



Erik Sunnerheim of Sweden competes in the Freeride World Tour's Nissan Russian Adventure in 2011.



Austrian Matthias Haunholder prepares to drop in at Fieberbrunn, Austria's 2011 Freeride World Tour stop.

WINTER LAB

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competition

GROWING BIG

BIG-MOUNTAIN COMPS COME OF AGE. BY DEVON O'NEIL

Last February, a pack of mostly twentysomething spectators stood at the base of Spellbound Bowl at Crested Butte, Colorado, pulsing energy. It was the final round of the 20th annual Subaru U.S. Extreme Freeskiing Championships, and a fresh 14 inches padded the normally rocky cirque, upping the ante for the impending show. Spectators and judges watched as athletes dropped in one by one, zinging off 30-foot cliffs and hopping like cats down rock shelves. There were back flips aplenty. Utah teenager John Collinson threw a 720. A local landscaper nailed a 50-foot front flip. The margin for error was so minuscule that any bobble dashed

all hope of winning.

Which, truth be told, is about par for a big-mountain competition now. What was once merely a stepping stone to the more illustrious ski-film industry "has become its own beast," says Jess McMillan, the 2007 Freeskiing World Tour champion. Contest slots fill immediately, wait lists swell to 100 names, and many believe the talent level has never been this deep, even if competition success no longer guarantees the renown it once did.

But the sport is once again operating under a microscope due to the recent deaths of three competitors: Neal Valiton in 2007, John Nicoletta in 2008, and Ryan

Hawks last winter. Hawks, 25, back-flipped onto a hard landing during a competition at Kirkwood, California, one week after Crested Butte's, and died the next day. His loss devastated the tight-knit, primarily U.S.-based Freeskiing World Tour community.

All three deaths occurred at events with visual inspection only, raising questions about whether athletes should actually ski the venue prior to competing. While physical inspection could provide a more intimate—and therefore, some might argue, safer—view of the terrain, it carries the risk of compacting landing zones and making them more dangerous. It's a hot topic

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Left: Photo courtesy Christophe Margot/Freeride World Tour; Right: Photo courtesy D.Daheer/Freeride World Tour

among organizers and athletes. "I typically argue for visual inspection," says Drew Tabke, winner of the contest at which Valiton died and member of the International Freeskiers Association advisory board. "I think it's the purest, most elite way to compete."

What outsiders might call a rash of fatalities could simply be a result of competitive freeskiing's popularity. Almost unanimously, athletes and organizers claim big-mountain competitions are safer than they've ever been, thanks in part to the judges' preference for calculated, smaller airs (often executed, however, while inverted or spinning to score style points) rather than flailing 60-footers. "It's no longer a stunt man's sport," says Griffin Post, who competed in North America and

Europe for five years before being invited to film with Teton Gravity Research last season.

Though a variety of resorts around the world host big-mountain competitions, two tours dominate the scene: the 15-year-old Freeskiing World Tour and the five-year-old Freeride World Tour. Both are confusingly abbreviated "FWT," but otherwise they share few core traits. The freeskiing tour is open to anyone with \$150 to spend on registration (fields often reach 140 skiers), offers an equal \$5,000 purse to male and female winners, and broadcasts its events live on the internet. The freeride tour, meanwhile, requires an invitation to compete (at no charge to the athletes), caps its fields at 24 men and 10 women (women are included only at certain stops),

pays nearly twice as much money to male winners (up to \$10,000 last year), and guarantees its sponsors and athletes visibility on major television networks throughout Europe.

Still, some of the world's best big-mountain skiers, the ones you see in each season's marquee films, compete sparingly or not at all. They don't need to. What is most telling is that the sport has flourished in their absence. "If you want to make a name for yourself in the ski industry, yeah, you can take as many photos and shoot as much video with your friends as you want," Post says. "But if you go out and win a contest, that's pretty objective."

Read Devon O'Neil's story about Valdez, Alaska, on page 88.

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Freeride World Tour Stops

- > Las Leñas, Argentina
 - > Valle El Arpa, Chile
 - > Revelstoke, British Columbia
 - > Jackson Hole, Wyoming
 - > Crested Butte, Colorado
 - > Kirkwood, California
 - > Snowbird, Utah
- freerideworldtour.com

Freeskiing World Tour Stops

- > Chamonix, France
 - > St. Moritz, Switzerland
 - > Crystal Mountain, Washington
 - > Kirkwood, California
 - > Sochi, Russia
 - > Fieberbrunn, Austria
 - > Verbier, Switzerland
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