

who offer corrections to body position, help develop awareness in freefall, and provide help in parachute deployment if necessary.

After becoming proficient at basic skydiving skills (e.g., stable freefall position, parachute deployment, basic safety procedures), novice parachutists continue to follow progression guidelines toward higher levels of proficiency in various areas of the sport before they are permitted to participate in jumps demanding these skills (e.g., night jumps, formation skydives).

Skydiving competitions date back to at least 1930, when jumpers gathered in Russia to demonstrate who could land closest to a target on the ground. The Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) sanctioned the World Parachuting Championships in 1951, with events being added as subdisciplines have been developed. The most recent discipline to be added to major competitions is freeflying, sanctioned in 2000.

The Sky's the Limit

Is skydiving an extreme sport? This question is difficult to answer primarily because of the recent technical innovations and the variety of ways to engage in the sport. Together these factors have changed the face of skydiving dramatically in the last forty years. In the 1960s and into the 1970s, for example, jumping equipment was heavy, landings were routinely hard under round parachutes, and numerous serious injuries and deaths resulted from situations in which jumpers failed to deploy a parachute in time for it to fully inflate. These days, however, people commonly perform their first jumps (either solo or tandem) under large rectangular parachutes equipped with AADs, performing soft, accurate landings. Moreover, modern canopy technologies, AADs, and training protocols seem to have dramatically decreased the hazards of the sport for many recreational jumpers. However, despite these advances in technologies, many people argue that skydiving remains “extreme.” Even for those jumpers practicing a relatively mainstream version of skydiving, the risk is so dramatic that it would be difficult to argue otherwise.

Moreover, recent innovations create opportunities for jumpers to push the envelope in ways that would have been difficult to envision only twenty years ago. For jumpers pioneering these innovations, skydiving is definitely an extreme sport. Jeb Corliss and Luigi Cani, for example, are developing the skills and technologies to attempt to land a wingsuit

without the use of a parachute. Many of skydiving's most important innovations have been driven by participants' thirst for new adventures and achievements. Although skydiving appears to have become less extreme for those who do it as a one-time adventure and perhaps for those who pursue relatively mainstream versions of the sport, it remains, for many, the most extreme of sports.

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See also BASE Jumping

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Snowboarding

When a sixteen-year-old male snowboarder traveling at an estimated 60 miles per hour collided with, and killed, a twenty-nine-year-old female skier in February 2005, the incident grabbed headlines across America and stirred

■ Snowboarding

considerable debate. Many contributors to the argument reinforced stereotypes of snowboarders as drug-addled, care-less brats who are anti-social to the point of posing a danger to skiers. Indeed, snowboarding has been labeled a “radical,” “risky,” and “extreme” pursuit since its inception. But today, with more than 18.5 million snowboarders worldwide, and participants ranging from five to seventy-five years of age, the notion of snowboarding as extreme seems obtuse. Jake Burton, owner of the world’s largest snowboarding company agrees, noting that “there [are] a lot of people that snowboard in a fairly conservative manner” (cited in Wheaton 2004, 4). Nonetheless, with more than 75 percent of American snowboarders under the age of twenty-four, and males constituting approximately 70 percent of all boarders, it is no wonder that stereotypes continue to abound.

Snowboarding is commonly understood as a dangerous activity enjoyed mostly by daredevil, risk-taking, adrenaline-seeking youths. Certainly, there is an element of risk involved, but in most cases risk is a subjective calculation that individuals make in the context of their ability. For example, a sign at an Austrian resort that reads, “Runs are extremely dangerous. 70 degree slope. One fall could result in loss of life,” might petrify some boarders while exhilarating others. According to a recent study, snowboarding is the third riskiest sport behind boxing and tackle football. Another study shows snowboarders are more than twice as likely as skiers to sustain serious fractures, become concussed and lose consciousness, dislocate joints, and have their teeth knocked out. While advanced snowboarders traveling at high speeds and trying dangerous maneuvers such as jumps and other aerial tricks are at risk of serious injuries, including trauma to the head, neck, and abdomen, beginner snowboarders are the most frequently injured. Falling is the lead cause of injury; thus it is understandable that almost one-quarter of all snowboarding injuries occur during a person’s first experience, and almost one-half occur during the first season. The majority of these injuries, however, tend to be minor, including wrist, ankle, and knee sprains and fractures. Colliding with a tree is the most common cause of severe injury, but such occurrences are rare. The risk of fatality for snowboarders, calculated at 0.000000231 per snowboarding day, is in fact lower than that for skiers. According to the National Ski Areas Association, in terms of the average number of deaths on the slopes, snowboarding is significantly safer than bicycling or swimming.

