



Lauren Samuels started graduate school at the University of Oregon Lundquist College of Business in October 2020, pursuing a master's degree in sports product management. She credits her appreciation for trustworthy equipment and gear to her long ski-racing career. She aspires to be a product line manager or merchandiser for a brand that fosters an inclusive and diverse outdoor space for all.
Photo: Samuels Family Archive

A NEW FINISH LINE FOR LAUREN SAMUELS



Words Megan Michelson

LAUREN Samuels has always been fast. A dedicated and uncompromising athlete, she was the J2 National super-G and overall champion in 2009 and she raced at the U.S. Nationals and World Juniors in 2012. At age 15, she made the U.S. Ski Development Team, earning a coveted spot as a next-gen future Olympian, while becoming one of just a handful of Black skiers in the history of the U.S. Ski Team.

Lauren competed four seasons for the University of Utah NCAA Division I team. After her sophomore year she suffered an ankle injury, but three ankle surgeries and 18 months off-snow later, Lauren returned to competition, co-captaining the team to its 11th NCAA Championship in March 2014.
Photo: Justin Samuels

The same year she won her J2 championship, the high school sophomore attended a preseason fitness testing at the U.S. Ski Team's Center of Excellence in Park City, UT. When Lauren broke the record for highest vertical jump and crossed the finish line as one of the team's fastest sprinters, whispers circulated: "Of course she can jump. She's Black."

She tried not to let comments like that get to her. "In ski racing, you will lose more races than you win," Lauren says, now 28. "For every person who says you can't do it, or that your goal is too high or not possible, there will be multiple other people who will tell you the opposite. I had to find those people."

Throughout her ski-racing career, Lauren found support through the National Brotherhood of Skiers, an African American ski club that's been around since 1974. Lauren was 9 years old when her family—her dad, David, who's Black, her mom, Heidi, who's white, and her older brother, Justin—attended their first National Brotherhood of Skiers Summit, a picnic and party on the slopes for the organization's members. They traveled from their home in Minneapolis to Snowmass, CO, where thousands of Black skiers congregated on the snow for the biennial gathering.

As Lauren remembers it, a DJ was spinning tracks while a chef cooked ribs and burgers over a barbecue. People were dancing in ski boots and wearing Mardi Gras beads over their local ski-club jackets. At that first event, Lauren and Justin met such ski legends as racer Andre Horton, the first Black male skier to make the U.S. Ski Team, Errol Kerr, who would go on to compete at the Olympics and X Games in ski cross, and Ralph Green, a decorated Paralympian.

"Before then, I'd never seen another Black person skiing besides my dad and brother," Lauren says. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, there are other Black people who ski. Why do people think we don't ski?'"

The Samuels family returned to National Brotherhood of Skiers events for years after that, and eventually when Lauren and Justin became elite ski racers in their teens, the organization offered financial help to cover the cost of training and travel, as well as moral support.

"There's nothing like having a couple of thousand people cheering on a young athlete and telling them they're special," David Samuels says. "I remember Lauren at a young age going to those Summits and saying, 'Dad, it's like having your own cheering squad.' It's amazing what you can project into a person when you praise them like that."

Lauren was a successful competitor, but it didn't come easily. The roadblocks she encountered—ranging from racially-tinged comments to often being overlooked or criticized unfairly—felt different from those of her mostly white peers. There were comments from her schoolteachers about being "lazy" because she missed school due to a ski race or her racing peers saying, "Well, you're not *really* Black." She carried their words in silence.

Still, Lauren never let any of that slow her down. She's retired from ski racing now but is back with the U.S. Ski Team. This time, instead of sliding up to the starting gate, she's channeling her experiences, both good and bad, to help change things for the next generation of skiers. In other words, after navigating the glaring problems within both the casual and competitive realms of our sport, Lauren has decided to be part of the solution.



Two-and-a-half-year-old Lauren learning how to carry her own skis at the Snowbird Plaza in 1995. After spending the historic '83-'84 winter in Little Cottonwood Canyon, Lauren's parents decided to make an annual trip to Snowbird, UT. Lauren was 5 months old when she made her first Utah pilgrimage.
Photo: Samuels Family Archive

While most of Lauren's friends went to the beach for spring break, the Samuels family always spent their vacations at Snowbird, UT. Lauren credits the tram operators for her love of the mountains, letting her sit on the operator stool to see out the tram windows.
Photo: Samuels Family Archive

Lauren graduated cum laude from the University of Utah College of Health, with a bachelor's in athletic training in May 2017.
Photo: Samuels Family Archive

IT SNOWED A RECORD-BREAKING 688 inches the winter in 1984 that Heidi and David Samuels worked at the ski shop at the base of the tram at Snowbird, UT. The couple met in college, at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where they were both skiers—Heidi, a racer, and David, a freestyle guy.

