

WINTER Olympic Preview

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MILANO CORTINA
2026



THE NEXT ERIC HEIDEN?

Speedskater Stoltz draws comparisons ahead of Olympics

HOWARD FENDRICH
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MILWAUKEE — Jordan Stoltz appreciates that people liken what he will be trying to do at the Milan Cortina Winter Games to Eric Heiden's record five speedskating gold medals at Lake Placid in 1980.

Who wouldn't be flattered?

"It's a cool comparison because not everybody is able to have that," Stoltz, a 21-year-old from Wisconsin, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Soft-spoken yet confident, Stoltz is positioned to be one of the faces of these Olympics, which begin Feb. 6. Not sure? Check out NBC's ads.

He is quick to point out that his bid for golds in four events — and maybe, just maybe, five — is not the same as what Heiden accomplished nearly 50 years ago by becoming the only person in the sport to win the 500, 1,000, 1,500, 5,000 and 10,000 meters at one Games.

"It's really not an exact comparison," said Stoltz, who qualified for the three shortest individual

events. "If I can have perfect races, I think I have the best chances out of a lot of people to win gold."

Folks who spend a lot of time around Stoltz tend to agree that is realistic.

"He's a once-in-a-generation skater," said

Emery Lehman, a 2022 bronze medalist for the U.S. in team pursuit. "I

was talking to one of the older skaters the other day about Heiden doing this stuff 40-50 years ago. It's similar in that

people are really in awe."

U.S. Speedskating national team coach Ryan Shimabukuro put it in simple terms.

"He's the best skater in the world," Shimabukuro said. "No doubt about that."

He is a two-time world champion at all three of his main distances, the 500, 1,000 and 1,500. The world record-holder in the 1,000. Owner of

an 18-race winning streak in the past.

It's why the Dutch, historically dominant at speedskating, nicknamed him "Straaljager" ("Fighter Jet"). Shimabukuro calls him "Champ."

At a pair of World Cup stops in December, Stoltz went 7-0, which

U.S. Speedskating executive director Ted Morris said,

"sent a really powerful message; you

can see it in those

skaters' eyes, like,

'What just happened? I'm not close anymore.'

That thought first entered minds when Stoltz, still a teen, swept those three

races at the 2023 single-distance championships. A year earlier, making his Olympics debut in Beijing, Stoltz was 13th in the 500 and 14th in the 1,000.

This time, in addition to those distances and the 1,500, which all are contested in 1-on-1 heats, he also will enter the mass start, a race

covering 6,400 meters with a pack of entrants. And there is a chance Stoltz could be in a fifth event: team pursuit, in which three teammates do 3,200 meters together.

"It's going to be more of an in-the-moment thing," Stoltz said about entering that, too.

The U.S. men hold the world record and are favored for gold. Their usual trio is Lehman, Ethan Cepuran and Casey Dawson, but Stoltz could participate in a round.

As with relay events in athletics or swimming, someone in any heat, even if not the final, earns the same medal as the rest of the squad.

His coach, Bob Corby, said Stoltz could join that event in Milan "if somebody gets sick or somebody gets injured."

The Stoltz origin story is the stuff of movies.

Jordan, then 5, and his sister, Hannah, then 7, fell in love with skating by watching American short track star Apolo Ohno win some of his eight career Olympic medals during the 2010 Vancouver Games. Their father, Dirk, cleared

snow off a frozen pond in their backyard so they could learn to skate. Their mother, Jane, found used skates at a nearby club.

"It's a talent. It's a gift. And he's driven to continue to improve," Jane said of her son. "A lot of people are more into, 'Let's see who I can beat.' No, he just likes to keep getting better."

And now Jordan Stoltz heads to his second Winter Games with all eyes on him.

Will that affect Stoltz?

"I really don't think he cares," Corby said. "That whole situation is pretty much what's happened for the last three years, and especially the last three months."

Asked the same question while sitting on a bench during the U.S. Olympic trials in early January, Stoltz shrugged.

His answer arrived in almost a whisper.

"As long as nothing gets in the way, then I should be fine," Stoltz said. "I've had a lot of high-pressure races, I guess you could say, so I don't think that's that big of an issue."

MILAN CORTINA GAMES ESSENTIALS

There are 16 sports in all in the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy, including some never seen before, and 116 gold medals are waiting to be awarded as competition begins.

This will be the most spread-out Winter Games in history: The two primary competition sites are the city of Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo, the winter resort in the Dolomites that is more than 250 miles away by road.

Athletes also will compete in three other mountain clusters besides Cortina, while the closing ceremony will be in Verona, 100 miles east of Milan.

KEY DATES

Here are some of the dates to mark on your calendar:

Feb. 6: Opening ceremony

Feb. 7: First gold medal events

Feb. 8: Gold medal, women's Alpine skiing downhill

Feb. 13: Gold medal, men's figure skating

Feb. 18: Gold medal, women's Alpine skiing slalom

Feb. 19: Gold medal, women's figure skating.

Gold medal game, women's

ice hockey. Gold medals in ski mountaineering.

