



Steep Thrills

skier: Ivan Malakhov | photograph: J. Bartlett

A primer on competitive big mountain freeride

by **Dave Zook**

Steep, untouched, and wide open, the landing below J-tree Cliff was flawless. And thus offered no excuses. I was gazing at the Silver King face at Crystal Mountain, Washington. Even from several hundred feet away on a nearby ridgeline, it was obvious that a thick stack of Pacific Northwest blower had filled out the apron below the cliff. As I gazed, I mind-surfed my line over and over, top to bottom, visualizing every vertical foot of it.

Jump ahead to the next morning, and I'm at the Silver King summit feeling simultaneously jacked and nervous to the verge of vomiting. Finally, my name cackles over the radio. It's time to drop in. Slip and sliding my way down the King's 1,000-plus vertical feet of shifting terrain, I spot the dead, gray snag I've memorized that's J-tree. The takeoff is just inches to the left.

That's the lead-up to a freeride, or "big mountain freeskiing" event, in which skiers and boarders (who usually all compete at the same events, but in separate categories) are delegated a juicy slab of terrain marked by only a start and finish gate. You won't see this style of skiing and riding at the Olympic Games. Hell, outside of Europe, you'll rarely see any coverage at all. But big mountain contests are arguably the purest form of competitive skiing and riding left in their respective sports. The venue is the unadulterated face of a mountain. Typically, it's the steepest face at a given resort. In some cases, the cliffed zones are permanently closed outside of the comps. As for the snowpack, it is what it is on the day of the event. Straightline a pinner chute? Milk every air possible? Launch a massive corked out backflip over granite? It's all fair game. Among other criteria, judges reward speed, fluidity, and creativity. It's about the turns and line selection, not just the

fireworks. The goal is to show masterful technique on rugged terrain. But full creative control is up to the athlete. It's risky as hell, but it's a chance to paint a masterpiece on a blank canvas.

A Crystal Mountain powder day isn't the norm though. It's not always happy snow. Boilerplate broken by coral reefs of sharp rock is common—a result of organizers having to set a date on the calendar. Such conditions set up the fascinating spectacle of humans chucking themselves onto hardpack, skiing terrain they'd typically avoid under the same conditions. They cancel downhill races on powder days. They rarely cancel freeride events for anything. This stirs up some real emotions in the athletes given the consequences of a fall. It's not uncommon to see multiple competitors walking around in fresh shoulder slings during the event. "It's super stressful," says pro skier Josh Daiek who won the Freeskiing World Tour overall title in 2012. "I was always skiing at the edge of my abilities. A lot of the time I was only around 75 percent sure I could pull off my line."

And that's pretty much the point. The comps were originally intended to let skiers and riders challenge themselves. There were earlier one-off "extreme" events, but the organized beginnings of freeride date back to the mid-90s and the late skiing pioneer Shane McConkey. (He also co-invented rockered skis.) McConkey didn't want to see freeskiing go the way of the rigid F.I.S. race scene, so he founded what was originally known as the International Free Skiing Association. Now it's the International Freeskiers and Snowboarders Association or IFSA—the sanctioning body for big mountain comps in North and South America. If you asked McConkey, who rarely played anything

straight, he'd have said it stood for, "I Fucking Ski Awesome."

No matter what you call it, the discipline has been a consistent career launcher for film athletes. Ingrid Backstrom, Chris Davenport, Sammy Luebke, and many more parlayed the freeride circuit into high-profile careers. Daiek used competitions as motivation to ride at the edge every day. The physical training, constant freeskiing, and contests every few weeks made him a better athlete. He earned fifth at the first event he entered at his home mountain of Kirkwood, and from there he was hooked. "After that year I was like a wolf that tasted blood. I got hungry," he says. From competition, he moved on to focus on filming and other projects, and won *POWDER* magazine's Breakthrough Performance award in 2015.

Lynsey Dyer, who would go from competing to filming with TGR and much more in a wide-ranging career, won every big mountain contest she entered. She credits the freeride scene for giving her the chance to be recognized. **"The contests were the only way at the time to be validated as an athlete,"** says Dyer. **"Additionally, they offer community and life skills like getting up early, facing nerves, and showing up. I love everything about them—except the injuries."**

What's new in the freeride world are the ample opportunities for junior athletes to partake. Today, there are 70 IFSA-sanctioned junior events on the calendar. Twelve years ago there were just three. Eric Deslauriers, the head of Squaw Valley's big mountain team says the youth programs are helping to build well-rounded skiers, pointing out that some kids are dryland training throughout the summer and fall, and that the coaching emphasis is on proper ski technique, not solely air. "This helps to produce a field of strong smart skiers," he says.