After their powder-filled winter at Snowbird, they moved back to Minneapolis where David worked as a sales rep for Salomon, and Heidi began a career in banking and finance. They got married and had Justin, and a few years later, Lauren.

The children were skiers long before they could actually ski. "We got tiny hand-me-down skis and let the kids play in the house," Heidi says. "They'd build Legos in the basement with ski boots on, then step into skis and play in the front yard."

Soon, they upgraded to the city-owned golf course a half mile from their house, which operated a small rope tow in the winter and charged \$3.50 for a day ticket. Neither kid knew what a chairlift was until they happened to see one on TV during the Winter Olympics.

Eventually, Justin joined the ski-racing program at Hyland Hills, the closest ski area to Minneapolis, which has a vertical drop of about 175 feet and is operated by the local parks and recreation department. Lauren joined the same race program, called Team Gilboa, a few years later.

The National Brotherhood of Skiers began offering support when the Samuels siblings were rising up the national rankings. "I started skiing when I was 9 and it took years for me to see another Black person skiing," says Henri Rivers, current president of the NBS and longtime friend of the Samuels family. "The biggest thing we do is show these young athletes that there are people who look like them who understand and love skiing, too."

Lauren was talented from the beginning, consistently in the top tier and a steady threat in all of the ski-racing disciplines. When a race didn't go her way, she'd remain stoic—to

this day her parents claim they've only seen their daughter cry a couple of times.

Strength was her biggest power. As a teenager, she'd drive pairs of skis so forcefully that she'd break them on a regular basis. "Lauren always had great balance and stability, coupled with speed, power and strength. She could stand on a stability ball like a kid at the circus," says Aaron Leventhal, a Minneapolis-based physical trainer who worked with the Samuels kids and other elite skiers during that era. "She was very mature and never shaken by all the politics that can go along with sport at her level."

Because of her travel schedule, Lauren missed 109 days of high school her junior year and didn't have time to get her driver's license until years later. "I was going to a normal public high school where nobody really knew what ski racing was," Lauren says. Some of her classmates thought she was always on a ski vacation. "My peers would say, 'What do you do?' That was tough."

By her senior year, she transferred to Rowmark Ski Academy in Salt Lake City. Lauren lost her spot on the U.S. Ski Team after just one season, a discretionary decision that came amid an overhaul of the coaching staff and other changes to the development program. Coaches broke the news to her after a three-day dryland training camp that served as a tryout for the team going into her second year. According to her coach at the time, Lauren's performance simply didn't qualify her for another season, but Lauren's parents can't help but wonder what happened in that moment.

"Lauren was cut by a coach who never saw her run a ski-racing course," Lauren's dad says. "At the end of the camp, she was told that she was not being invited back. And this is after she'd crushed the physical testing. There's a certain pedigree of what you're supposed to look like as a ski racer, and I believe that may have played a role."

Squeezing in a few Snowbird, UT powder runs with her dad David Samuels between a busy season of coaching. Lauren spent two winters as an FIS coach with Team Gilboa in 2019 and Rowmark Ski Academy in 2020. Photo: David Samuels



"I REMEMBER THINKING, 'WOW, THERE ARE OTHER BLACK PEOPLE WHO SKI. WHY DO PEOPLE THINK WE DON'T SKI?'"—LAUREN SAMUELS

Getting cut from the U.S. Team after just one year was one of the few times Lauren's parents have seen her cry. "I felt like there was unfinished business," Lauren says. "I didn't achieve everything I wanted to do or set out to do, but I knew this wasn't the end. I had watched numerous athletes succeed without the support of the U.S. Ski Team, so I didn't let it stop me from continuing on my journey."

Lauren went on to race in college. As a Division I ski racer at the University of Utah and captain of a team that won the NCAA National Championships her senior year, other coaching and athletic department staff would sometimes assume she played a different sport. "People would always think I played softball or ran track," Lauren says. "When I'd tell them I was a skier, they'd always look a little surprised."

She was used to those types of comments by then. They impacted her, bit by bit, but she always chose to rise above. She took premed courses, battled and overcame injuries, and graduated college in 2017 with bright plans for her future. Today, Lauren is in graduate school at the University of Oregon, where she's studying sports product management. She hopes to get a job working for an outdoor or ski-industry brand where she can begin unraveling the issue that's loomed over her entire life.