So what is so extreme about snowboarding? While snowboarding might not be an overly dangerous activity for the majority of participants, the term extreme has relevance

in three distinct ways. First, snowboarding’s countercultural roots and irreverent lifestyle contributed to the general public’s perception of the activity and subsequent extreme labeling. Second, in the late 1990s television and corporate sponsors recognized the huge potential in snowboarding to tap into the young male market and thus went to great lengths to portray snowboarders as extreme in their perilous approach to the activity and in their personas. Third, big mountain snowboarding, which exposes the individual to the raw power of the natural environment, including gale-force winds, subzero temperatures, 60-degree slopes, ice, rocks, slides, avalanches, cliffs and crevasses, is undeniably extreme.

Alternative Youths on Board

Snowboarding as we understand the activity today emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in North America. The early pioneers embodied the idealism of the counterculture and, in direct contrast to skiing, which was an expensive and bourgeois sport framed by a strong set of rules of conduct, embraced snowboarding as a free, fun, cooperative, and individualistic activity. In comparison with skiers, snowboarders were typically younger, less educated, single, male, low-income earners or students. Summarizing the cultural differences during this period, Duncan Humphreys explains that whereas “skiing embodied technical discipline and control,” snowboarding “embodied freedom, hedonism and irresponsibility” (Humphreys 1996, 9). Indeed, as part of the new leisure movement, snowboarders subscribed to antiestablishment counterculture values and do-it-yourself philosophies. Ben, an early snowboarder, describes the anti-establishment mentality among snowboarders as “ruining all the fixtures at resorts, rails and running into skiers and telling them to screw off . . .” (Anderson 1999, 68). Jake Blattner, an early professional snowboarder, recalls the do-it-yourself mentality prevalent in early snowboarding culture: “We cut the noses off our boards. It was just to see what would happen. It was like being your own board manufacturer instead of having to rely on some company to make something how you want it. There were no boards being made for what we wanted to do . . . so we took matters into our own hands” (cited in Howe, 1998, 86).

However, Terje Haakonsen, a snowboarder of legendary status, best captures the countercultural ideology of boarders when he described snowboarding as about making “fresh tracks and carving powder and being yourself”



rather than “nationalism and politics and big money” (Lidz 1997, 114). Snowboarding was in the words of cultural commentator Jamie Brisick “an expansion of surfing and skateboarding, a way to explore different terrain with the same mind-set” (Brisick 2004, 69).

The long history and acceptance of skiing as a legitimate pastime and sport bestowed skiers with social authority on the mountain. Snowboarders challenged skiers’ power. Thus, ski resorts initially banned snowboarders. Owners, managers and their skiing clientele defined the snowboarding cohort as “13–18 year olds with raging hormones” who liked skateboarding and surfing (Hughes 1988). Negative images of surfing and skateboarding from the 1970s contributed to the public dislike and distrust of snowboarding. David Schmidt, the national sales manager for Burton Snowboards, says that “most people visualize[d] snowboarders as a bunch of skate rats who are going to terrorize the mountain” (Nelson 1989). One running joke among skiers went: “What’s the difference between a boarder and a catfish? One is a bottom-dwelling, disgusting, rejected muck sucker and the other is a fish” (Coleman 2004, 206). But while bans made participation difficult, they did not stop determined and passionate devotees.

