

ENTER THE DANCING MONKEYS

AFTER JUST TWO YEARS, THE FREERIDE WORLD TOUR IS ALREADY THE LARGEST CONTEST IN BIG-MOUNTAIN SKIING. BUT WILL IT CROSS OVER AND MAKE THE AVERAGE SKIER CARE?

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

Seb Michaud at
Sochi, Russia, 2009.

MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON



Nicolas Hale-Woods at Verbier, Switzerland, 2009.



Thibaud Duchosal at Sochi.



The Sochi venue.



Richard Permin at Sochi.



Sochi.



The judges at Sochi.



The podium at Sochi.

Thousands of feet below the craggy summits of Verbier, two dozen people huddle under a large inflatable tent, though it's more of a bubble. It's plastered with Nissan logos and filled with international camera crews, sports agents, reporters, and a press secretary with a microphone. More camera crews buzz around in helicopters overhead, and Red Bull stunt pilots have just wrapped up an air show.

The top five competitors from today's event sit behind a table, responding to questions from journalists. They look slightly nervous and fidgety and seem unaccustomed to this kind of attention. Maybe they're just stunned by the barrage of asinine questions:

Were you scared?

Did you have a hunch you'd win?

How do you feel?

Then come questions in French—which sound more sophisticated, but perhaps they aren't. The men's winner, France's Aurélien Ducroz, looks antsy to start partying with his fan club, which is outside waving banners with his face on them.

A newspaper reporter asks Sweden's Reine Barkered how he feels now that it's all over. "My goal for the season was to compete in this event," Barkered says. "It feels—"

Suddenly there's a distant sputtering sound, like a car that has just run out of gas. The inflated ceiling looks limp. Diagnosis? The device blowing hot air to support the tent has failed.

"We must leave now!" someone shouts. The athletes, trained to move quickly, grab their gear and hustle out. But the journalists react slowly. One looks around half-alarmed, as if this is a practical joke. He and a few

others don't actually move until the roof begins collapsing on their heads, and then grab their notepads and cameras and scramble through the shrinking doorway.

So ends the Verbier Extremes—the largest stage in big-mountain skiing, where skiers charge down any line they please in front of a panel of judges. The competition is held on Verbier, Switzerland's Bec de Rosses, a 2,600-vertical-foot, 50-degree face. And this challenging venue is the fourth and final stop on the 2009 Freeride World Tour, the new big-mountain skiing and snowboarding competition circuit that's flitted from Sochi, Russia, to Squaw Valley, California, to Tignes, France, and now, in March, to Verbier.

The tour could cover those roughly 7,500 miles thanks in large part to sponsor money (specifically car sponsors like Nissan). But given the current economic uncertainty, the Freeride World Tour's bubble, like the Verbier tent, could pop at any moment. Recent tours like this have failed before:

the Honda Ski Tour (Honda pulled out and the whole thing fell through), followed by the Jeep King of the Mountain (see Honda Ski Tour). But there's something different about this one, something bigger, flashier.

After stumbling somewhat in its first year in 2008, the Freeride World Tour—run by a Swiss-Brit entrepreneur named Nicolas Hale-Woods, who looks like a mountain-man version of a Ken doll—has become an invite-only cabal of 36 of the best skiers and snowboarders in the world, all backed by corporate dollars.

Behind it stands a media machine so aggressive that the tour has been covered in over 400 newspaper and magazine articles and syndicated

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DOM DAHER (LEFT), MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON

MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON (5)



on 65 European television stations, including EuroSport, the Old World equivalent of ESPN. The FWT treats big-mountain skiers like celebrities and showers them with perks such as free lodging, meal and beer coupons, lift tickets, and cash bonuses—starting at \$400—just for showing up. Each year it spends \$60,000 just on athlete lodging. Prizes are as cushy as \$10,000 and a new Nissan truck.

This simply doesn't happen in skiing, let alone big-mountain skiing—a niche sport that has thus far failed to crack the mainstream and is perennially smothered by the glitzy and more telegenic X Games.

The night before the dome collapse, a Saturday, the athletes congregate to sign autographs during a street fair celebrating the Verbier Extremes. Roughly 10,000 fans attend the fair's kebab and vodka booths and gape at a theater-size screen playing steep-skiing movies and loud rock music.

