

Youth driving Olympic sports options

By Bill Marolt

There was an aura of excitement at Copper Mountain last month for the Visa U.S. Halfpipe Grand Prix. That excitement was echoed last week when organizers of the FIS Freestyle World Ski Championships at Deer Valley and Park City Mountain Resorts confirmed slopestyle skiing on the schedule.

The weekend at Copper mixed halfpipe skiing and snowboarding for the first time at the Grand Prix with back-to-back events at a resort where skiers and snowboarders routinely drop into the halfpipe together. Hopefully, they'll be doing the same at Sochi in 2014.

Freeskiing's stars, including Americans Jen Hudak and Simon Dumont, are chomping at the bit for their Olympic moment – a decision which could come later this winter from the International Olympic Committee. The athletes echoed each other in their pride of being part of the Grand Prix and enthusiasm to show off their sport for the IOC.

In a very progressive move this fall, the IOC gave an informal nod to halfpipe skiing, plus both slopestyle skiing and snowboarding, subject to evaluation after this year's World Championships. The organizers of Snowboard World Championships in La Molina, Spain have also added slopestyle. And a combined Junior World Championships in New Zealand in August featured freeskiing and snowboarding in the same event.

The three potential Olympic events mirror what is taking place at virtually every winter resort. Tens of millions of kids around the world are spending their on-mountain time in feature-filled terrain parks, riding over obstacles and dropping into pipes. It's a credit to the IOC for recognizing

the relevance of these sports to the real world of skiing and snowboarding.

The integration of skiing in addition to snowboarding into the already popular Revolution Tour [halfpipe, slopestyle, cross] is resulting in the biggest fields ever for that series with 1,200 entries to the four event series selling in less than two hours including 500 slopestyle snowboarding spots in seven minutes. Sales of twin tip skis and participation by skiers and riders in pipes and parks are growing at a rate of around 10 percent a year.

It's simple. This is what kids like to do at resorts today. And whether you're a skier or snowboarder, you feel the same level of excitement. It doesn't take long being with these athletes to see their passion and professionalism. This is the same passion kids around the world want to see and feel at the Olympics.

Bill Marolt is president and CEO of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association.