Modern competitive snowboarding began in 1981 with the first American national titles held at Suicide Six (Vermont). The next year, the resort hosted the first international snowboard race. Snowboard competitions later in the 1980s embodied an inclusive ideology. Tina Basich recalls one of the first regional competitions in 1986 in which

everybody, from both genders, competed together. Snowboarding historian Susanna Howe describes these events as “cultural hotbeds” that effectively ironed out any notions of social stratification. Everyone, she adds, was “drunk and disorderly” (Howe 1998, 41). Early snowboard competitions were poorly organized and, in keeping with countercultural traditions, privileged fun over serious competition and individualism.

It was not until 1983 that Stratton Mountain (Vermont) became the first major ski field to open its piste to snowboarders. Others quickly followed. Skiing had reached a growth plateau and snowboarding offered ski fields a new youth market and ongoing economic prosperity. In the words of one cultural commentator, snowboarding was the “biggest boost to the ski industry since chairlifts” (Hughes 1998). Nevertheless, by 1988 snowboarders comprised only 6 percent of the ski resort population. Negative media coverage influenced the mainstream’s opinion of snowboarding, and its followers, during this period. For example, *Time* magazine that year declared snowboarding “the worst new sport.” Certainly, the distinctive personalities and styles embodied by early professional snowboarders Damion Sanders and Shaun Palmer contributed to the general public’s dislike and distrust of snowboarders.

Damian, the younger brother of Avalanche founder Chris Sanders, was “perhaps the most visible poster boy of snowboarding’s ‘radical,’ ‘extreme’ image. He embodied this with everything from clothing to riding style, Spiky hair and Day-Glo head bands; every flashy mutation of the board

The Journey

The following is an account of what was running through author Megan Popovic’s mind as she tried out an extreme sport for the first time. Popovic decided to try snowboarding as part of her graduate research on the topic.

I’m staring up the mountain that I know I must climb and yet I am frozen with fear and self-doubt. I can hear my mentor’s motto whispering in my mind, “it is the process instead of the end-result which defines one’s character,” and question whether I have the skills to tackle the ride. I begin to move. The journey to the top is filled with pitfalls and periods of wonderment as I gaze up to where I am headed and then turn around to observe the path

I have made. It is a world that was unknown to me not too long ago, and yet through immersing myself in the culture, I am in awe with the freedom and individuality engrained within the essence of the sport. Step-by-step I reach the top, overwhelmed with pride and speechless from the vast view at this pinnacle of my young life. I take a breath, allow the present-moment to permeate my body, and then set off with my feet grounded to the earth and the wind blowing through my hair.

Such was my experience completing a Master’s thesis on snowboarding.

Megan Popovic

garb was 'extreme.' Huge cliffs, over-extended postures, gritted teeth, and clenched fists were signs of aggression and in vogue [among boarders]" (Howe 1998, 70). Voted the "most extreme snowboarder" in an early *Transworld Snowboarding* magazine rider roll, Sanders explains that "the wilder I was the better they [boarders] like it" (cited in Howe 1998, 73).

Shaun Palmer further epitomized the rebellious image of snowboarding; he was foul-mouthed and "would drink and do drugs all night, and win half-pipe contests in the morning" (Howe 1998, 78). Palmer was essentially snowboarding's "first real bad boy." He was, according to snowboarding historian Susana Howe, "cocky, rude, and couldn't lose a contest between 1988 and 1990. While he was at it, he created some of the most lasting images in the history of snowboarding. When people remember those days of competition, they inevitably get a sparkle in their eye, and mention some crazy thing that Palmer did: jumping out a hotel room window, throwing a snowboard into a sacred Japanese bath, flinging a hot dog at a contest organizer, the stories go on and on, and they shaped the image of what it meant to be a real, hardcore, snowboarder" (Howe 1998, 70). Palmer's constant bravado, athletic prowess and belligerent and hedonistic lifestyle combined to create a cultural ideal that appealed to many youths seeking an "alternative" identity.

