

# History of Freeskiing Category Summaries



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## Preface: Freeskiing defined through the eyes of iconic industry members

Mike Douglas (38:38)

“Good Question... Freeskiing to me is freestyle. And I always felt that this kind of skiing should be called freestyle and the only reason it’s not is because freestyle taken by a couple sports that aren’t really free anymore. It’s essentially skiing in a way that is completely open and uses the terrain in the most creative way. Certainly when we look at freeskiing, it can be everything from a big mountain skier painting beautiful tracks down an untracked massive peak at high speed all the way to the Real Skifi guys in Finland, who are spending all day skiing on a rail on the stairs. It’s kind of anything goes on a pair of skis. Yea. I’m happy to say that there are a lot of different ways to make it as a freeskier and I think that’s the best thing about the sport. When you think of ski racing for example, there’s one path to make it as ski racer but in freeskiing, there’s like 10 paths to make it, and it’s not just about performance, it’s also about creativity and passion.”

Josh Loubek (52:41)

“Good Question... I feel like I’m trying to do that all the time when I talk to people that don’t know the sport and I say freeskiing and they talk about moguls and you’re like: no, not really”

“I think it’s the best form of acrobat skiing”

“You have a lot of different personalities that come through skiing”

“It combines art and athleticism and a bit of risk”

Mark Epstein (35:15)

“These are athletes that work their asses off...they work hard”

Megan Michelson (41:29)

“Good question. I mean obviously the stuff we talked about that it started as a counter culture sport because they wanted to inject individuality and style back into trick skiing and that’s still a huge part of it, but they’re doing these really difficult tricks. They’re also putting their own stamp on it and there’s a lot of room for creativity, so I think that’s huge. The X-Games was called the extreme games initially and a lot of the sports that are in it, according to mainstream, are extreme. They look at it and think that’s so scary and dangerous”

“There is so much planning and training and calculated strategy that goes into what these athletes are doing and it’s just like a football player or track star - there’s a lot of preparation.”

Jon Olsson

“It’s all about waking up in the morning and going out in the slopes to have as much fun as possible with your friends!”

Simon Dumont

“If you’re pushing yourself and you get scared...That’s Freeskiing”

“The biggest thing about Freeskiing is there is no cut and dry way to freeski, there many different routes to do different things. But if you’re having fun with your friends and your community while testing yourself as an athlete and an individual, that is freeskiing.

## Evolution of Skiing

### Athletes rebellion

- FIS was the main governing body for skiing and regulated the competitions
- Athletes didn’t like the rules and structure FIS was placing on the sport<sup>1</sup>
- There was a lack of creativity and freedom in mogul competitions
  - Athletes had to call tricks prior to run and couldn’t do backflips<sup>2</sup>
- Athletes began looking for a creative outlet and progression and thus freeskiing was born

### Birth of the Twin Tip

- In 1996, snowboarding was growing very quickly
- Snowboarders had the snowboard park to practice tricks and snowboarding was considered the cool, rebellious sport
- Skiers started looking at snowboarding and saying “why can’t we do that?”
- New Canadian Air Force began practicing in the snowboard park whenever possible as it was more fun than moguls
- About a year later, they realized the fairly long mogul skis they were using weren’t ideal for tricks
- They started looking for a way to get manufacturers to build a twin-tip ski
- Made a 20 page proposal and a 8 min video to convince manufacturers to make twin-tip skis
- The pitch essentially showed off freeskiing with a sales pitch
- Steve Faring shopped proposal with all major ski companies
  - First round, rejected by everyone
  - Only a few people who believed it would make a difference
  - Toshi Shimizu at Salomon got behind the deal
  - 3-4 months later a prototype was ready
- First real prototype ready in Feb. 1998

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<sup>1</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> (Loubek, 2013)

- First twin tip ski, the Salomon 1080, introduced to the world on the podium of the 1998 US Freeskiing Open in Vail, CO.<sup>3</sup>
- Salomon was not necessarily the first to think the concept but first to push for it<sup>4</sup>
- The Salomon 1080 legitimized freestyle skiing

