



MOUNTAINS



RACING ENTHUSIASTS BEWARE. THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE MAY GET YOUR LYCRA IN A KNOT. JOURNALIST RACHAEL OAKES-ASH AND WORLD CHAMPION SLOPESTYLE SKIER ANNA SEGAL TEAM UP TO DISCUSS ALPINE POMPOSITIVITY, THE RISE OF FREESKIING AND OLYMPIC POLITICS, ALL WHILE GETTING SLAPPED BY MOUNTAINS OF POW IN THE BRITISH COLUMBIAN BACKCOUNTRY.

WORDS // RACHAEL OAKES-ASH. PHOTOS // VINCE SHULEY



ANNA SEGAL SINKS DEEP INTO SOME UNTOUCHED B.C. FRESH.
(INSET) ANNA SHOWS OFF HER WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP MEDAL. PHOTO // ERIC SEO.

I LOVE A REBEL. SOMEONE WHO GOES AGAINST THE OLD SCHOOL GRAIN AND RISKS ALIENATION FOR SOMETHING THEY LOVE. CHANGE USUALLY REQUIRES SOME ACT OF REBELLION, AND THE WORLD OF SKIING HAS CERTAINLY SEEN PLENTY OF BOTH IN RECENT YEARS.

The lycra-loving traditionalists have been left shaking their helmets, as skiing has upped the ante

with a string of breakaway disciplines like skier X, halfpipe and slopestyle. Much to alpine racing's chagrin, The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has taken note, adding skier X to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics and giving halfpipe a start at the 2014 Games in Sochi, with talk of slopestyle also making the grade, with an announcement expected in June after IOC officials visit the site.

NO DOUBT WE HAVE THE SNOWBOARDING COMMUNITY TO THANK FOR THIS. They saved the ski industry with their rebellious ways. It was their technology that helped change the shape of skiing and, thanks to twin tips, the newschoolers took to the park, skiing backwards down hills and sliding across rails.

Canadian Mike “the godfather of freeskiing” Douglas is credited with creating the first commercially produced twin tips, the Salomon 1080 in 1997, and was one of the original New Canadian Air Force members alongside the likes of JP Auclair. The breakaway ski group took to the formerly snowboarder-dominated terrain parks in the 1990s.

“The true pioneers of the sport are the hot doggers of the 1970s. They paved a path for all of us,” says the ever-humble Mike. “Now the IOC wants it. When they went to New Zealand last August to observe the Snowboard Junior World Championships, they were totally surprised by the level of the skiers in slopestyle. I think it was at that point they realised they needed to seriously consider the discipline for 2014.”

Australia is well set up to score some serious medal action when the IOC gives slopestyle the green light, and not just from Thredbo’s Russ Henshaw, who is already a “name” overseas, winning silver at the Aspen X Games in January. Australia’s female leader of the slopestyle rebellion, 24-year Anna Segal, is also flying the flag.



IF ANNA WAS SURFING, SHE'D BE HEADING STRAIGHT OVER THE FALLS...

AUSTRALIA IS WELL SET UP TO SCORE SOME SERIOUS MEDAL ACTION WHEN THE IOC GIVES SLOPESTYLE THE GREEN LIGHT. HOPEFULLY OUR ATHLETES WILL BE GIVE THE CHANCE TO SHINE.



ANNA AND RACH CATCH UP FOR A CHAT IN THE CAT.

Anna loves a first. She was the first female to win a slopestyle gold when the event was added to the X Games lineup in 2009. This year, for the first time, FIS [Federation International de Ski] recognised slopestyle as a sport after the IOC put the pressure on to include it as a World Championship event. “Our Anna” was there to be first again, taking the inaugural gold when the World Championships were held in Deer Valley, Utah, last February.

To realise the importance of this move by the IOC, you have to understand the difficult pathway a sport must undertake before being chosen for the Winter Olympics.

“Ski slopestyle (and halfpipe) has been fast tracked through the system,” explains Ski and Snowboard Australia (SSA) Chairman and FIS Council member Dean Gosper. “Typically an event has to be held in two FIS world championships before it can bid for the Olympics.”

SSA CEO Michael Kennedy agrees. “It is unprecedented. This has been driven by the IOC. The IOC said to FIS we want this sport in



the Olympics, you go away and talk about how to make it happen.”

Lucky, for Anna, they did. It has been a long time coming for the Team Buller Rider and Chix With Stix ambassador, who grew up in Richmond, Melbourne and has been skiing since she was a little tacker.

