skiers is obvious. Randall’s technique is more refined and efficient, and she easily wins the short sprint by a body length. But toward the final lap, she has clearly influenced the young skier, who’s skating more like Randall—and getting faster.

“That’s Kikkan,” says Flora as we watch the women whip by. “She’s always doing things like that to help bring the other women up to her level.”

Brennan echoes that sentiment and credits Randall for helping her ascend to the World Cup podium. (She scored a bronze in 2015.) “At first I was like, I can’t even train with Kikkan,” she says. “But then I’d be able to keep up with her in this workout. Then this workout. Now I can train with her, and that makes a huge difference.” Brennan pauses, then repeats herself. “A huge difference.”

The team also benefits from Randall’s star power. One day, while the APU team worked out in their basement gym, I mentioned to Randall how nice the equipment is. “It didn’t used to be,” she says. “Then I said something, and the next thing you know everything is new. It’s nice to have that power of suggestion. As long as you don’t let it go to your head.”

Ironically, the team Randall built might prevent her from ever reaching an Olympic podium. A few of her teammates have beaten her already. “She probably knew she was going to develop athletes who could eventually beat her,” says Matt Whitcomb. “But the

idea of building a legacy is important to her. If one of these other women win an Olympic medal, that would still make her happy.”

In fact, at the Sochi Games, after she’d been eliminated, Randall’s first instinct was to run to Sophie Caldwell, an American skier who’d also made the quarterfinals, to tell her about the nuances of the course—where she could pick up speed and what to watch for. “There was nothing more I could do,” says Randall, “but she still had a chance. At the end of the day, I want to see our team succeed.” Caldwell ended up skiing into the final heat, where she placed sixth, the best result ever by an American woman in the Olympics.

But Randall’s Olympic disappointment still stings. I asked her about it as she was getting her hair re-pinked—a monthly process—and for once I see a crack in her happy demeanor. “It was frustrating,” she says, wiping a tear from her cheek. “I’ll have one more shot in Korea in 2018. Then I’ll retire.”

ON ONE OF MY last nights in Alaska, Randall invites me over for dinner. I arrive to find Breck strapped to her chest in a carrier—her stirring a pot of chili, him drooling on the shoulder of her pink shirt.

She and Jeff Ellis, a former skier for Canada, were married in 2008 and live in a modest three-bedroom home in Anchorage. The garage is cluttered with skis and bikes; the living room is a shrine to Randall’s achievements. World Championship medals hang on a small shelf along with two of her three World Cup crystal globes, the award given to overall discipline winners. The third is in Freeport, Maine, in the flagship store of L.L.Bean, one of her sponsors.

Randall’s contracts with L.L.Bean, Subway, and Fischer skis, to name a few, are incentive laden, and she makes a respectable living, earning as much as \$200,000 a year. But that’s nothing compared with her Scandinavian counterparts. In much of Europe, cross-country skiing is as big as baseball in America, and Randall is a celebrity.

“People plan their days around watching the races on TV,” she says. “Three of my friends from the tour have built houses over the past couple of years, and they’re mansions. They’ll finish skiing and be set for life.” Randall knows that, in the U.S., her sport will always be niche. “When I’m done,” she says, “I’ll need to find another source of income.”

Randall fills a bowl and sets Breck on the floor to play. Having a baby will make life on the tour interesting. Luckily, Ellis works for the International Ski Federation, the sport’s governing body, as a media specialist, so the pair travel together. During various times over the four months of competition, they’re flying their parents to Europe, where almost all

the races are held. And they’ll stay in separate lodging, away from the rest of team, so that Breck doesn’t disturb Randall’s teammates.

“Last night he only woke up once,” says Randall as she sips a glass of red wine.

“Actually, he woke up three times,” says Ellis.

“Well, I only woke up once,” Randall chuckles. “I sleep so much better since having him. That must be a special mom power.”

Randall is hoping that being a mom will help her be a better athlete, and there might be something to it. During pregnancy women create more oxygen-carrying red blood cells, and their hearts are able to hold a larger volume of blood. Nia Ali, who gave birth to a son in 2015, won silver in the 100-meter hurdles in Rio after not qualifying for the Olympics in 2012. And Kristin Armstrong dominated women’s cycling after her pregnancy. If there’s an advantage, it may be psychological. Many moms will tell you that incredibly hard workouts, the kind that make it feel as though every muscle in your body is giving birth, simply don’t hurt as much after you’ve actually given birth. A scary thought, considering that Randall is already basically impervious to pain.

This much is certain: Randall is ready to race. After a set of running intervals the next day, she flips open her laptop to compare her times from previous workouts. All of her training is meticulously logged on a spreadsheet. How she felt that day, the grade of the climb, the weather. One entry reads, “Had some moose issues on #1, #2, and #3.”

She scrolls down to the interval workout she’d completed and compares it with her time from the fall of 2014. During that period she was firing, trying to make up for her Olympic bust. “I hadn’t yet reached the point of overtraining,” she says. “I was strong.” But on this overcast day, one of her last before shipping off to Europe, she’s nearly 20 seconds faster on each lap. “And I did one more lap today,” she says. Then she looks up, closes her laptop, and smiles. **1**

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