

Switzerland's Alpine dominance, fueled by smuggled meat and red wine, was 'absolutely insane'

By [Dave Sheinin](#)

February 17, 2022 at 6:50 a.m. EST

YANQING, China — The Swiss were hugging. The Swiss were crying. The Swiss were standing for another rendition of their national anthem, “Schweizerpsalm” (“Swiss Psalm”), on the side of a Chinese mountain. Michelle Gisin had just won the women’s Alpine combined, Switzerland’s fifth gold medal in Alpine skiing at the Beijing Olympics, and the party that had begun 10 days earlier with the first of those golds would be starting up again soon for No. 5.

But before that, Gisin had something she needed to do. She waded through the post-race chaos and the well-wishers until she found Mikaela Shiffrin, and she threw her arms around her and whispered encouragement in her ear.

Even at her highest moment — a successful defense of her 2018 Olympic gold medal in Alpine combined — Gisin, 28, could empathize with a rival at her lowest. Shiffrin, the American superstar, had skied out in the slalom portion of the combined, her third such calamity at an Olympics in which she has no medals to show for five starts. If it’s lonely at the top, it is more so at the bottom, and maybe only another elite skier could understand the thin difference between the two.

“The wheel turns, you know,” Gisin said. “And [Shiffrin] managed to stay on top of the wheel for incredibly long time, and now it’s a low. ... It’s just normal.”

Gisin had seen the same thing happen, she said, to her brother, Marc, and her sister, Dominique — both world-class skiers and former Olympians. She had seen it with boyfriend Luca de Aliprandini, a two-time Olympic skier for Italy.

“And I’ve seen it with myself,” she said, referencing a bout of mononucleosis last summer that bled over into the early portion of this World Cup season. “The wheel, it keeps turning. Sometimes you’re up there. Sometimes you’re down there. That’s just how athletes and normal human beings live it. And for sure, for her it’s really hard because she was always on top. I’m extremely sure she will bounce back and she will be very strong again.”

Expectations are a tricky thing at the Olympics, something that has never been so evident as over the past 11 days at National Alpine Ski Centre. The expectations on Shiffrin, a three-time Olympic medalist and one of the most accomplished skiers in history, were enormous, and she fell shockingly short of meeting them. As a result, Team USA has just one medal — Ryan Cochran-Siegle’s silver in the men’s super-G — to show for the 10 individual races at these Olympics, its fewest since 1998, with only Saturday’s mixed-team event remaining.

The expectations on the Swiss team here were more manageable. Despite the nation’s Alpine orientation and rich history in the sport, it had never won more than three gold medals at an Olympics entering Beijing. Its men had been shut out of the medal stand entirely as recently as 2002 and its women as recently as 2010. In 2018, Gisin’s gold in the combined stood as Switzerland’s only Alpine victory.

But here, Beat Feuz won the first race of the Olympics, the men's downhill, and the victories and the medals piled up from there. The five Swiss golds were earned by five skiers: Feuz, Marco Odermatt (men's giant slalom), Corinne Suter (women's downhill), Lara Gut-Behrami (women's super-G) and Gisin. The Swiss women's team alone took three of the five individual golds and seven of the 15 overall medals.

That list of Swiss medalists in Beijing includes Wendy Holdener, who took the silver Thursday in the Alpine combined — more than a second behind teammate Gisin — with Italy's Federica Brignone earning bronze. Holdener, 28, also took home a bronze in the slalom last week.

"Absolutely insane," Gisin said of the Swiss medal haul.

Asked whether the performance had exceeded his expectations, Beat Tschuor, head women's coach for Switzerland's Alpine team, said, "Definitely."

"I never saw seven medals for the whole team," he said. "But they are calm. They are working well. The team is really relaxed. The girls are in amazing shape We knew in each discipline, we had a chance for a medal. I knew that. After that, it's just: 'Let's see. Let's do it.'"

The secret ingredients that pushed Switzerland over the top here? Meats and wine. Tschuor revealed late Thursday that his team had smuggled some special, air-dried meats from back home — called *buendnerfleisch* — into China in their ski boots, and Gisin said she has enjoyed some, along with some cheese, from time to time.

Also, on the night before her bronze medal performance in the women's super-G, Gisin had a glass of red wine with teammates Loic Meillard and Luca Aerni and arrived back at her room that evening to find a sign on her door that read: "Drink Wine. Ski Fast."

"I drank a glass of wine with them again yesterday, of course," she said Thursday. "It seems to work for me very well."

Like other Alpine countries, Switzerland draws from a bigger pool of athletes than countries such as the United States, where skiing is a niche sport limited to a few mountainous regions. But even by their standards, this may be as deep a team as the Swiss have brought to an Olympics in a generation or more, particularly on the women's side. It stands in stark contrast to Team USA, which produced only two top-10 finishes on the women's side: Paula Moltzan's eighth in the slalom and Shiffrin's ninth in the super-G.

"In Mikaela's case, she had the pressure to deliver for the entire team. That's not easy. It was an amazing amount of pressure on her. I feel kind of upset for her," Tschuor said. "We are lucky — four girls [winning] these seven medals. I'm happy it's not just one. It makes the team feel complete."

Gisin sat in 12th place Thursday after the downhill portion of the combined and said she expected Shiffrin, who was fifth after the downhill, to make a big charge in the slalom — an event in which Shiffrin owns a record 47 World Cup victories, compared with just one for Gisin. But after Shiffrin skied out, Gisin, seven skiers later, pulled out one of the best slalom runs of her life.

"I have no idea where that came from," she said.

When she went to hug Shiffrin afterward and offer some solace, Gisin referenced their disparate records in the slalom, recounting later, "I told her, 'I feel pretty badass about winning one slalom in my career.' . . . So she is [many] times as badass as I am."

The rest of the night, though, belonged to the Swiss, just as this entire Olympics have on the Alpine slopes, where the red wine and *buendnerfleisch* have been abundant — and so have the gold medals.