The celebrating continues at Verbier's rowdy Pub Mont Fort. The bar's TVs display a heated Ireland versus Wales rugby match, which Ireland wins for the first time in 61 years. A delighted and drunken Irishman, whose face is as red as his hair, shouts with glee and hugs a stranger. Over a round of car bombs for everyone around him, he says he lives and works in Dubai and is in Verbier for his annual ski vacation.

He's unaware that the world's best big-mountain skiers are in town as well.

"Those guys signing autographs in the village could be anyone," he says. "They could be lift operators for all I know."

It hasn't always been helicopters and Red Bull. Big-mountain competitions originated as grassroots contests just after the pioneer days of extreme skiing. They were a way to quantify talent and bravery. The skiers would pick a venue in a place like Alaska or Chamonix and select the judges. They'd scout a line on a mountain face and ski it with as much guts and style as they could. Judges scored skiers on line choice, aggression,

fluidity, and speed. The winner was declared something grand, like world champion.

The World Extreme Skiing Championships, a tacked-together event that began in Valdez, Alaska, in 1991, became an early metric for big-mountain skills. Legends like Doug Coombs and Shane McConkey were made there, but there were no autograph signings or car giveaways. "In the past, these types of competitions have been one-off, outlaw events held in Europe or Alaska," says Glen Plake, who helped birth the "extreme" movement in the '80s. "I always had a hard time calling someone a champion just from one day of competition."

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Big-mountain comps gained momentum in the '90s with the International Freeskiers Association, formed by McConkey, Brant Moles, Adam Comey, Lhotse Hawk, and others in 1996. The IFSA contests, which require athletes to pay entry fees and find accommodations, continue to draw hundreds of skiers vying for positions in events at Crested Butte, Telluride, Snowbird, Alyeska, Kirkwood, and elsewhere. They are where pro skiers are born, and they launched the careers of Seth Morrison, Chris Davenport, Ian McIntosh, Ingrid Backstrom, and countless others. "The tour is and has been a very successful and

powerful tool for athletes to break into the skiing mainstream and elevate the sport to new levels," says Adam Comey, president of Mountain Sports International, the organization that runs the IFSA comps.

The IFSA events have proven popular with the rising-pro ski-bum crowd. But even though they began with a flurry of grassroots energy, they have yet to receive much mainstream exposure.

Nicolas Hale-Woods saw room in the market for more. After filming snowboarders on the Bec de Rosses for a video-production company he co-owns, he realized the potential of the mountain and launched the Verbier Extremes, which began as a snowboard-only big-mountain comp in



Squaw Valley, 2009.



Henrik Windstedt at Squaw Valley.

1996. After the comp grew to include skiing, he began thinking about a world tour.

When organizing the first Freeride World Tour in 2007, Hale-Woods recognized the overlap with the IFSA and discussed collaboration with its leaders. IFSA proposed running all North American stops of the Freeride World Tour and ceding the European events to Hale-Woods. But by then, he'd already made his own arrangements for a comp at California's Mammoth Mountain and wasn't about to delegate it to the IFSA, which runs an altogether different skiers-only competition with more athletes, on-mountain inspection, and a pay-to-enter fee structure. They couldn't reach a deal.

So Hale-Woods established a four-stop world tour, and the IFSA kept its U.S.-centric series. A year later, in the summer of 2008, The North Face, a cosponsor of both tours, tried to merge the two parties in a shotgun wedding. They discussed coordinating calendars so athletes could compete on both tours, simplifying the qualification process, and harmonizing the two judging systems. Again, no deal was reached.

The two tours aren't exactly rivals. Instead, the IFSA has evolved into a staging ground for the Freeride World Tour. "IFSA has a family feel. It's a way to get your name out there and start getting sponsors," says Jess McMillan, who competed on the IFSA circuit for three years, winning the overall title in 2007 before graduating to the Freeride World Tour. "But this tour is like a job. I'm here to compete."

Elyse Saugstad, winner of the 2008 Freeride World Tour, agrees. "IFSA was dropping the ball and Nicolas saw the potential," she says. "At IFSA comps, most of the spectators are other competitors. At Verbier, there are 10,000 fans. The Freeride World Tour treats us like professional athletes—I don't have to pay to enter and they're paying me. It's nice to be recognized like that."

For all their differences, it's easy to get the two tours confused. It doesn't help that they go by nearly identical names. The IFSA events were originally called the Freeskiing World Cup Tour and are now the Freeskiing World Tour...which sounds a lot like the Freeride World Tour. Even worse, both tours go by the acronym FWT.