Feb. 22: Gold medal game, men's ice hockey. Closing ceremony.

HOW TO WATCH

Dozens of countries will stream or air each day's events, with some delaying broadcasts until primetime depending on the time zone. That will be the case in the U.S., where Eastern time is six hours behind Milan and Cortina. NBC will carry showcase events at night while streaming sports on Peacock.

TOP STORYLINES

Venues: All eyes are on the hockey arenas in Milan, which were still under construction in January; the main rink will be about 3 feet shorter than NHL and PWHL players are used to. And the athletes' village in Cortina is a collection of more than 350 mobile homes.

Russian athletes: Some

sports federations are

deciding whether to let Rus-

sians compete as neutral

athletes but only after they

are cleared by an indepen-

dent review to ensure that

they have not publicly sup-

ported the war in Ukraine and are not affiliated with Russia's military or other forces.

What's new: Ski mountaineering will make its Olympic debut while skeleton has added a mixed team event, luge has added women's doubles and large hill ski jumping added women's and men's super team events.

GENDER BALANCE

About 47% of the athletes competing in the 2026 Games are women — the highest percentage ever in the Winter Olympics. Of the 116 events, 50 will be women's events (the most ever) and 12 will be mixed events, meaning women will compete in a Winter Games record 53% of all events.

Four new women's events will be featured for the first time: freestyle skiing dual moguls, luge doubles, ski jumping large individual hill and ski mountaineering sprint.

Women and men will

compete over the same

distances in cross-country

skiing for the first time at the

Winter Games.

— Associated Press

THREE MORE U.S. MEDAL HOPEFULS



Chloe Kim

Age: 25

Hometown: Torrance, Calif.

Specialty: Halfpipe

Olympic medals: 2 gold

Notes:

- Tied with Shaun White for the most halfpipe wins (8) in X Games history

- First person to win the halfpipe title at all four major events: World, Olympic, Youth Olympic, and X Games

- Has won five ESPY Awards, including Best Female Action Sports Athlete three years in a row



Mikaela Shiffrin

Age: 30

Hometown: Edwards, Colo.

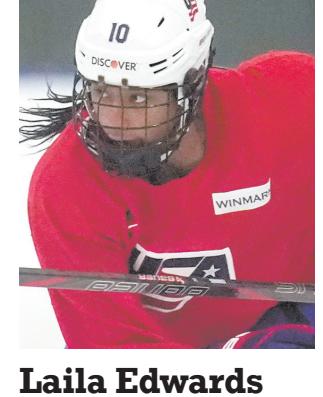
Specialty: Slalom, Giant Slalom, Super-G, Downhill

Olympic medals: 2 gold, 1 silver

Notes:

- First alpine skier to record 100 World Cup wins
- Five-time overall World Cup champion

- At age 18 in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, became the youngest slalom gold medalist in Olympic history



Laila Edwards

Age: 22

Hometown: Cleveland Heights, Ohio

Position: Defenseman/forward, hockey

Notes:

- Two-time national collegiate champion at the University of Wisconsin
- At age 20 in 2024, became the youngest Tournament MVP in World Championship history

- In 2023, became the first Black woman to play for the U.S. women's senior national team

HISTORIC MOMENTS TO REMEMBER

The U.S. hockey team pounces on goalie

Jim Craig

against its 4-3 victory

against the Soviet Union in

a medal round

match at the

1980 Winter

Olympics in Lake Placid,

N.Y., on

Feb. 22, 1980.



File photo | Associated Press

THE MIRACLE ON ICE (LAKE PLACID 1980)

One of the most famous moments in sports history came at Lake Placid 1980, when the underdog U.S. men's ice hockey team stunned the seemingly invincible Soviet Union with a 4-3 victory in the medal round.

The Soviets had won five of the previous six Olympic titles with a roster of seasoned professionals, while the U.S. team was made up mostly of young collegiate amateurs (only four men had minimal minor-league experience). Dubbed the "Miracle on Ice," the upset captivated the world and propelled the USA toward an improbable gold medal.

EDDIE 'THE EAGLE' TAKES FLIGHT (CALGARY 1988)

A plasterer from Cheltenham, England, with poor eyesight and no funding, Michael "Eddie the Eagle" Edwards scraped together borrowed equipment and trained himself into Olympic contention, managing to qualify to compete at Calgary 1988 in the men's ski jumping competition.

He finished last in both events, but his courage, humor and sheer determination captured the world's imagination. His unlikely story became a symbol of the Olympic spirit and later inspired the hit film "Eddie the Eagle."

JACOBELLIS' REDEMPTION GOLD (BEIJING 2022)

Lindsey Jacobellis had to wait 16 years to bury the demons of Turin 2006, when the U.S. snowboarder famously crashed on the last jump of the women's snowboard cross final while celebrating too early, costing her the gold medal. When she finally got a second chance in Beijing, she made no mistake.

Jacobellis led from start to finish, keeping her composure until she crossed the line — then let out a cry of unbridled joy, her long wait for redemption complete. At 36, she became the oldest American woman ever to win a Winter Olympic gold medal.

— Olympics.com