

TIME

Shaun White vs. Lindsey Vonn: Who's Better?

By [Sean Gregory / West Vancouver](#)

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Lindsey Vonn of the United States reacts in the finish area after winning the Women's downhill at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics on Feb. 17, 2010

Gero Breloer / AP

Call it the Tiger Woods-Roger Federer debate, Winter Olympics style. On Wednesday, the two most heavily hyped Americans in these Olympics games, skier Lindsey Vonn and halfpipe snowboarder Shaun White, lived up to the billing and dominated their respective events, winning two golds. Like Federer in tennis and Woods in golf, they're both transcendent talents who have set the standards of greatness in their sports. One of the more popular arguments amongst sports fan around the world surrounds the question of whose accomplishment is more impressive, Woods' 14 major golf titles or Federer's record 16 grand slams. What's the tougher game to master, golf or tennis?

In keeping with the proud human tradition of starting sports arguments, it's time to pull up a barstool and pit Vonn, America's sweetheart, and White, he of the flowing red mane, against each other. Let's attempt to answer the most basic sporting question in the world: Who's better?

This argument is particularly prescient to the mountain crowd. Like golfers and tennis players at the country club, skiers and snowboarders often share a home on the slopes, but they don't always see eye to eye. For years, the regal skiers treated the upstart snowboarders like pests; thanks to efforts by pioneers like White who have given the sport legitimacy and near-mainstream acceptance, there's at least a grudging respect between the two camps. "I wouldn't say there's a rivalry," says Rick Bower, a halfpipe coach for the U.S. team. He stops to reconsider that statement. "There is a little bit, I guess."

Each side has a case. Vonn is a physical specimen. Her powerful legs give her advantage at the start, and smart money says she could shame White in the weight room. Watching her whiz down a bumpy mountain at 65 m.p.h while maintaining her near-perfect technical position gives you a healthy rush of adrenaline. On Wednesday morning, Vonn's teammate Julia Mancuso had turned in the downhill ride of her life at Whistler Creekside course, setting herself up for an upset gold. But Vonn responded, achy shin and all, finishing the 1.8-mile course in 1 minute, 44.19 seconds, beating silver medalist Mancuso by .66 seconds. Vonn's run was even more amazing considering that several top skiers crashed on the speedy Whistler course.

White, meanwhile, reached into his deep bag of snowboarding tricks during his gold medal run at Cypress Mountain on Wednesday night. On the routine that clinched his second straight Olympic halfpipe gold, his amplitude — the term snowboarders use to describe the aerial distance they fly off the 22-ft. halfpipe — far exceeded that of the other competitors. He executed back-to-back double corks (two flips, three body revolutions, like a corkscrew) on his winning run. Although he had already clinched the title, on his second run White still went all out, and landed the Double McTwist 1260. That's a double backward flip with 3.5 revolutions, a maneuver which pushes the limits of what snowboarders can accomplish. Don't be fooled by White's shaggy looks: Underneath those baggy jeans, White is more jacked than you think. "He's using a lot of his core muscles," says Bower. "He definitely has a lot of strength in his legs, and his back muscles. He's wiry strong, and definitely in shape."

When asked which sport was tougher, downhill skiing or halfpipe snowboarding, each side protects its turf. "I know what they do is massively difficult," says Chemmy Alcott, a ski racer from Great Britain who finished 13th in the downhill race. "But just being on skis, you can create so much more energy and speed than a snowboarder." Another totally biased observer, Vonn's younger sister, Karin, offers one of the more rational reasons for favoring her sibling. "It's like comparing gymnastics to football," says Karin, 21, a student at the University of San Diego. "With one you do tricks and stuff, but at the end of the day, this one requires more strength and power. I think Lindsey would win."

What a kind sister. The snowboarders don't quite sell themselves as well as the skiers. "Downhill skiing is way gnarlier than snowboarding," says snowboarder Markku Koski of Finland. Don't hire that guy as your spokesperson. Fortunately for the boarders, other players inside the game will fight for White. "You need to be able to flip yourself multiple times," says Bower, who is not shy about giving White the advantage over Vonn. "It's not just one jump, it's a series of jumps, five or six in these pipes. To land cleanly, and to maintain the speed that you need to do the giant double flips that they're doing, that takes an incredible amount of athleticism."

You could look to Tom Kelly to settle the score. Kelly, the spokesperson for the United States Ski and Snowboard Association, is supposed to love both of his children equally. That's his job. So when I asked him which endeavor was tougher, skiing or snowboarding, I expected a dodge. Surprisingly, he didn't duck the question. "When you're sitting in a bar and see Shaun White do a double cork, that's a singular move, a singular activity," Kelly says. "But if you look at what Lindsey is putting on the line, doing 80 miles per hour, to keep that going for that long a time, at that speed, under conditions you don't know, that's pretty tough. I would give her the edge. I think the guy sitting in the bar would give Shaun White the edge."

Well, maybe I drink too much. Here's one man's humble opinion, after witnessing both gold-medal performances on Wednesday: Vonn is awe-inspiring, but White is still the more impressive athlete. To me, it's all about the flipping. You can teach me to ski; obviously I'd never reach Vonn's level, but if thousands of folks of all ages hit the slopes every weekend, so can I. But I'm not pointing my head to the ground in mid-air. And I'm certainly not doing it 35 feet from the bottom on a pipe. (My fear of heights also works in White's favor).

Skiers, there's no need to throw your poles. No sports argument can ever be really settled. That's why we love them so much. And thanks to the exploits of White and Vonn at these Olympics, this one is just getting started.