

ALL IN AT



Kevin Klein



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Holy Cross-Man. Skier: Dylan

ALYESKA

Behind the scenes of the first ever World Telemark Freeskiing Championships

by Megan Michelson

The Sitzmark Bar at the base of Alyeska Resort in Girdwood, Alaska, is crawling with telemark skiers. An older guy with a long, grey beard and leather boots slouches at the bar. A couple 20-something guys with baggy pants and red-and-white Scarpa T-races dive into a plate of spicy wings. Balancing all the male energy, a group of girls sit in the back, sharing a pitcher of Alaskan Pale Ale. This gathering of like-minded telemark skiers—Telepalooza, it's called—happens once a year, every spring for the last five years. It's a weekend-long festival in memory of Jeff Nissman, a local skier and mountaineer who died in 2004.

This year, however, the place feels more packed than usual. Knee-pad-wearing skiers have flown in from as far away as Vermont, Colorado, and British Columbia for a chance to join in on the festivities. By weekend's end, 50 people will participate in telemark clinics, 40 will enter a costume fun race, and the ski demos, beacon park, film screenings, and pirate-themed parties will attract over 600 people. The bar will sell out for three nights in a row. But what's drawn many of them (77 people, to be exact) is the first-ever World Telemark Freeskiing Championships, a big mountain competition that's the second stop in a two-part tour that started in Crested Butte, Colorado, a few weeks earlier.

"If Crested Butte already has Nationals, then the telemark community is ready for the Worlds," says event organizer Brooke Edwards, who also managed to find time to enter in the competition, placing sixth overall.

Ross Matlock, the head judge for the Crested Butte event, flew to Alaska to volunteer as a judge. "The goal is to figure out how to get a series together and back on the road, like we used to have many years ago," Matlock says. "I have a passion for this sport, and I want to keep it alive. Ultimately, we'd like to have a three-event series: one at Alpine Meadows, leading to a national event in Crested Butte, leading to the world champs in Alyeska."

I'm here to find out if this dream is possible. In the Sitzmark, I order a beer and walk up to the registration table. "Hi. I need to pick up my media badge," I say to the woman behind the desk. She gathers my information and hands me an around-the-neck laminated nametag.

"Um, I'd also like to sign up for the big mountain competition," I stammer.

She gives a blank stare. Clearly, the newspaper reporter who'd picked up her media pass

before me would be watching the event from the bottom. "You want to compete in the big mountain competition?" she repeats, doubtfully. I confirm and she cautiously gives me a bib number. "You'll be number 100. You're starting last among the women."

Early the next morning, I bootpack 1,000 feet to the top of the cloud-high peak looming above Alyeska's tram. Called the Shadows, the terrain hasn't been open to the public since 1999. Since then, a few patrollers have skied it and local ripers have poached it under moonlight. But this spring, the resort's new management decided to let competitors tackle the 45°-plus rocky lines that descend 1,500 vertical feet over boney spines, narrow couloirs, and massive cliff bands.

"The timing is right," maintains Edwards. "Alyeska was just bought by John Byrne out of Salt Lake City, a passionate ski bum with great ideas for how to make our little resort a world class attraction. With him comes new management that wants to highlight Alyeska's out-of-bounds terrain. The doors flew open and I was encouraged to give it a whirl—so we're going big."

The rules are simple: Judges watch from the bottom, scoring athletes based on line difficulty, fluidity, control, aggression, and technique. Unlike most big mountain competitions, competitors don't receive an inspection run.

"There's always something in most big mountain venues that you can scare yourself on," says Andy Jacobson, a pro telemark skier from Salt Lake City, Utah, who will end up placing eighth in the competition. "But because there is no inspection, I'd say this is some of the most challenging terrain I've ever seen in a tele comp before. It's consistently steep from top to bottom."

From the top, I watch the 14 women before me ski over the precipitous edge. The Chugach Mountains shoot up around me like spikes on a white picket fence. In the distance, I can hear a helicopter dropping skiers at the apex of nearby peaks. I've chosen to ski a wide apron called Waterfall (one of the easier lines in the venue) that narrows into a choke with a small mandatory air. I can see the tiny outline of the judges and spectators watching from the bottom. My stomach twists into a ferocious tangle.

"Last women's competitor ready to go," the man with the walkie-talkie says. "Three-two-one, dropping."

Once I drop in, my nerves settle. I'm doing my favorite thing in the world: skiing powder. I try to forget about the judges and the spectators

and the cameras and just ski it. Just float along the surface while a flurry of white surrounds my face. I let gravity pull my body down the fall line. My mind goes blank; instinct kicks in. I can't remember making a single turn or catching air at the bottom, but apparently, I did. At the finish corral several minutes later, I stop to catch my breath and glance back at what I'd just come down. It takes my breath away. "Welcome to Alaska," someone in the finish corral says before handing me a beer.

Later that day, a local athlete named Ben Johnson stalls nervously above a 60-foot cliff band. After several agonizing minutes, he hucks himself over it and crumbles, completely limp, at the bottom. Fellow competitors run frantically toward him from the bottom, while ski patrol gathers their rescue crew from the top. Time stops as the rest of us watch in grief from the finish. The music shuts off, the beer stops flowing. Johnson is airlifted to the hospital, where it's determined that he's broken his back. (In a few months, he'll be OK—and by next winter, he'll ski again).

Later that night, back in the Sitzmark bar, a group of us are sitting around the table, talking about what happened. Rather than put a damper on the competition, Johnson's accident has brought us closer, a group of 77 strangers drawn together with a common bond—a passion for that bended-knee turn. "He would want us to compete tomorrow," one of Johnson's friends says. "No doubt about it."

So the next day, we strap on our skis and charge through a new venue called the North Face Prow for the Final and Super Final run. This time, I'm not as nervous. I ski it like Johnson would want me to—fast and fluid. And when it's all over, we head back to the Sitzmark, relieved, and order another pitcher of Alaskan Pale Ale, Edwards' dream of a telemark big mountain series as effervescent as the bubbles in our mugs.

—Editor's note: While the author is obviously bashful about her own placing, we can't help but point out that she did, in fact, take first for the women. Not bad for a journalist...

see competition results p. 22