### Effect of the Twin Tip

- Exodus of skiing in full force at 1998 when 1080 was released
- You were a weirdo at the time if you started skiing
- New ski shape and new aspect to the sport put a little dam up against the exodus
- Within 3-4 years the exodus had stopped
- Today, snowboarding is not as popular as skiing
- If this movement hadn't had happened, there would be a very different mountain culture today<sup>5</sup>

### Snowboarding's Impact

- Initially there was a barrage of hate from snowboard industry.
- It woke the ski industry up. Skiing had a phase in late 60s and 70s when it was just as bad ass as snowboarding<sup>6</sup>
- The lesson skiing need to learn and couldn't really learn was understanding what style and cool factor was.
- Because freestyle became so constrained and unstylish, it took the snowboarders to explain visually to skiers what style was how you can put your own imprint on a trick that everyone can do. Snowboarders knew inherently that there were only going to be so many tricks but an infinite way to do all the tricks to make it visually pleasing and fun to watch
- We never would have figured out how to build jumps or boxes and rails without snowboarders<sup>7</sup>
- Look at what happened to snowboarding when it debuted in the Olympics
  - Proved that it could be done successfully and possibly even improve the sport<sup>8</sup>
- The animosity between skiing and snowboarding has fallen apart
  - Jake Burton finally gave up on the skiing hate campaign

### Terrain parks

- Athletes work very close with course designers
- Safety is number one issue
- Courses are designed to be progression friendly

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<sup>3</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> (Bertrand, 2013)

<sup>5</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

<sup>6</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

<sup>7</sup> (Abrams, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> (Michelson, 2013)

- Evolution of half-pipe
  - Half-pipe is pretty standardized
  - Walls have grown from 12 to 22 feet tall
  - Allows athletes to go bigger
  - Some consider it too big and preventing progression
- X games have been leader in course design<sup>9</sup>
- Slopestyle<sup>10</sup>
  - A lot of countries want to know exact dimensions and layout of slopestyle
  - Countries want to build exact same park for competition so they can practice
  - Are all the courses going to be the same?
    - If golf courses were all the same, it wouldn't be fun
  - Slopestyle is the sole of the sport and they want to make sure it's constantly different.
- Any time AFP sanctions an event, they have to be using a formidable park builder and use standardized pipes<sup>11</sup>
- Mike Douglas' opinion<sup>12</sup>
  - On old jumps, the takeoffs were bigger than landings so the impact was harder and the jumps were more dangerous
    - They were essentially mogul jumps, just a bit bigger
  - Step-over style jumps are safer, less impact
  - Jump design has come a long way
  - A little nervous looking at superpipes now
    - Only 4-5 in the world that are actually perfect
    - Most have unsafe areas, walls that aren't completely straight
  - Progression of sport is working against itself
    - Pipe is too scary and big for most people
    - Bigger is not always better
  - Where do you see the future of terrain parks?
    - Smaller mountains may bring their parks up to par
    - Progression happens out in the streets
    - Urban skiing progression possibly moving into the park

## Competition

- X-Games:
  - X-games won't lose value after the Olympics because it has been the celebration of the sport for so long. Getting a gold medal in the X-games is still a huge focus to competitive athletes<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

<sup>10</sup> (Loubek, 2013)

<sup>11</sup> (Loubek, 2013)

<sup>12</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

- Second x-games w/skier cross, third x-games w/big air
- 2003 x-games, CR Johnson dominated superpipe<sup>14</sup>
  - Didn't win but was going so much higher than everyone else
  - Snowboarders were starting to take notice
  - Almost less important who won, more important CRJ was taking things so far, snowboarders couldn't do it
- Athletes used to petition to get into the x-games<sup>15</sup>
  - Logic: I did well at this event so I should be in x-games
  - Now decided by AFP World Ranking
- US Freeskiing Open<sup>16</sup>
  - First US Freeskiing Open was in Vail in 1998
  - FREEZE Magazine organized the entire event
  - Tricks being thrown were complete spins with grabs
  - JP won slopestyle with a series of stylish spins
  - JF won the big air with a 720
  - JP took the Solomon 1080 prototypes to the podium with him where they made their first industry debut
  - First time the public really saw a twin tip
  - Huge event for a number of years prior X-games
  - Women could compete in US Open prior to being able to compete in X-games
- Dew Tour
- Gran Prix and World Qualifiers
  - Events that athletes need to do in order to qualify for the Sochi Olympics
- Olympics
  - Added value to athletes who work very hard to excel at their sport since they finally have the opportunity to show the world what their sport is.<sup>17</sup>