Significant change occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s. The convergence of several factors contributed to the escalating number of snowboarders. More ski resorts opened their pistes to snowboarders, the mainstream media started reporting favorably on snowboarding culture, and snowboarding magazines (e.g., *International Snowboarder Magazine*, *Transworld Snowboarding*, *Snowboarder*, *Blunt*) and films (e.g., *Snowboarders in Exile*, *Critical Condition*, *Totally Board*) communicated positive images, attitudes, and styles across the whole culture. Technological advances and an increasingly competitive market also provided participants with a cheaper and wider variety of equipment. Economic growth in the associated cultural and manufacturing industries and institutionalization accompanied growing numbers of participants. Television and corporate sponsors also started to identify the huge potential in extreme sports as a way to tap into the young-male market, and mainstream companies began appropriating the alternative, hedonistic, and youthful image of the boarder to sell products ranging from chewing gum to vehicles.

Institutionalization and commercialization angered many snowboarders: Some overtly resisted the process. For this group competitive boarding stood in symbolic jux-

taposition to "soul boarding." For example, in 1990 world champion snowboarder Craig Kelly retired at the peak of his career from the competitive circuit that he likened to prostitution. As he put it: "Snowboarding is something that I think should be done on your own terms. Society is full of rules, and I use the time I spend in the mountains as an opportunity to free myself of all constraints. . . . I decided that competing on the World Tour restricted the freedom that I found with snowboarding in the first place" (cited in Reed 2005, 54).

Debates over the institutionalization process in snowboarding came to the fore in the lead-up to the 1998 Winter Olympics. The loudest voice of opposition came from Terje Haakonsen who refused to enter the games because he believed, quite correctly in the eyes of many, that the International Olympic Committee comprised a group of Mafia-like officials and that the event was tantamount to joining the army. Haakonsen refused to be turned into a uniform-wearing, flag-bearing, walking logo. Other snowboarders expressed similar sentiments. Morgan Lafonte from the United States, for example, declared that "the Olympics are way too big" and will mold snowboarding into its image (cited in Howe 1998, 151). Some boarders, however, embraced these changes. American snowboarder Jimi Scott wanted to "be the first snowboarder to win a gold medal and be written into the history books" (cited in Howe 1998, 151). In his biography professional snowboarder Todd Richards explains that while "half of the companies and riders were looking forward to the Olympics as the ultimate forum that would legitimize the sport," the other half "didn't give a damn about the Olympics because it reeked of skiing—a stuffy by-the-books sport with an attitude that was the kiss of death for snowboarding's irreverent spirit" (Richards 2003, 135). Nonetheless, he conceded that "finally snowboarding is becoming lucrative." Debates among snowboarders over the commercialization process in general, and the 1998 Winter Olympics more specifically, illustrate the growing divisions and cultural fragmentation within the broader snowboarding culture during this period.

The Mainstreaming of Extreme

Inevitably, incorporation continued regardless of the contrasting viewpoints of boarders, and snowboarding increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational media exposure like ESPN's X Games and NBC's Gravity Games. According to Todd Richards: "The X Games marked the



end of one era but simultaneously gave birth to a whole new world of possibilities. It was sort of sad to say good-bye to being a bunch of misunderstood outcasts. A lot of joy was derived from the punk-rock-spirit, and once the masses join your ranks . . . its over. The image had already begun to change, but the X Games put the icing on the mainstream cake” (Richards 2003, 182).

In 1998 ESPN beamed the X Games to 198 countries in twenty-one languages. The incorporation of snowboarding into the 1998 Winter Olympics, video games including Playstation’s Cool Boarders and Shaun Palmer Pro-Snowboarder, and blockbuster movies such as *First Descent* (2005) helped further expose the sport to the mainstream. According to a Leisure Trends survey, 32 percent (nearly 92 million people) of the United States population watched the 2002 Olympic’s snowboarding half-pipe competition in which Americans won gold (Ross Powers), silver (Danny Kass), and bronze (J. J. Thomas) in the men’s event (this was the first U.S. Winter Olympic medal sweep since 1956) and gold (Kelly Clark) in the women’s event. Of those viewers 18.6 million Americans said they wanted to try snowboarding.

