

History of Freeskiing Interview Responses



Interviews Conducted By Sierra Nevada College Students
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Manufacturing:

How did the first twin tip come about?

In 1996, the future of skiing was not looking so bright. To the public and especially the younger generation, skiing was no longer cool - but snowboarding was. This resulted in all the young guys switching to snowboarding and left the skiers wondering how to rejuvenate skiing and stop the exodus to snowboarding. What were the different aspects of the sport? Why was snowboarding so much more popular? In hindsight, it's clear that the twin tip was a solution, but - to ski manufacturers at the time - it was not obvious.¹

At the same time, athletes Mike Douglas and the rest of the New Canadian Air Force were beginning to take skiing into what, at the time, was called "the snowboard park". They saw what snowboarders were doing and knew they could do the same. However, after about a year of this, the athletes realized that their skis weren't ideal for the park. They were too long and you couldn't takeoff or land backwards on them - something that really impeded their progression and the potential of the sport. The ideal skis for this would have to have twin tips, be stiffer to absorb landings better, and be shorter to improve maneuverability.²

After realizing this, The New Canadian Air Force created a 20 page proposal and an 8 minute video to show companies what was possible in skiing and why these skis should be built. Full of hope and energy, they proposed the new ski to all the major manufacturers at the time hoping to get a company on board to build it. However, their first go around yielded nothing but rejection, as the companies believed the potential was in snowblades and other shorter, fatter skis. They did, however, gain the support of Toshi Shimizu at Salomon, who convinced the company to build a prototype for The New Canadian Air Force.

Essentially, everyone but Salomon said it wasn't what the ski market wanted at that time. Salomon was the only brand willing to give it a try. They said, "What do you need? We can build it". Part of the reason for this was that manufacturing didn't have to change much to produce a twin tip. It was simply an adaptation of the process. When you know how to put one tip on a ski, it's doesn't take much to add another, especially when you know how to make snowboards.

So Salomon was the first manufacturer to listen to athletes about what *they* wanted. Even though some twin tip models were built much earlier than this, Salomon created the modern twin tip category in the 1997-1998 winter season. Salomon launched the first modern twin tip ski, the Salomon 1080, at the 1998 US Freeskiing Open in Vail using Mike Douglas as the spokesperson.²

According to Bruno Bertrand, Salomon Global Freeski Sports Marketing Manager, Salomon didn't invent "park and pipe", it was the athletes who pushed for the progression and changes¹. This new ski shape opened the door for the athletes of the future.

¹ (Bertrand 2013)

² (Douglas 2013)

Evolution of the twin tip ski

Skis today are consistently evolving to fit the needs of the athletes. Salomon and other manufacturers work closely with the athletes to ensure their opinions and ideas are incorporated into the product design. The skis are shaped and adjusted to maximize their performance in a specific skiing discipline. Bruno Bertrand says that Salomon's commitment to its athletes is that *its skis will never fail*. He adds that "since Day One, inspiration and ideas for all our products have always come from the athletes and the developers".³

Competition Course Design & Building:

Freeskiing courses and competitions have changed and developed greatly since they first started in the early 1990s. The first few courses were fairly sketchy and variable, as no one really knew the best way to build a course or features. The original jumps had heavy impacts and were quite risky as the takeoffs were larger than landings - leading the athletes to drop quite far. Since then, a few companies - most notably Snow Park Technologies (SPT) - have come in and figured out the safest, best way to build features in the snow.⁴

Today's athletes and course designers work very close together on course design. The builders take into consideration athlete feedback to make sure courses are safe - yet still allow for progression of the sport. The X-Games have also always been a leader in course design, showcasing what can be built out of snow, while pushing the athletes as far as they can. The athletes watch the builds and test the features to ensure that everything feels as it should.² According to Jon Olsson, "If they don't like a camera position - as it might disturb them - we move the camera...skiers are always number 1".⁵ As a result of this, the progression of course design has been athlete driven.⁶

Another big area of development has been with halfpipe skiing. The original pipes were small and crude - and their shapes were inconsistent. Halfpipes have now grown to 22 feet. They've also been standardized to be built with very specialized equipment. This allows athletes to "go bigger" while keeping the risk as low as possible. However, not everyone sees "bigger features" as actual progression. Mike Douglas, for example, is a little nervous looking at today's superpipes and suggests the progression is working against itself. He says that halfpipes are now are too big or too scary for most people and only 4-5 of the halfpipes in the world are actually perfect with straight, vertical walls.²

As the sport has grown, more people and countries have become involved. The importance of freeskiing on the world stage has grown with it. As a result, a lot of countries want to know the exact dimensions and layout of the slopestyle courses prior to the events, so they can build training courses for their athletes to practice on.

