

## Outdoors

### UW Nordic ski team represents USA at international competition

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By EVE NEWMAN /



Junior Elise Sulser, of Casper, a member of the University of Wyoming Nordic ski team, competes at the World University Games in Strbske Pleso, Slovakia, in January. The UW team was chosen to represent the United States at the games. Courtesy photo

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For Sam Wiswell, a University of Wyoming junior and men's team captain for the UW Nordic ski team, things got real at the World University Games when he put on the stars and stripes.

Wearing the Team USA racing suit — dubbed the "super suit" by Wiswell and his teammates — brought home the fact they were representing their country at the games; hosted Jan. 24-Feb. 1 in Strbske Pleso, Slovakia.

"There's a lot of pride," he said.

It was a reminiscent of the pride he feels wearing the brown and gold of UW, except the scale was unmatched.

"This is a whole other tier," he said. "I'm representing the United States of America."

For the third time, the UW club team was selected to represent the U.S. in the biennial international competition, also known as the Winter Universiade. This year, the venue was split between Slovakia and Grenada, Spain, with Nordic ski events in Slovakia.

Thirteen athletes and four coaches from UW made the trip, returning to Laramie on Feb. 2.

## Testing their limits

Competition on the international stage is daunting compared to racing on home snow, even for a team that's won 10 men's and women's national titles since 2003. That's because many athletes at the Universiade compete at the international level. However, Team USA represented well, their coaches said.

"Overall, it was very, very successful," said Christi Boggs, who coaches the team along with Rachel Watson.

Top finishes included junior Elise Sulser, of Casper, in 23rd in the women's 5k classic race and senior Sierra Jech, Cody, finishing 41st in the women's sprint freestyle race, Watson said.

"The top athletes there are World Cup skiers, or at least have World Cup starts," Watson said.

Perhaps five full-time college students finished ahead of Sulser, Watson said. She estimated that 15 full-time students finished ahead of Jech.

Jech, this year's club president, said she prepared for the competition by not worrying about things she couldn't control, such as competitors' resumes. Instead, she focused on her own preparation, rest and nutrition.

"Focusing on those things allows me to do the best I can at things I can control," she said.

Senior Sindre Solvang of Cheyenne said he kept his nerves at bay by knowing friends and family were already proud of him.

"I had nothing to lose, so I was just going to try my best and see what happened," he said.

A proud moment mentioned by several athletes and coaches was the men's 30k freestyle. Wiswell finished 53rd; and sophomore William Timmons, from Eagle River, Alaska, finished 54th.

Athletes completed eight laps on a course that humbled even the strongest racers. Coaches could tell the course was difficult when even the front-runners looked as if they were suffering.

"It was a punishing course under any circumstances," Boggs said.

Officials even shortened the men's team relay because of the difficulty.

"This course was nuts," Wiswell said.

On the final morning of the games, with the sun shining and the Tatra Mountains visible in the distance, the UW team watched their teammates ski an aggressive, mentally tough, 90- minute race.

"Being able to see athletes test their limits, have a low point, and then recover — for me it was a huge success as a coach because I could see them recognizing their fitness," Watson said.

## **Making connections**

Team USA stayed in a hotel across the street from the Nordic ski venue along with several other teams; the athletes loved being close to the action and getting to know fellow racers.

"For me, one of the highlights was having the opportunity to spend time with people of the same age from different countries and making connections," said senior Taylor Vignaroli, from Casper.

Wiswell recalled the surreal feeling of being surrounded by athletes from so many countries.

"There were these moments where I was skiing on the course and I realized I was hearing 10 different languages at once," he said.

During the closing ceremonies, the gulf between nationalities grew smaller as athletes traded clothing, coming away sporting a rainbow of international flags with their new shirts, jackets and vests. By the end of the night, one's clothing no longer signified where he or she was from.

"We started with distinct differences, and then you can't tell anybody apart," Wiswell said.

## **A unique academic experience**

With the help of their coaches, the skiers designed an academic class to take advantage of their unique experience. The team received a grant from the UW Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources

to support the project.

“Environmental Assessment of an International Athletic Event” included readings, journal entries and research, which athletes worked on between races.

The big-picture goal of their research is to analyze the effect of the games.

One group of students is calculating the carbon footprint of their group’s travel to Slovakia and two-week stay. Wiswell said the athletes stayed in an energy-efficient hotel and didn’t use their vehicles during the competition. The lightness of their environmental effect surprised them.

“It was pretty low-impact once we were there,” Wiswell said.

Another group of students interviewed locals about the social aspect of the games and what effect it had on their lives. They found that locals were positive.

“The general consensus was great,” Vignaroli said. “We had a lot of really positive data that came from that.”

One group of students is measuring the economic effect of the event on businesses, while a final group is measuring the accumulation of fluorocarbon in the snow from ski wax to assess possible environmental side effects. Jech was one of the students who took snow samples on four different nights from various points on the course. They stored the snow in water bottles, transported home in their checked luggage.

Watson said she was proud of the student-athletes’ diligence in their dual roles.

“They push each other’s thought in the same way they push each other physically to achieve more,” she said.

As they complete their research, the team plans to prepare an article for possible publication later this year.

## **Looking ahead and saying thanks**

The UW skiers had to recover from their jet lag on the fly; they returned to find classes at UW in full swing and another weekend of competition looming.

They are slated to compete at the Cowboy Chase, scheduled for today-Sunday at the Tie City Trailhead. It's their final race before the United States Collegiate Ski and Snowboard Association national championships in Bend, Oregon, scheduled to start March 1.

The coaches praised their athletes for prioritizing recovery in the face of a busy schedule.

"We could not be more proud," Watson said. "The key to athletics — everything is about recovery. That's where champions are made."

The athletes said a taste of international competition sets them up well for the high-stakes races they'll be in come March.

"You're challenged on a whole new level at (the World University Games), and you learn what you didn't know you were capable of before," Solvang said.

Vignaroli said he expects his nerves to be a little less jittery when nationals arrives.

"It helps you recognize your fitness and trust that you're able to accomplish a lot of big things," he said of competing at the games.

When Team USA arrived in Slovakia, they looked around for their Canadian counterparts and didn't see them. They learned that no Canadians came because of a lack of funding.

"That helped us realize how fortunate we all were," Vignaroli said.

Athletes and coaches thanked the UW and Laramie communities for supporting their venture.

"Our support here enabled Team USA to have any representation," Watson said.