### Understanding the Judging System<sup>18</sup>

- In the Beginning:
  - During Freeskiing's infancy there was no official judging system or training
  - Industry determined that they needed to be regulations to keep competitions fair and credible
  - Choose to not follow FIS rules and regulations for moguls and aerials as it would limited the creative expression in Freeskiing

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<sup>13</sup> (Michelson, 2013)

<sup>14</sup> (Abrams, 2013)

<sup>15</sup> (Loubek, 2013)

<sup>16</sup> (Abrams, 2013)

<sup>17</sup> (Bertrand, 2013)

<sup>18</sup> (Loubek, 2013)



- Athletes shunned FIS sanctioned events because of the structure and creative limitation
- How do we regulate the sport while still allowing for progression and creative expression?
  - New Judging System requirements
    - Did not limit creativity and character of the sport
    - Allowed the athletes to put their own style mark onto tricks
- Creation of the Judging system that regulates while allowing the sport to keep character<sup>19</sup>
  - 5 categories athletes are judge on
    - Progression
    - Amplitude
    - Variety
    - Execution/style
    - Trick difficulty
      - These categories provide talking points and structure for judges to compare and score runs
  - During warm up, judges attentively watch athletes so they can create a scoring system based on the most difficult and stylish tricks they see in practice
    - The higher the skill level of all the athletes, the harder it will be to score high
      - A 900 may be a score of 65 at one event and the same trick at another event may only receive a score of 57 based on the skill level of all the athletes combined
- Average Competition Scores
  - 65-70: average
  - 71-85: good run
  - 90+: excellent run
- Perfect score stigmatism
  - Based on the scoring system and 5 categories and the other athletes accomplishments in the competition, it is very hard to receive a 100 or perfect score
  - Perfect scores are only ever given to extremely deserving athletes who have the last run of the competition as no one can put down a better run that day
    - More of a publicity stunt since something can always be improved in a run
- Pros of Scoring System
  - Allows athletes to put their own style mark on tricks
  - Keeps a universal judging system for freestyle events
  - Training provides consistency among judges

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<sup>19</sup> (Loubek, 2013)

- Qualifications of Judges
  - AFP education clinics for both FIS and AFP
  - A ton of former athletes got involved in judging and moved into FIS
- Controversy
  - World ski festival in Whistler
    - Athlete meeting before event where athletes decided to do mandatory straight air
    - A required straight air is done to increase amplitude and add style
    - Vote came back, we don't need to do anything mandatory in competition
    - Mandatory straight air was kind of cool for one event, but in general we don't want to impose anything on the athletes
  - Majority of the time, people come and say the competition was scored right
  - With skiing, they are open enough to let progression lead the way
  - Things that'll become a problem:
    - Pressure of the Olympics on judges
    - Winning Olympics means A LOT for athletes, coaches, teams, countries
  - There are other sports out there (gymnastics, diving) with extremely strict judging systems based on formulated equations. Even in those sports there's always going to be controversy.
- Role of media
  - With social media, chatter and controversy can spread really fast
  - Media focuses on popularity often
  - Media becomes more biased as they go to different countries
- Can you explain FIS involvement and how things are changing with the AFP?
  - A couple years ago, AFP met with FIS in Zurich and FIS got freestyle skiing into Olympics
  - AFP came and said we know how to judge this better so let us do it
  - Has been tricky since there are a lot of different countries that are unfamiliar with the culture and rules of the sport
  - Some countries ask "what exactly do we have to do to win?"
    - They are looking for a formula for success
    - There is no formula, you have to go very big, perform difficult tricks, and be progressive
  - FIS and AFP have worked well together to let sport progress on its own
  - World Cup FIS events required to qualify for Olympics
  - AFP coordinates with FIS to ensure major events don't occur at same time
  - FIS picked Olympic judging panel out 2 years ago
    - Judges have previously judged together for other events