As snowboarding became popularized and incorporated into the mainstream, it adopted many of the trappings of traditional modern sports: corporate sponsorship, large prize monies, rationalized systems of rules, hierarchical and individualistic star systems, win-at-all costs values, and the creation of heroes, heroines, and in the words of Mike Messner, “rebel athletes who look like walking corporate billboards” (Messner 2002, 178). Unlike earlier generations many current boarders embrace commercial approaches or, in the more colorful words of professional snowboarder Todd Richards, “milk[ing] it while it’s lactating” (Richards 2003, 178). Professional snowboarders including Shaun White, Danny Kass, Todd Richards, Tara Dakides, Gretchen Bleiler, Lindsey Jacobellis, Kelly Clark, and Hannah Tetter have benefited from the recently commercialized form of snowboarding. They have achieved superstar status within the culture, attracting corporate sponsors including Target, Visa, Nike, Mountain Dew, Campbell’s Soup, and Boost Mobile. Some earn seven-figure salaries. But with major corporate sponsors offering large prize monies, the focus of many boarding competitions is no longer fun; extreme forms of individualism and egocentricity prevail. Olympic silver medallist Gretchen Bleiler believes the “industry pressure” and “ultra-high” level of snowboarding ability are creating an “extremely competitive” atmosphere in snowboarding, and decries a younger generation who, in their hunger to

win, are “changing the overall feel at the top of the half-pipe” (cited in Sherowski 2003, 146).

In this hypercommercial context of the X Games, Gravity Games, and prime-time television exposure, new competition formats and boarding disciplines that lend themselves to television coverage emerged, including boarder-cross, slope-style, and big-air competitions. These events are spectacular with crashes virtually guaranteed. This was certainly true when professional snowboarder Tara Dakides attempted to perform a spectacular big-air stunt live on *The Late Show with David Letterman* in February 2004. The producers built a massive wooden ramp outside the studio in the middle of New York’s 53rd Street and then covered it in snow. It was supposed to launch Dakides over a 20-foot gap. But various factors including lack of building materials, warm weather melting the snow, and the pressure of a big-time production diminished Dakides chances of successfully completing the stunt. In her own words: “I wasn’t aware of it, but the snow on the run-in was soft [and] when I went to turn I sunk to the wood. . . . I went off in a direction that I knew was bad. Before I even took off, I was like, ‘Oh Shit!’ You hear it clear as day on the tape. I was already committed, so I went for it [the 360-degree rotation], but I knew I was in trouble. I came around and all I saw was concrete. I didn’t even see the cameraman I hit” (cited in Roenigk 2004, para. 11). In front of a stunned crowd and live national audience, Dakides fell on the asphalt from an estimated height of 25 feet, was knocked unconscious, and split her head. The event was covered by every major American newspaper and became the lead story on local news programs across the country, thus reinforcing the “extreme” nature of snowboarding and snowboarders.

Despite the increasing professionalism at the elite level, residual traces of snowboarding’s countercultural past remain. Top snowboarders must not appear to take the activity too seriously; they must maintain a marketable image that is part snowboarding larrikin and part professional athlete. In interviews professional snowboarders frequently emphasize their hedonistic and party lifestyle, disregard for authority, heterosexual pursuits, and high jinks. For example, in *Snowboarder* magazine, professional snowboarder Romain DeMarchi reveals that he has a “bad boy image” for being “a hard-core partier” and admits he has been arrested four times. DeMarchi is very aware of the economic value of a distinctly “extreme” personality that makes links to snowboarding’s history of rebellion: “People say, ‘Ah, Romain’s the wild guy, he’s going to go out and rage his ass off and be a f—ker and a dickhead!’ But you know, who cares if these things are said? People label



A snowboarder going big high above the half pipe. Source: istock/Jason Lugo.

me as crazy, and it's good for me. It sells, so the sponsors use it and the magazines use it" (Bridges 2004, 101).

Arguably the most professional competitive snowboarder, Olympic half-pipe gold medalist Shaun White downplays the professionalism of snowboarding in an interview with *Rolling Stone*: "We are still the dirty ones in the bunch, the sketchy snowboard kids. I don't think I'd have it any other way" (Edwards 2006, 45). Of course, neither would the corporate sponsors who have profited enormously from the commodification of snowboarding's perceived irresponsible and uncontrolled image.

