

SHIFFRIN EYES MULTIPLE MEDAL HAUL AT PYEONGCHANG

WASHINGTON: US alpine ski star Mikaela Shiffrin, who captured her third consecutive world slalom title last weekend in Switzerland, is looking at a possible multiple medal haul at next year's Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

The 21-year-old American will defend slalom gold next February 13 in South Korea after winning at Sochi in 2014 at age 18, becoming the youngest Olympic slalom champion in history.

"Performing at the Olympics is on a whole other level because it's only once every four years. It sets you up for the rest of your career. So there is a lot more pressure," Shiffrin said in a US Olympic Committee conference call.

"It's going to be a totally new feeling having won a gold medal and competed at an Olympics before. There are more expectations around me having won

a gold medal. I sort of have to take it in stride."

But Shiffrin, who finished second in the giant slalom at this month's world championships, said the worlds made her "think more about big competitions and my goals" for Pyeongchang, looking beyond her usual disciplines for medals in Super G and combined as well.

"Downhill isn't even out of the question either," she said. "I'm trying to set myself up to be a medal contender in three or four events, which would really be incredible."

Shiffrin said the intense training and competition at worlds could pay off in South Korea next year as well as in Switzerland last week.

"These are the kinds of periods I can make breakthroughs-with my skiing, with my equipment, with my mentality-that will help me through the

Olympics," Shiffrin said. "They could be the difference between 10th place and getting a medal." But the next year also offers rivals time to improve and challenge Shiffrin's slalom throne.

"There's time for other athletes to improve," she said. "Anybody who is winning World Cup races is generally going to be good competition at the Olympics. The girls who have been strong the past few years will continue to be strong."

"It will be great competition at Pyeongchang. There will be a couple girls who haven't been strong this year who will turn on the afterburners. We're still a year out. There's time for things to change."

But Shiffrin has clearly made herself the woman to beat in her speciality, tweeting this week after her successful worlds effort, "I may not be a real superhero, but I got to feel like one." — AFP

OLYMPICS

BUDAPEST BID CHIEF SLAMS OLYMPICS WITHDRAWAL

BUDAPEST: The chief of Budapest's Olympics bid committee has deplored the capital's withdrawal from the race to host the 2024 Games, after a referendum drive forced the city to drop its candidacy. The decision, announced by the right-wing government late Wednesday evening, leaves Paris and Los Angeles to fight a neck-and-neck battle for 2024. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is due to vote for the host on September 13.

Boston, Hamburg and Rome had already pulled out of the contest to follow 2020 hosts Tokyo, all because of pressure over the cost. "It frustrates me because we have never been so close... We dropped out in front of the finish line," Balazs Furjes, chairman of Budapest 2024, told the Hungarian news agency MTI.

"We had unity and we lost it," he added of the failed campaign. Budapest City Council has to vote on the bid's withdrawal on March 2, before the committee can officially inform the IOC of its exit. The IOC said it would not comment until officially notified.

The move is a setback for the sports-mad premier Viktor Orban, a key backer of the bid. It comes just months after low voter turnout voided his anti-migrant referendum aimed at rejecting a troubled European Union refugee quota plan.

'MIND SAID NO'

Hungary's Olympic bid unravelled after a group of young activists collected over a quarter million signatures demanding a referendum, almost double the threshold required to trigger a ballot.

Critics of the Olympics drive, fearing spiralling costs and corruption, said taxpayers should decide how their money is spent "I work in sports... but even if my heart was beating for the Hungarian Olympics, my mind said no," Eszter Balatoni, 37, told AFP in Budapest yesterday.

"There are so many other things that need financing in this country, like education and healthcare."

Momentum Movement (MoMo), which organised the petition, said it never sought to drop the initiative but had merely wanted a public debate. "We have pushed back the government... but we have also missed an opportunity for discussion," the group's leader Andras Fekete-Gyor said at a press conference yesterday.

Some locals expressed frustration at the cancelled bid. "The majority of costs would have been paid by the IOC. These young liberals have destroyed the dreams of several million Hungarians," businessman Vilmos Lisztes, 47, told AFP.

The so-called "Nolimpia" drive had been aided by opposition parties critical of Orban, prompting the government on Wednesday to accuse them of turning the matter "into a political party affair".

Observers said Orban and his ruling Fidesz party had no choice but to withdraw the bid because of the lack of public support, which is a key criteria for the IOC when making its decision.

"A lost referendum would have given too much of a blow to Fidesz, one year ahead of the general elections," analyst Zoltan Cegledi told Hungarian media. — AFP



TOKYO: This picture taken on February 22, 2017 shows Japanese swimmer Ippei Watanabe (2nd L) smiling in the pool during a training session at the Waseda University swimming pool in Tokyo. Fresh from setting a new world record, Japan's latest swim sensation Ippei Watanabe is plotting Tokyo Olympic glory in 2020 - and he wants his gold medal sealed with a kiss. — AFP

SWIMMING

JAPANESE ROMEO WATANABE SEEKS TOKYO GOLD AND MORE

TOKYO: Fresh from setting a new world record, Japan's latest swim sensation Ippei Watanabe is plotting Tokyo Olympic glory in 2020 — and he wants his gold medal sealed with a kiss. The 19-year-old, who shot to fame with a jaw-dropping time of 2 minutes 06.67 seconds in the men's 200 metres breaststroke last month, plans to set another world best in the Olympic final and celebrate by sweeping some lucky damsel off her feet with a dashing wedding proposal. "I'm blessed that I'll be at my peak as a swimmer when the Tokyo Olympics arrive," Watanabe told AFP in an interview.

"My aim is to win the final in a world record and then propose to someone with my gold medal," he added, coyly declining to elaborate on who might be the object of his desire.

"There's only three years to go and I'm determined not to waste the opportunity to make the Tokyo Olympics the crowning glory of my career." Behind

Watanabe's hopes for a slushy Hollywood ending, burns a competitive fire to emulate boyhood idol Kosuke Kitajima, who won 100m and 200m breaststroke gold at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics. "When I was 10 I buried a time capsule," said the Waseda University student, who broke the world mark in Tokyo watched by the Japan swimming great. "I put in a message with my dreams written on it: saying I wanted to be like Kosuke Kitajima and swim at the Olympics."

Having eclipsed a world best once owned by Kitajima and competing in Rio last summer, Watanabe has gone some way to reaching those goals. But the record-breaker, who finished sixth in the Olympic final, is hungry to prove his wonder swim was no fluke.

'MARKED MAN'

"I'll be a marked man at this year's world championships," nodded the 1.93-metre (6ft 3in) Watanabe, looking

ahead to the July 14-30 global championships in Budapest, where the spectre of Kazakhstan's Olympic champion Dmitry Balandin is set to loom large.

"People used to think I was weak under pressure. But if I can lower the world record again and win the gold medal, I'll be able to call myself the real world number one." Watanabe revealed that the pain of coming up short in Rio fuelled his surprise world record.

"I was gutted after that Olympic final," he said. "I just wanted to crawl into bed. But if I hadn't suffered like that I don't think I would have set the world record. I knew I would break it at some point, just not so quickly." A voracious student of the sport, Watanabe studies video of Kitajima's races to pick up tips.

But as he continues his rise to the top, there is a cautionary tale for Watanabe in the form of fellow Japanese Akihiro Yamaguchi, who broke the 200m breaststroke world record in 2012 before fading into obscurity. — AFP