

Banzai Tour – a test of free riding, downhill skills

By Dana Turvey

The Rahlves Banzai Tour follows a simple equation: speed plus terrain divided by fun equals just what the host still craves post-World Cup.

And Daron Rahlves is the guy to do it. He took a perfectly good career as a 12-time winning World Cup downhiller and three-time Olympian and amped it with a run on the newly formed U.S. Skier Cross Team and a fourth visit to the Olympic Games. Throw in some X Games hardware and there's quite a resume.

The three-stop Banzai Tour has morphed from its roots as the Silver Belt Banzai Race, which Rahlves re-booted in 2009 at his host resort of Sugar Bowl. A blend of ski and boarder cross strategy, big mountain free riding and downhill racing, the Banzai pumps racers four at a time out of a skicross start "maneuvering through strategically-placed gates on a big mountain course while navigating alongside fellow racers, with the limited rules to finish fast enough to advance to the next round."



Daron Rahlves brings the Banzai Tour to Kirkwood Feb.

5 - 6 .

Photo/Dana
Turvey

“The Silver Belt event has been so much fun that I wanted to see it kind of expand and to also do something for Tahoe,” Rahlves told *Lake Tahoe News* from his home in Truckee. “This kind of series isn’t done anywhere else and I figured that it could be a draw to bring attention to Lake Tahoe in a way that’s really unique.

“So, I got together with (long-time sponsor) Red Bull and we tried to decide what other resorts would fit in. In addition to Sugar Bowl, we came up with Kirkwood and Alpine Meadows because of their terrain. With both places, it’s so wide-open and they get lots of snow, plus they have plenty of natural terrain features and impressive steeps.”

This winter’s Banzai Tour schedule had the first event at Alpine Meadows on Jan. 22-23, with the results sheet reading like a partial who’s who of winter: Errol Kerr, Shelly Robertson, Nate Holland and Chris Hernandez were part of the world class roster.

Kirkwood is coming up this weekend and the finals at Sugar Bowl will be March 12 and 13. The format is fairly simple: day one is qualifiers and after inspection and practice runs, each entrant has a solo timed run that is used for the four-person brackets the following day. The finals day will bracket the top 32 skiing men, top 32 snowboarding men and top 16 in each category for the women. Then the banzai part truly starts.

At a fairly tame entry fee of \$100 per resort, that gives racers two days of lift tickets in addition to the event. There is a total purse of \$50,000, which allows for \$10,000 in prize money at each of the resorts, plus an extra \$10,000 distributed to the overall tour winners. Math whizzes will realize that leaves a spare \$10,000 that goes to the winner of

the Banzai Super Final.

Don't look for Rahlves' name on a check this weekend, but maybe at the very end of the series.

"I won't be racing through the series," Rahlves explains. "I'm more just the ambassador for the event and I'll be there with my wife and our twins. So I'll be there each day and I'm setting the course, forerunning and doing a lot of work behind the scenes. But I'm mostly sitting on the sidelines, licking my chops waiting for the Super Final, where I get to race against the winning skier from Alpine, Kirkwood and Sugar Bowl. Then it's a final day, one run, winner-take-all \$10,000 that should be a definite crowd pleaser."

Speaking of crowds, spectators get more than just great racing. At each stop there's a sponsor village with tents and a few giveaways. Rahlves has brought together an impressive list of sponsors, many onboard since his early World Cup days. Look for booths from Spyder, Bud Light, Red Bull, Contour HD, Giro, Sierra Avalanche Center, Atomic, Suunto, Snowbomb, 101.5FM, TahoeTV, Powder Magazine, Wend Snow Wax, Zinka SPF and Crux Events.

Rahlves says, "At Kirkwood, after the qualifiers, we plan to meet at the outdoor patio, the Village Plaza (at the base of chairs 5 and 6) and just have some fun. If it gets colder, then we may migrate to Bub's Pub across the street. But at each event, we have a charity that some of the proceeds go to – again, for Kirkwood, it's the Level Field Fund, which offers grants to athletes who may not have the funds to travel to competition. It was started by Ross Powers, and with other athletes like Michael Phelps and Seth Wescott, we're trying to bring it some attention."



Banzai Tour competitors at Alpine Meadows in January. Photo/Alpine Meadows

The Kirkwood course on Feb. 5-6, accessed from top of Chair 10, will run down Eagle Bowl and Rahlves guesstimates that it will be a bit more than one minute long.

“You get there from the top of the Wall, but the course won’t start until the Eagle Bowl ridge to skier’s right. Then it’s pretty wide-open, which is great because there’s lots of room to spread out and a chance to use the fall line. There will be eight or so gates and we’ll set it so you can use the terrain to naturally soak up speed or just let it go and catch some air. Plus, you don’t have to worry about anyone coming in from your right,” Rahlves said with a laugh.

Based on the popularity of the Alpine Meadows stop, Kirkwood’s entries could sell out. Register beforehand online and mark your calendar for a day of fun, speed and terrain, Daron Rahlves-style.