The mainstream exposure of snowboarding had a significant influence on cultural demographics. Snowboarding attracted an influx of participants from around the world, and from different social classes and age groups. Snowboarding has seen a 385 percent increase in participation between 1988 and 2003, and it is one of America's fastest growing sports. But the influx of new participants during

the late 1990s and early 2000s fueled struggles within the snowboarding culture between insiders and newcomers, and various subgroups. Andy Blumberg, editor of *Transworld Snowboarding*, explains that "once united we seem today divided" (Blumberg 2002, 16). Core participants include males and females whose commitment to the activity is such that it organizes their whole lives. According to snowboarding journalist Jennifer Sherowski: "Not everyone who rides a snowboard is a snowboarder, but for those who do bear this illustrious title, it's an undeniable way of life. High school ends, and the road starts calling—off to mountain towns and the assimilation into weird, transient tribes full of people who work night jobs cleaning toilets or handing you your coffee in the early mornings, all so they can shove a fistful of tips in their pocket and ride, their real motives betrayed by goggle tans or chin's scuffed by Gore-Tex. In this world, people don't ask what you 'do,' they ask you where you work—knowing that what you do is snowboard, just



like them, and any job you might have is simply a means for it" (Sherowski 2005, 160).

Snowboard instructor, park crew, journalist, photographer, competition judge, coach, event organizer, and semi-sponsored snowboarder, are among the jobs held by passionate snowboarders committed to the lifestyle rather than the economic rewards. In contrast to core boarders, snowboarders who are less committed—including male and female novices, poseurs, or weekend warriors—have lower cultural status. Rather than demonstrating commitment via participation, poseurs display what Becky Beal and Lisa Weidman call a "prefabricated version" of a snowboarder by consciously displaying name-brand clothing and equipment. Although taste and style play an important part in constructing a distinctive snowboarding identity, members cannot buy their way into the core of the culture. As *New Zealand Snowboarder* magazine puts it, respect has "to be earned, usually with a lot of blood, sweat and tears" (May/June 1995, 9).

Various identities, and preferred styles of participation (e.g., free riding, free-styling, and alpine) exist within this core group. Freeriders prefer to hike, ride a snowmobile, or pay for a helicopter ride, to access remote backcountry terrain, where they might drop off rocks or cliffs, ride down chutes, and snowboard in powder and among trees. Others, including freestyle boarders, prefer to ride the more accessible, yet typically crowded, ski resort slopes. Freestyle riding, which includes snowboarding on man-made features such as half-pipes and terrain parks, is currently the most popular form of participation. This style rests on creative and technical maneuvers (e.g., spins, grabs, inverts), many of which have their roots in skateboarding. In response to this trend, the typical ski resort invests in equipment and personnel to create and maintain features such as terrain parks and half-pipes to attract snowboarding patrons. Some core snowboarders also enjoy "jibbing," a sub-style of freestyle snowboarding that involves performing various skateboarding inspired maneuvers on obstacles including trees, stumps, and rails. Jibbing in urban environments has also become a popular activity among core boarders; jibbers locate a handrail (e.g., down a flight of stairs outside a school, hospital, mall, etc.), shovel snow at the top and bottom of the rail (to create a run-in and landing), and then perform technical maneuvers while jumping onto, sliding down, and jumping off the rail. Alpine, another style of participation, privileges speed and carving over jumping or jibbing, but it is the least popular style among core snowboarders who tend to dismiss participants as skiers on boards. Simply put,

styles of participation are constantly evolving, boarders are continually creating new and more technical maneuvers, and snowboarding companies and ski resorts are going to great lengths to cater to the diverse demands of participants. A recent example is the production of snow-skates (skateboards for the snow) and the creation of specially built snow-skate parks at many major ski resorts.