³ (Bertrand 2013)

⁴ (Douglas 2013)

⁵ (Olsson 2013)

⁶ (Dumont 2013)

However, since the athlete's feedback is taken into consideration, the course design can change at any point². Another issue currently facing course designers is whether or not the competition courses should be standardized. Some believe it would make the sport fairer and easier to judge and it has occurred to some degree.⁷ Many courses now include 3 different rail features followed by 3 jumps, but total standardization is an unlikely outcome.³ Slopestyle is the soul of the sport and they want to make sure it is constantly different to allow for progression. The logic is similar to golf courses: if all golf courses were the same, it wouldn't be nearly as much fun.

Tricks:

Tricks are the main idea and focus behind freeskiing. At its inception over 15 years ago, the single hardest tricks to do were a backflip and the 360. For around 30 years, if you could do these tricks, you were one of the coolest people on the mountain. Now, with the development of twin tip skis and course design, progression of the sport has exploded. In half the time it took for the backflip and 360 to morph into variations with grabs, skiers have moved to triple off axis spins with grabs and more.⁸ Another big development within tricks was style. Learning from snowboarders at the time, skiers realized that even though there was a finite number of tricks that could be done, there was an infinite number of ways to personalize them and make them your own.⁹ Style is now one of the most important factors considered when judging and helps differentiate each athlete.¹⁰

Events:

Events and competition are one of the main focuses of freeskiing and where most of the publicity lies. The main events include the X-Games (which is widely considered the Superbowl of skiing), the Dew Tour, the US Open, and World Cup events.¹¹

At the beginning, athletes would compete in smaller competitions and then petition to compete in the larger ones based on their performance. However, this system left room for bias and uncertainty - partially leading to the creation of the Association of Freeskiing Professionals (AFP). The AFP created a world ranking system for all skiers from the local to the international level to help identify the sport's top athletes. Now, these rankings are the main deciding factor on who goes to the X-Games and other major freeski events.³

The first and original freeski competition was the US Freeskiing Open. The first US Freeskiing Open was in Vail in 1998. Freeze magazine, the main industry publication of the

⁷ (Leskinen 2013)

⁸ (Douglas 2013)

⁹ (Abrams 2013)

¹⁰ (Loubek 2013)

¹¹ (Michelson 2013)

time, took the lead in organizing it. And, since it was the first time Freeze had ever put on an event, it didn't have much of an idea of what was needed to make the event successful. The slope style and big air courses were combined - with the final slope style jump being the big air course.²

Since parks were not all that popular yet, the jumps were rough and unpredictable. JP Auclair and JF Cusson were already in Colorado for a mogul competition and ditched the mogul competition as soon as possible to compete in the US Freeskiing Open. Most of the tricks were complete spins with grabs, since the skis did not allow for switch take offs or landings yet. JF won with the big air competition with a 720 while JP won the slope style with a series of stylish spins and grabs. This competition was also significant since during the awards ceremony, Salomon debuted their 1080 prototype ski - making it the first time the public really saw a real twin-tip ski.² The combination of this event and the release of a new style of ski highlighted the potential and future of the sport. The US Open remained a huge event for a number of years and allowed women to compete earlier than they could in the X-Games. However, with the growth of the X-Games, the US Open lost its dominance of freeskiing competitions.

The first X-Games was held at Snow Summit in 1997 with events like snowboarding, super-modified shovel racing, and snow biking, but did not include freeski events. In 1998, skier cross was added - with big air being added the following year. According to Simon Dumont, the X-Games put freeskiing on a global scale.¹² In the 2003 X-Games, CR Johnson proved to the world that skiers can do just as much, if not more, than snowboarders by completely dominating the superpipe event.¹³

Even though he didn't win, he was going so much higher than everyone else - and doing things that snowboarders couldn't - that it was almost irrelevant who won. Now, skiers and snowboarders compete on a similar level at the X-Games and all events are offered to both disciplines.¹ The Winter X-Games now stand as one of the most important contests for all athletes and still provides breakthroughs in course design and trick progression.

Olympics:

What your personal opinion on the freeskiing entering the Olympics?

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."

¹² (Dumont 2013)

¹³ (Abrams 2013)

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”

“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)

Mike Douglas (35:35):

“When we started doing the sport, we were running away from everything that the Olympics represented. We wanted freedom and that’s what freeskiing represented to us. We came from the mogul skiing, FIS world and the rules and regulations of the sport that came into place in the late 80s and early 90s, for me certainly ruined most of what I liked about it. We wanted to be able to do different tricks and if we competed, have those acknowledged, whether they were in a rule book or not.”

“All it’s going to do is make whoever wins a household name.”