"It's good for the sport to have more events, but our only complaint with the freeride tour is the unfortunate and confusing name selection mirroring our longstanding Freeskiing World Tour," says MSI's Comey. Meanwhile, at the Freeride World Tour stop at Squaw Valley, David Carlier,

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head of communications, stood in front of the competitors and said, "We insist that you use the right terminology when referring to the Freeride World Tour—FWT. We want the outside world to know that there is only one World Tour."

For all the posturing, Carlier may be right. Only in Europe do bobsledders, biathletes, and Nordic skiers glare at you from cereal boxes. Europe is home to a level of winter-sports stardom that America may never know.

In the near future, the Freeride World Tour and the Freeskiing World Tour could combine forces to create an even more powerful event. But maybe there's room for both, one as a stepping-stone to the other. There could be a tour to reach skiing's core, another to reach the masses. That is, if the masses show up.

It's a Thursday in February, a month before the Verbier Extremes. The Freeride World Tour is in Squaw Valley, California. Tomorrow's competition is to be held on the legendary Tram Face, an eerie-looking rock pinnacle that's closed to the public and has been skied only by poachers and film crews. The tour's PR team has all but promised a spectacle in a press release: "The world's best ski and snowboard riders will make history by competing for the first time ever on the infamous Tram Face: the mythical Squaw Valley venue which has remained strictly off-limits since the resort opened nearly 60 years ago."

It's been lightly snowing all morning and the upper mountain is closed



Sverre Liliequist at Verbier.

due to high winds, poor visibility, and the threat of midwinter Sierra rain, which threaten to scuttle the Tram Face's first contest. Without the exclusivity of the Tram Face, the FWT's hype in America could fizzle.

Later that night, inside a vacant shop at the resort village that the FWT turned into tour HQ, the athletes meet to learn the prognosis. Hale-Woods steps to the front of the room and clears his throat to command the group's attention. "I skied the Tram Face two days ago with local mountain guides," he says. "It was unskiable. Tomorrow is supposed to be clear weather, so we are going to hold the competition on Friday instead of Saturday. And, sadly, it won't be on Tram Face."

The crowd begins to whisper, expressing both disappointment and subtle relief. Hale-Woods looks discouraged too, but only for a moment. "We're heading to Silverado instead," he says over the murmurs.

He describes Silverado as a less exposed but tough venue on the back side of the mountain, adding that athletes must have a beacon, shovel, probe, helmet, and spine protector. They will get a chance to inspect the run, but only from the bottom and only for one hour in the morning. As in all FWT events, there is no skiing on the venue for 30 days prior to the event and violators face disqualification.

After the briefing, the athletes migrate to the Blue Coyote sports bar next door, where Hale-Woods chats with pro snowboarder Jeremy Jones, who looks surprisingly diminutive next to the 41-year-old organizer's six-foot, one-inch frame. The son of a British father and Swiss mother, Hale-Woods has the look of a surfer—a chiseled jaw, broad shoulders, and blond, sun-tinted hair that sweeps off his forehead like a wave—and the confident remove of a European businessman.

"I wanted to model this tour after the pro surf tour, which is very flexible," Hale-Woods says over a beer. "The basic concept is simple: the best

riders, the best mountains, and the best resorts. All the conditions were right to bring this sport to a larger, non-special-interest crowd."

The next morning, the crowd appears. Sort of. The turnout is lower, according to the PR team, because of the location and date change. But Hale-Woods doesn't seem bothered by it—possibly because 400,000 people will watch videos on the tour's website by season's end.

Spectators are settled on camp chairs in the finish area, squinting to see the top of the course to watch the forerunner: Shane McConkey, who will pass away one month later in a ski-BASE accident. He stands above the start—on the roof of the High Camp restaurant attached to the tram building, which he has integrated into his line. McConkey jumps off the roof, makes five big turns, and ends with a small huck at the bottom—an easy run to test the conditions and leave fresh snow for the contestants.

"How was it?" someone asks as he comes into the finish. "Perfect stomping conditions," says McConkey.