WHEN GEORGE FLOYD was killed in her hometown of Minneapolis in late May 2020, Lauren stepped into the streets, part of one beating heart in the global movement for change.

That summer, she rode her mountain bike 84.6 miles—to signify the 8 minutes and 46 seconds in which Floyd was pinned to the ground by police officer Derek Chauvin—over the course of 10 days to raise funds for a friend's campaign benefiting a

local kids' bicycling program. "My dad's been pulled over by the police while riding his bike on our own street," Lauren says. "Being active and being outside is healing for me, but there was a period that summer where I was scared to leave my house."

Lauren had to find ways to rediscover comfort in the outdoors. "There have always been moments where I'm scared in the outdoors because of what I look like or what my dad and family look like," she says. "But for all of these people who came before me and blazed this trail, I owe it to them to continue to share this space."

Lauren has come to terms with the fact that her identity is no longer linked to ski racing. She's still a skier, of course, and she spent several seasons working as a race coach at Team Gilboa and Rowmark Academy, but she's got other priorities now. She's on the diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging committee for the Lundquist College of Business at the University of Oregon and she's in a BIPOC student group that organizes events meant to foster community on campus.

Last year, Lauren was asked to join the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association's diversity, equity and inclusion committee, which was formed in 2017. The committee's initial efforts were focused on recruiting and retaining more women in coaching positions. "Then the events of 2020 happened, and we immediately said, 'There's another critically serious issue here: There are many groups in our country who are not represented in our sports,'" says Ellen Adams, club development manager for the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association and chair of the DEI committee. "We knew we needed to take a look at our own organization. Are we being as inclusive as we can be? How can we be more diverse?"



Lauren finishing on the junior podium in the super-G at the 2013 U.S. Nationals at the former Squaw Valley, CA and wrapping up her season with an invite to join the U.S. Ski Team. Photo: Photo: Harry Caston

“I DON’T THINK IT SHOULD BE DISREGARDED THAT GETTING MORE KIDS AND ATHLETES FROM ALL ASPECTS OF DIVERSITY WILL, ONE, EXPAND OUR TALENT POOL, AND TWO, MAKE IT STRONGER.”—LAUREN SAMUELS

Of the 200 full-time employees of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association, just two are people of color (not including Lauren, who holds a volunteer position). So the association hired an agency to conduct an internal audit to assess shortcomings with regard to diversity and inclusion. They’re now in the midst of finalizing a strategic plan to implement changes across everything from recruiting and hiring practices to training and education to working with a wider range of community partners.

“It’s clear when you look at our public-facing content, we’re pretty limited in our representation. If someone can’t see themselves in that material, then how can they feel like they belong?” Adams says. “In a perfect world, if all of this is successful, the next generation will experience a more welcoming, accessible and diverse sport that more closely represents American demographics.”

Rivers is also on the committee. “Skiing is the epitome of white privilege,” Rivers says. “You have to have money to do this sport. Can you imagine if we had a diverse, inclusive pool of talented athletes in skiing? The U.S. would destroy Norway at the Olympics. We could do that. We would also help expose so many more of our children to the outdoors.”

Lauren thinks the committee’s efforts are just the beginning. “Are we making progress in terms of getting people in this organization and this sport to see that this matters and

they have to do something? Yes, I think so,” Lauren says. “It’s important progress, but there’s so much more to do.”

In a July 2021 virtual discussion hosted by the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association about how to improve racial diversity in snowsports, Lauren was the youngest panelist. “I do believe there is some ingrained racism in our sport, and in some people in our sport,” she said in the call, later adding, “I don’t think it should be disregarded that getting more kids and athletes from all aspects of diversity will, one, expand our talent pool, and two, make it stronger.”

Lauren would love to see ski resorts cater to a broader demographic of people with more inclusive marketing campaigns, a wider array of food and entertainment offerings and more inclusive pricing. She’d like to see outdoor companies not just market to more diverse consumers, but also design products for a diverse target customer. She’d like to see more ski companies partner with local organizations that help get new people into skiing—and keep them engaged in the sport. She understands the need for both bottom-up and top-down strategies for meaningful changes to occur.

“Everyone deserves to have access, comfort and belonging in any sport and outdoor space, including skiing,” Lauren says. “We’re not there yet. Everyone deserves to be able to explore new places and themselves, and that’s my mission. I want the outdoors to not just be diverse, but to be welcoming, too.”