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”

Judging:

When freeskiing first started, there was little to no structure for judging. Everyone was a little looser about it and there were no official judge requirements nor training. Those who set up the events determined who was going to judge and how. As the sport progressed and developed,

however, the athletes and event organizers realized there needed to be regulation of competition for the sport and the events to remain credible and fair.¹⁴

Naturally, everyone looked to the already existing structure for downhill, aerials, and mogul skiing as a guide. With these sports, judging was very regulated and strict, with an entire organization developing the rules and the judging system. Consequently, the requirements placed limitations on the freedom and expression of the athletes. Prior to an aerial or mogul run, the athletes were required to tell the judges what trick they were going to perform and were not allowed to perform certain tricks like backflips.¹

The structure and limitations of this system were rejected by many people including the athletes, forcing the sport to develop its own, new judging system. The main question everyone was asking was “How do we regulate the sport while still allowing for progression and creative expression?” It was vital that the new system allowed skiers to be consistently judged without limiting the creativity and character of the sport. The biggest fear at the time, and one that many people were concerned about coming into the Olympics, was seeing the progression of their sport stifled by rules and requirements. Thankfully, over the last two decades, a judging system has been developed that allows for regulation of the sport while keeping its character.¹

Under the current scoring system, there are five categories a skier can be judged on: progression, amplitude, variety, execution/style, and trick difficulty. The more of these a skier competes on, the better their score will be. These categories provide athletes an idea of what to compete on and give judges talking points and structure when comparing and scoring runs.¹

Prior to each competition and during practice, the judges gauge and compare the skill of all participants to create a score range that the athletes should be scoring within. For example, a cork 900 may receive a score of 70 at one competition, but only a 57 at another if the overall skill level of the athletes is higher.¹

For most competitions, a score of 65-70 is average, 71-85 is a good run, and anything above 90 is considered an excellent run. Since the scores take into account the other athletes' style, and additional factors, it is very difficult to earn a perfect score. It can only really be given to a very deserving athlete on the last run of the day since no one else will be able to put down a better run. This scoring system allows the athletes to inject their own style and personality into their tricks while creating a structure within which all athletes can be fairly judged.¹

Prior to an event, each judge goes through training where they learn the purpose and methods for judging freestyle skiing. This training guarantees the consistency and integrity of the judging process. To further ensure fairness, five different judges provide scores - which are then averaged to determine the athlete's final score. Surprisingly, replays are not used during scoring, since the score needs to be decided within about 30 seconds and not all runs can be replayed. This system of checks and balances ensures scores are fair and accurate - and opens each score to evaluation by the other judges.¹⁵

¹⁴ (Loubek 2013)

¹⁵ (Loubek 2013)

Sponsorships:

Ski companies have recognized the value of sponsoring athletes from the beginning. At first, it was the ski racers and mogul competitors that picked up the sponsorships and support. They were the ones getting the media and public's attention.

With the rise of freeskiing, however, many companies now recognize the value of sponsoring these athletes and skiers. Moreover, companies outside the ski industry (such as retailer Target and food company Kellogg's) are starting to sponsor skiers and are using freeskiing as a way to market their brand. This change has forced athletes to alter the way they view sponsors.

For the athletes, sponsorships used to be about the free product. The brand and message that company delivered was irrelevant, as long as they were willing to give out free gear. Now, however, a sponsorship is more of a business relationship. When athletes chose sponsors now, they look at the roots and core values of the company to ensure the products are something the athlete can get excited about. "This way when companies are in conversations with athletes, everything will not be forced. This is why athlete education is important on knowing what you want to represent and who will best deliver that value".¹⁶

The increase in sponsorships has also come with an increase in structure and support from these companies. It used to be that athletes would train and teach themselves, but now, everyone has a coach with state of the art training facilities designed to athletes to their limits. Furthermore, the most successful skiers can have their own agents and publicists to help manage their competition, training, and film schedule. Because of sponsorships, the sport has been allowed to grow and has given athletes support and structure to manage their career.¹⁷

Definitions:

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 freeskiier 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

¹⁶ (Dumont 2013)

¹⁷ (Michelson 2013)

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."

Women's Freeskiing:

Women's freeskiing has seen a lot of development and progression in the last decade and is clearly on the rise. The early days of female competition was unorganized and not that

popular. Women used to compete with the men on the same course, even though the prize money and coverage allocated to the women was significantly less.¹⁸

This made it difficult to increase participation as there were few incentives to make the risks worth it. However, with the help of Sarah Burke, Kristi Leskinen and others, they have been able to inspire other women and build an athlete base for the sport. In 2005, the sport had enough involvement to warrant equal involvement by the industry. Nowadays, the women are getting equal prize money at the X-Games and are getting similar amounts of coverage and event access.¹