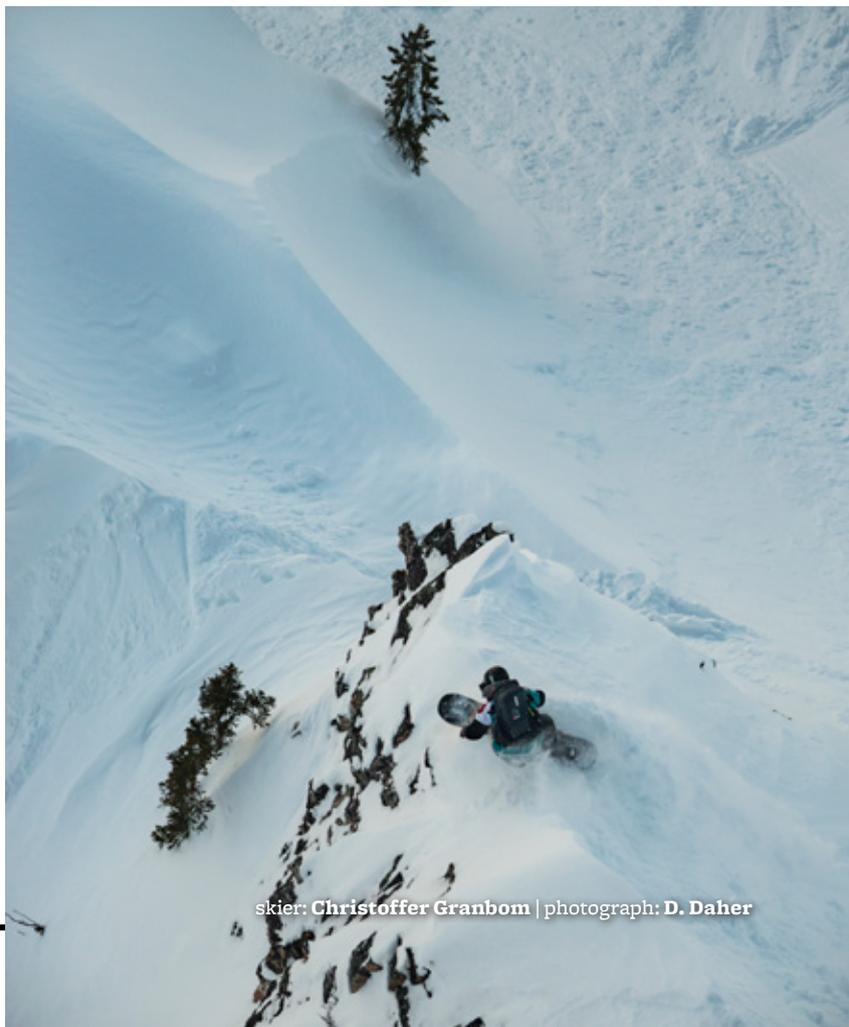
Today, while prize money remains tight, especially in regional events, there are enough contests and skill levels on display to require something of a minor and major league breakdown to competitive freeriding. The Freeride World Qualifier contests are governed by the IFSA. Finish the year at the tip-top of that level and you just might qualify to the independently organized Freeride World Tour. The media interest remains virtually nonexistent outside the FWT. But that's never been the point anyway. To be true to the sport, it's about awesome skiing and snowboarding.

Pointing the nose of my snowboard at Crystal's J-tree takeoff, I launch and...overshoot my landing by about 15 feet, washing out in a Plop. Leaving a hot-tub size crater in the now-defiled landing, my visualized run is no longer. The date on the calendar I've been training for now irrelevant.

Frustration washes over me as I idle through the finish gate, but the negative feelings don't last long. It's instantly clear where I went wrong, and now I have a little more experience in my toolbox for next time. The show goes on. And watching as friends and peers pin the throttle on a sunny powder day in March brings me right back up. What a great way to experience the mountains and push the limits.



skier: Kristofer Turdell | photograph: D. Daher



skier: Christoffer Granbom | photograph: D. Daher