And now they stomp. One after the other. A Russian snowboarder. An Argentine skier. A girl from Canada. A guy from Austria. Many of them carve high-speed turns down the top of the mountain and then, without hesitation, launch the 50-foot nose in the middle of the venue, sticking the landing. They blast from cliff to cliff, linking them as smoothly as fish swimming downstream. Drew Tabke, who took second overall in the 2007 IFSA series, arcs turns above exposure so daunting that the spectators grow silent. Then he makes a sharp right turn and airs into a powdery pocket.

Of course, there are crashes. Sweden's Kaj Zackrisson straightlines through a narrow chute with a 30-foot cliff drop at the exit and explodes upon landing. Though his bindings are set at DIN 15, American Griffin Post loses his ski on impact off the big nose and has to bootpack 10 feet uphill to fetch it. Local hero J.T. Holmes blows up off the biggest air, though he

looks as though he knows exactly what he's doing the entire time.

The winners are announced at the awards ceremony that night, which features a fire pit surrounded by go-go dancers wearing bikinis slathered with Swatch's sponsorship logos. Elyse Saugstad takes first for the women while Sweden's Reine Barkered takes the men's field.

"I am the underdog," Barkered says. "But I want to win. Nobody remembers who got seventh on the Freeride World Tour. They only remember who won."

The winners pose for photos and sign autographs, and then finally relax. They have time to themselves after mugging for the crowd for several hours and seem, as a whole, to be happy. But one athlete, who asked not to be named, isn't so sure. "The athletes think of this as a competition," the skier whispers. "The organizers think of it as a show. We are like dancing monkeys."

Eddy Sarrassin has been camped out in a tattered blue tent on the bootpack toward the Bec de Rosses for the last 22 days. He's done this every March for the past nine years. He speaks in Spanglish, having spent years in Colombia—the athletes call him the drug lord—and reads a newspaper through glacier glasses while occasionally sipping tea. When he's not serving as policeman to keep competitors from illegally scouting the venue, Sarrassin says he supports himself by "renovating casas," but today, "I am here to ask people to not go to mountain."

But on the morning of March 22, when the sky is as clear as glacial runoff, 40 prequalified skiers and snowboarders legally march past his camp. They've spent days studying their lines through binoculars. The snow has been wind-whipped into a stiff meringue but it's soft

please turn to page 78



Richard Permin (left) and Aurélien Ducroz at Verbier.



The winner: Ducroz.

DOM DAHER (2)

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ENTER THE DANCING MONKEYS

(continued from page 77)

and chalky in pockets. It takes over an hour and three clogged tram rides from the bottom of the mountain to reach the spectators' area. Yet Aurélien Ducroz's fan club, along with roughly 2,000 others, are in position.

Then the monkeys dance. They charge into narrow chutes, hit double airs into impossibly tight landings, and flash the mountain with aggression and grace. Squaw had maybe 300 spectators, but here the sheer size of the audience seems to elevate the level of performance—the airs are bigger, the speeds faster, and the consequences much graver. At Squaw, a crash could have resulted in a few broken bones; here, a crash could be fatal.

J.T. Holmes takes a smooth, fast line down the peak's bony shoulder, making him the top male American finisher. Griffin Post charges into the Dog Leg Couloir, a rocky chute, and airs off a cliff only to lose his ski on the landing (again). Post muscles himself together for a spectacular recovery that prevents him from toppling headfirst over a rocky face. Norway's Ane Enderud motors through an exposed area, launches two big airs, and links smooth turns top to bottom—a winning line for the women's field, and enough to win the overall title.

When Ducroz drops in off the top, his fans (easily identified by their fan-club banners) link arms as they watch. He nails his line, a treacherous and calculated descent through multiple no-fall zones, and when he bombs toward the finish, several of his fans begin crying tears of joy. Like Enderud, he wins both this contest and the overall title.

Hale-Woods stands on a wooden deck near the judges, listening to radio feeds through headphones. Spectators to his left and right drink and celebrate, but he remains fixed on his athletes skiing the Bec de Rosses. A reporter sneaks up to the deck and tries to ask him a quick question, notebook in hand. "Not now!" he barks, all business.

Below the deck stands Canadian Jen Ashton, a three-time IFSA champion. Finished with her run, she watches the final male competitors from the viewing area. "This is like night and day from the Freeskiing World Tour," says Ashton. "It's an invite-only tour where the best skiers in the world compete on a fresh, untouched venue instead of well over 100 people skiing a moguled-out run. It's the biggest event in freeskiing."

"What about the X Games?" someone asks.

"There are go-go dancers in bubbles here." ♦