Unfortunately, not everything has been fully figured out for the sport yet. During the first x-games and early US Opens, the courses were way too big for women. The professional males and amateur women rode the same course, which makes it difficult and dangerous for them to perform their best tricks and really prove what they are capable of. As a result, women have injury rates 2-5x that of men in contests since they have to push themselves way harder in competition than they do in practice or on a regular basis. This led Kristi to perform an anonymous survey of 87 of the world's top male and female skiers to determine the best path to take for women's freeskiing. The results were eye-opening. Men prefer jumps 14 feet larger than that of women yet women still wanted to ride the same course as the men. These opposing preferences have made it very difficult to create an ideal solution for all groups.¹

Impact Snowboarding had on the Evolution:

Snowboarding's main impact on freeskiing was the introduction of style and personalization to the sport. In moguls and aerials, the each athlete was judged on the quality and difficulty of the tricks performed, and because of this, the tricks and style became more similar as each athlete tried to perfect the trick to the judge's standards. Because of snowboarding though, skiers figured out how to make tricks stylish and add their own personality to their skiing. Additionally, snowboarders developed jumps and parks, and in seeing these features, the skiers joined in on the action and started making it their own. Finally snowboarding took the lead on entering the world's Olympic stage. The ski industry was able to watch how the Olympics impacted snowboarding and have taken those lessons into consideration when debuting freeskiing to the world.¹⁹

Ski Films:

Although people have been on skis for thousands of years, it has only been since the 1920s that the sport has been put in front of the camera. For decades, the focus of these films was the wonder of winter and many instructional films were developed showcasing the newest and best techniques European skiers had to offer. By the 1950s, the focus of the ski films were

¹⁸ (Leskinen 2013)

¹⁹ (Douglas 2013)

changing. It was becoming less about the mountains and snow and more about getting air and being “extreme”. Warren Miller got his start in 1951 with “a style that guaranteed a belly laugh amid his deadpan delivery” (Moulton, 2002). Additionally, travel companies were using skiing as a way to advertise the Alps and Western resorts. Over the next few decades, more and more groups began making films and nowadays, there are dozens of groups and hundreds of individuals putting together segments of skiing to display the sport to the world.²⁰

For modern freeskiing, ski films have been an absolutely integral part of the industry. From the start, it has been considered to be the single most important medium in terms of covering, celebrating, and explaining freeskiing to the world. This is because ski films can get in front of more people than any other form of showcasing the sport. Every fall when the movies are released, the sport and its progression is put into the spotlight. These films are annual way of setting the bar for freeskiing for the entire community. The shots in these movies either reinforce existing freeskiers or inspire someone to try it out. Ski films have also helped breakdown psychological barriers that slow the progression of the sport. For many, a trick is impossible until its done and can be seen, but once that happens, it changes everything and many people can perform it. Some examples of this include Chad’s Gap and the first triple cork spin.²¹

Films also play an important role in the lives of the athletes. Many skiers spend their entire season travelling the world, finding the best lines and throwing down their best tricks. Others focus more on competition and transition to filming once they tire of the extremely demanding competition schedule.

Additionally, with the technological developments made in camera equipment and the proliferation of online video sharing, any athlete or person can take filming into their own hands without help from the major production companies. With more and more people creating these films, a new style and focus has developed that is less about being extreme and more about the art, energy, and story that comes with skiing. Examples of this include Into the Mind by Sherpas Cinema and Valhalla from Sweetgrass Productions.²² And as technology constantly develops, ski films will continue to transition and change to fully explain and highlight the creativity and passion that freeskiing is.

Impact of Age of Athletes:

As with many sports, the younger you start, the more successful you are likely to become. This is extremely evident in today’s freeskiing and something the entire industry can see and feel. Although freeskiing has a younger participation base to start with, some of the most successful skiers are the youngest ever, to the point where they had to lower the required

²⁰ (Moulton 2002)

²¹ (Abrams 2013)

²² (Douglas 2013)

age to compete in the X-Games.²³ Some athletes, like Simon Dumont, have been able to maintain their competitive level over the years, but due to the toll freeskiing takes on your body, it is very difficult to stay in the game for too long. Nevertheless, the athletes and the industry now treat freeskiing as a genuine sport with professional trainers and lots of conditioning which is helping them last longer and remain injury free. Older athletes still competing “is the best of both worlds, new tricks and ideas, since there are people still here to deliver the guidance of the core values, which should hopefully transcend generations”.²⁴ An interesting trend that has developed as part of this is that women are tending to compete for longer than men, even though they have higher injury rates.²⁵ In the end though, the athletes say it best, “It is much easier when you are younger, you don’t think as much and you just go out there and do your best. When you are older you think about the consequences a lot more”.²⁶

²³ (Michelson 2013)

²⁴ (Dumont 2013)

²⁵ (Loubek 2013)

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