## Women's participation<sup>20</sup>

- Early days of female competition was unorganized and not that popular
- There were not that many competitions women could compete in
- You need enough girls in the field to make it a viable sport
- Equal involvement requires equal participation
- During first x-games and earlier US Open, courses were way too big for girls
- First x-games, snow was way too slow, caused three girls to be out for the season
  - Pro guys and AM girls rode same course
- In 2005, the sport got a lot bigger
  - They had enough people to get into the big contests with more money
  - Once there was a reason to compete, there was more participation
- In 2005, X-Games female halfpipe was added
- In 2008 X-Games female slopestyle was added
- Women's contests have historically had lower prizes amounts
- Dew Tour recently cut women's skiing but not snowboarding
- Kristi Leskinen did an anonymous survey in 2011 (published 2012) to relieve pressure from girls who were scared to speak out in front of guys
  - Included 87 of world's top skiers, both men and female
  - Idea was to be able to go to course designers and be like "this is what we want"
  - Avg. preferred female jump size is 55 feet
  - Avg. preferred male jump size is 69 feet
  - However, girl skiers still wanted to ride the same courses as men
  - Differences in rail preference for skier vs. snowboard
  - Asked about injury, women get hurt in contest 2-5x more than men
  - Women are being pushed harder in competitions than they push themselves in practice
  - What comes across on TV is the tricks you do, not the size of the jumps
  - ESPN released the story skewed to look like it was Kristy's opinion and it wasn't received as well as it could have been
- Kristi Leskinen's Homecoming Seven Springs Contest
  - 3 years of female only contest
  - Girls were doing hardest tricks they could at that event

## Sponsorship<sup>21</sup>

- Ski companies have always sponsored athletes
- They used to put more money into ski racing
- Athletes are starting to pick up sponsors from companies outside the industry (Target)

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<sup>20</sup> (Leskinen, 2013)

<sup>21</sup> (Michelson, 2013)

- Sponsor dollars haven't increased with the mainstream companies, they haven't started to recognize these athletes yet.
- So much more structure → athletes were teaching themselves the tricks and now they all have coaches and training centers. A testament to high level of competition and talent.
- Consumers are paying more attention to gear that their favorite athletes are using.
- ROI on sponsoring athletes is more important now than it was.
- Athletes can have their own followers now, they don't need the media as the middle man anymore.
- Athletes have their own agents and publicists now
- Sponsors pay to get their athletes

### Ski movies<sup>22</sup>

- Most successful films used to be the most action packed
- How has filming skiing changed since it started?<sup>23</sup>
  - Transition of media from movies to webisodes,
  - Edits are places you find a lot of energy and creativity now
- Film medium was always single most important medium in terms of covering, celebrating, and explaining freeskiing
- Absolutely integral to the industry
- More important than anything, single biggest driver of progression at the start
- Movies get skiing in front of more people
- Movies are generally released in fall
- Wherever they were distributed, either:
  - Someone who had never tried was inspired
  - Reinforced freestyle skiers
- Annual way of setting the benchmark for freeskiing for the season for the whole community
- Before comps, there were ski movies
- Warren Miller dates back to end of 1940s
- Psychological phenomenon
  - Impossible until its done, but what's its done, it changes everything and happens a lot
  - Seeing is believing
- Drives the progression of tricks
  - Switch, off-axis
  - Chad's Gap – gave people a wake up as to what is possible
  - First triple – bobby brown, Sammy Carlson
- For 10 years, almost every major movie had something significant
- Movie and films can play a significant role in the life of an athlete:

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<sup>22</sup> (Abrams, 2013)