Different styles of snowboarding participation carry different sets of risks. Freestyle snowboarding is often portrayed as the most aggressive and perilous style of snowboarding. While serious injury can and does occur in these artificially constructed playgrounds, risk tends to be more perceived than real. Terrain parks and half-pipes are carefully constructed and maintained by trained professionals, they are positioned within the boundaries of the ski resorts, rules and regulations are signposted and policed by resort employees, and, if injury should occur, the ski patrol and medical facilities are only minutes away. Jibbing in urban environments carries a new set of risks, including arrest by police and the physical consequences of falling on concrete steps or metal railings. But big mountain snowboarding is undoubtedly the most risky style of participation.

Big Mountain Snowboarding: The Meaning of Extreme

It is in relation to riding big mountain terrain that the term *extreme* has most relevance in snowboarding. Big mountain riding is, in the words of Susanna Howe, "downright dangerous: avalanches, sluffs, helicopter crashes, crevasses, rocks, and exposure to the elements take their toll on those who aren't prepared or aren't lucky" (Howe 1998, 143). Big mountain riders tend to be physically taller and more powerful than freestyle snowboarders. With their greater strength they are able to ride longer and stiffer boards. Many big mountain riders are mountaineers who spend years learning about snow conditions, weather patterns, emergency techniques, and rock climbing. While big mountain riding is rarely a competitive endeavor, the world's best big mountain riders do put their skills to the test in the annual Xtreme Verbier (Switzerland) contest held on the infamous Bec des Rosses, a dauntingly steep and frighteningly jagged rock face standing at 3,222 meters. Prior to the event contestants must study the mountain face with binoculars and choose their line. On the day of the competition, they hike for over an hour to the summit and then, one by one, ride down "the

Bec” in an attempt to qualify for the podium. Not only must they make it down the face alive (which would be a challenge for even the most experienced boarder), the riders are also judged on the “steepness, exposure, snow conditions, difficulty of terrain, obstacles, jumps, control, falls, continuity, pace, smooth transitions, style, technical ability, and energy” of their 500-meter vertical descent.

Death is a very real threat in big mountain riding. Shaun White described his first experience snowboarding in Alaska—“the fabled North Shore of snowboarding”—as follows: “It was really intense out there. Everything seems to be about dying out there. ‘Oh man, you go over the falls there and you’re dead.’ ‘Don’t set that off, or you’re dead.’ ‘You’re gonna die here.’ ‘Oh, that’s death for sure.’ Even getting ready to go up the mountain is sketchy. I’m wearing peeps [avalanche transceiver], I have their gnarly backpack survival kit with a shovel and probes and all this stuff in it, and then I’m wearing a harness. I’m like, ‘why do I need a harness?’ They go, ‘Dude, if you fall in a hole and you’re dead we have to use it to drag you out.’ What? I don’t want to deal with that! Are you kidding me? I thought knee surgery was bad, I don’t want to die!” (Bridges 2005, 88).

While White clearly ventured out of his comfort zone, other boarders, more confident in their abilities and knowledge, are excited by the challenges of big mountain riding. “There’s always a chance to die, but you don’t go out and try to kill yourself,” says legendary big mountain rider Tom Burt. “[T]o say that what I do is the most dangerous aspect of snowboarding . . . well, it’s a relative thing because of ability, training, and experience.” Big mountain riding clearly divides the men from the boys. Furthermore, while a few women are big mountain riders (e.g., Julie Zell, Victoria Jealousie, and Tina Basich), the activity continues to be heavily dominated by men.

Whether performing a corked backside 720 over an 80-foot jump in a terrain park or completing a first descent in Alaska, snowboarders earn prestige and respect from their peers through displays of physical prowess and courage. *Transworld Snowboarding’s* introduction to professional boarder Roman De Marchi highlights the value of such traits in gaining cultural status: “How many people do you know who live life like there’s no tomorrow? He’ll look at something and say, ‘I’m gonna do that. Get out your camera.’ And everyone else will be like, ‘are you fking nuts? Shit that doesn’t look doable,’ he’ll stomp it nine out of ten times . . . his riding is going bigger, harder, and gnarlier than everybody else’s.” (Muzzey 2003, 126)