“I remember hating those little edgy-wedgy things that the ski school made me put on my skis,” laughs Anna in the back of the cat as we make our way up Red Mountain Resort’s legendary backcountry terrain with Big Red Cats. We’re here with Big Red Cats’ owner, former Australian team skier turned ski guide

Kieran Gaul, to get Anna out of the park and into some powder.

“I went to ski kindy, but apparently I hated it so I skied between my mum’s legs a lot. I then went into a group called mini squad when I was seven. It was so much fun, but eventually it led to race club, so I raced until I was 14 then decided I’d had enough of the brown-nose coaches and their favouring of kids from wealthy families,” says Anna, with no fear of telling it like it is.

“Racing is a very expensive sport. Having new skis every year is a big advantage as it helps you go faster. So the families that get their kids

into racing usually have a lot of money, but for mogul and park skiing, you only need one pair of skis and it doesn’t matter if they’re crappy!”

Anna’s talent as a mogul skier (she made the move from racing halfway through high school) scored her a place with the NSWIS mogul development team, training at Perisher and travelling overseas for the Europa Cup circuit. While training with the team in Canada after graduating from St Catherine’s Girls’ School in Melbourne, Anna blew her knee. It was a turning point and forced her to take a look at her skiing future. Her decision? Freeskiing. In her words, “It just felt right”.



ANNA AND I ARE "POWDER BUDDIES" AT BIG RED CATS. When skiing the steep and deep backcountry terrain through the trees it's best not to do it alone. Trailing behind her it is easy to see why she is a world champion. The girl is fearless, passionate, driven and a natural on skis. Although that "natural" look has taken years of training to perfect.

It's a rare "day off" for Anna, who spends more time on the hard-packed in the park, and she's loving it, beaming her trademark smile for all. Between thigh burns Anna speaks highly of the coach she claims got her to where she is. After working with Aspen Ski Club coach Elana Chase, she won the US Freeskiing Open in 2007 and went on to win the Aspen X Games in 2009.

Anna won \$US25,000 at the X Games, one of the only ski competitions where men's and women's prize money is equal. Despite popular belief, the sponsors didn't come rolling in.

"I was already supported by sponsors, but my pay cheque didn't increase exponentially after I won X-Games," says Anna. "I'm just glad that I have built up good sponsor support, so I don't have to rely too much on selection committees. A grant would be great, but I don't want to have to deal with the crazy politics of sporting bodies. That's not what skiing is to me."

The SSA already has its fair share of politics to deal with as alpine, skier X, snowboarder X, aerials, moguls and cross-country vie for funding and racing parents start stamping their feet for alpine recognition. No doubt they are stamping harder since the April announcement that skiing halfpipe has officially made it into the 2014 Olympic Games. Many say slopestyle is just a matter of time.

"I'm really excited that halfpipe skiing has made it into the Olympics and I think it is a huge step forward for freeskiing," said Anna by Skype the day the announcement was made.

"I'm still hopeful that the IOC will also decide to include slopestyle. Of course it's easier for the halfpipe skiing to be added, as they already have the venue set up for snowboard halfpipe, but I think that slopestyle is a far more accessible sport for a larger number of countries as most resorts do not have the facilities to build a world-class halfpipe for their athletes to train in."

From a resort perspective she's right, and with more resorts offering slopestyle terrain the more our medal chances increase. The truth in Australian skiing is there is a direct correlation between medal outcomes and high-performance funding from the government, and moguls, skier x and aerials is where we do our best work, and yes, racing parents, alpine is where most of them start out.

"We're doing well in freestyle [aerials and moguls] because there is a lot of government funding for the programs and a set athlete pathway, but I think the resorts really need to get their acts together and start supporting this sport. They should help prospective event organisers to find sponsorship and donate hill space and cat time to build decent parks and pipes. New Zealand has really capitalised on this and it's really time for the Aussie resorts to catch up.

"Australian kids have caught on to freeskiing quickly. We don't have the steep, long terrain or snow reliability of Europe and North America, which is a huge disadvantage [for racing]. But for freeskiing, all you need is a patch of snow on which you can set up a rail, or build a small jump, to learn a huge variety of tricks."

And with that, Anna pops off a powder pillow into an open bowl below, with her bag of rebel tricks at the ready. Methinks there will be gold in that bag come Sochi 2014.

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ANNA SAYS IT'S TIME FOR RESORTS TO STEP IT UP.



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ALL IN A POW-DAY'S WORK FOR WORLD CHAMP ANNA SEGAL.