<sup>23</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

- Depends on where they are in their career. They can go and film and travel and ski in more remote places.
- Athletes can take filming into their own hands without help from production companies now

## Freeskiing Today:

### Progression of the sport

- Increase safety precautions in course designs
- Women's ability to compete in their own divisions
- Sponsorships are more of a business relationship<sup>24</sup>

### Age impact of athletes

- There is no question that you get better when you're younger
- As with any action sport, the time to get good is when you're young and not scared
- Things like injuries and losing friends puts that fear in you over time<sup>25</sup>
- Had to lower the required age to compete in x-games<sup>26</sup>
- Younger guys are picking up tricks quicker
- It is a young sport in general
- Dumont is prime example of older skier who is still very strong and relevant
- Women have done a better job of longevity<sup>27</sup>
  - Partly due to an increase of conditioning and professional training in the industry as a whole

### Participation

- General public
  - Every skier is kind of into the park now and this directs vacation and equipment choices<sup>28</sup>
- Pro athletes
  - Athletes film, compete in slopestyle, big air, and halfpipe, and urban skiing is on the rise

### Media<sup>29</sup>

- Freeze Magazine was the first
- Freeskier Magazine
- Ski Magazine
  - Putting only the best athletes in the spotlight

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<sup>24</sup> (Dumont, 2013)

<sup>25</sup> (Leskinen, 2013)

<sup>26</sup> (Michelson, 2013)

<sup>27</sup> (Loubek, 2013)

<sup>28</sup> (Epstein, 2013)

<sup>29</sup> (Michelson, 2013)

- Not looking for new and upcoming athletes that have not “proven” themselves yet
- Each athlete is now their own brand manager
- Almost more demand since they have to run their own blogs and traditional media
- A lot of big athletes have their own publicists now, have to go through them to get to the athlete

## Future of Freeskiing

### Olympics

- **Mike Douglas:**<sup>30</sup>
  - On the fence
  - Running away from everything the Olympics was when freeskiing started
    - FIS and structure ruined most of what they liked about moguls
  - 15+ years into modern freeskiing
  - Everyone knows how the game works now
  - Having snowboarding in Olympics and not skiing is frustrating
  - Athletes deserve it, deserve the opportunity and recognition
  - Opens up the sport to the world stage
  - Aside from more awareness and a tiny spike in participation, it won't change the sport much
    - “All it's going to do is make whoever wins a household name.”
  - Fairly impressed with FIS and their willingness to listen
- **Bruno Bertrand:**
  - “As a former mogul skier, I think it's a great idea. It involves world class athletes - and traveling - and it's one of the best things for an athlete to represent their country at the Olympics.”
- **Micah Abrams:**
  - “It was totally inevitable. The Olympics are the pinnacle of the winter sport universe and freeskiing is the best celebration of skiing”
- **Josh Loubek:**
  - “I think it's great for the athletes, it gets world exposure to the sport”
  - “I love the big opportunity that it offers”
  - “The athletes that are going to perform deserve the opportunity and exposure that comes with the Olympics. They are incredibly gifted athletes and deserve to be there”

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<sup>30</sup> (Douglas, 2013)

- “I worry about losing the culture of what the sport is...losing the fun lifestyle part of what the sport is all about”
- “Since The Olympics only come around 4 years, they miss a lot of athletes that have peaked in between those 4 years. And what I mean by that is that our sport is so quick and so progressive that is very doable for an athlete to come in hot in the year after the Olympics, blow up two huge events in the x-games, kill it, be the winner, and highlight everything, and then he gets old or has a small injury and you lose him and he never performs in the Olympics.” (36:00)
- **Simon Dumont:**
  - “Many athletes complain about the constraints, the Olympics will bring with FIS and the IOC etc., but these athletes don’t need to compete. ‘I have succeeded in the ski industry for 13 years without the Olympics. Athletes that feel this way can do the same.’ If they are not willing to be flexible and make small sacrifices on your initial Freeskiing values, just don’t participate.”
  - “The Olympics have the potential to deliver a message that is much more than competitive”

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