Many male snowboarders accept injury and risk taking as part of the core snowboarding experience. The following interviews by two core boarders illustrate the reckless relationships many boarders have with their bodies: “In the 2002 X Games at Whakapapa [New Zealand ski resort], I was competing. I came down to the med[ical] bay, I had 4 cracked ribs and a twisted knee and I was the least injured guy there; fractured skulls, massive back injuries, guys with their calves ripped open, you name it. It was crazy. I was just like, ‘give me my two Panadols [painkillers] and I’ll be on my way.’ *Accidents happen aye*”; “I fractured my radial head in my elbow this season jumping off a 30ft cliff [in Whistler, Canada]. Putting my hand down straight, the impact rammed my radius into my humerus chipping the end off it. But it only had me out for 28 days.”

Like their male counterparts, female riders embody the cultural values of courage and risk taking and experience their share of injuries. Tara Dakides has fractured her back, dislocated elbows, and torn ligaments in both knees. Big mountain rider Victoria Jealousie once found herself caught in an avalanche above a 1,000-foot chute with car-size rocks in the middle and house-size rocks at the bottom. To survive she had to “do two back-flips and then cling on some rocks to avoid falling in” (cited in Ulmer and Straus 2002). While snowboarders who are prepared to risk it all receive the most media coverage (in advertising, editorial, and video) and cultural respect, few participants embody this attitude to risk. Snowboarders, particularly professionals wanting to prolong their careers, are increasingly taking safety precautions. For example, many freestyle snowboarders have taken to wearing helmets and body armor (extensive lower- and upper-body padding) in terrain parks and half-pipes, and free riders are wearing avalanche transceivers, probes, and shovels in case of an emergency.

Nevertheless, snowboarders do not always avoid death; on the contrary, for some it is the object of a strong unconscious attraction. For example, a recent trend among “passionate snowboarders” is to hike into the backcountry and provoke an avalanche to ride: The boarder who “surfs” the avalanche the longest is the “winner.” Those who drown obviously lose. Another trend is extreme terrain parks built by ski resorts eager to attract the elite snowboarding patron. A direct consequence is increasingly severe injuries. Steen Webster, editor of *New Zealand Snowboarder* magazine, observes that the “consequences of pushing your limits have changed . . . we never used to do jumps that could kill you . . . people are dying now” (personal communication, 2005).



An American snowboarding cinematographer also sees the sport “becoming more and more dangerous because people have to keep pushing the limits to get *more recognition*. . . kids don’t *respect* anything if someone’s not going 100 feet [size of jump] and doing a 1080 [degree spin]; it is way harder to get *noticed*. I think a lot of these guys [professional snowboarders] are taking these risks with confidence, but who is going to suffer is the kids that think to be good they have to do the craziest thing ever, and eventually that is going to catch up. . . I think more people are going to start dying soon” (personal communication, 2005). The recent deaths of several top snowboarders, including Craig Kelly, Jeff Anderson, Tristan Picot, Line Ostvold, Josh Malay, and Tommy Brunner, certainly sent “shockwaves of grief” through the snowboarding community.

While television and corporate sponsors attach the moniker extreme to all snowboarding in an attempt to sell products, personalities, and events, the relevance of the term is remarkably limited to a minority of participants in a minority of styles.

Holly Thorpe

See also Alaska; Dakides, Tara; Extreme Media; France; Gender; Haakonsen, Terje; Kelly, Craig; Whistler; White, Shaun; X Games.

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Sociology of Risk

Commentators sometimes claim that extreme sports involve a shift from taking risks in order to achieve a goal, to risk taking “for its own sake.” However, this claim is not strictly true. Participants engage in even the basest risk-taking leisure activity, such as bungee jumping, because they expect to get something out of it; they do it for the thrill, feelings of conquest, prestige. Risk-taking activities that are structured enough to come under the banner of “extreme sports” involve meanings significant enough for participants to dedicate considerable time and resources to them.

The way people think about risks and the meanings that people attribute to risk-taking activities are socially constructed, and so the broader social and cultural environment in which extreme sports have come to flourish is fundamental to understanding this phenomenon. What are some of the key elements of contemporary social change and the ways in which these elements may be linked to current trends and modes of risk-taking leisure?

