

Tahoe skiers put the fun into freeskiing competition

By Jessie Marchesseau

KIRKWOOD – Last weekend's Subaru North American Freeskiing Championships was quintessential Kirkwood. Postponed two days due to a gnarly storm, Day 1 boasted blue skies, 4 feet of fresh powder and the steep, rocky, forbidden terrain of the Cirque.

Freeskiers traveled from as far away as New Zealand, Chile, Sweden and France to be part of this year's competition. And Kirkwood did not disappoint.

But one does not need to venture into the closed terrain of the Cirque to find extreme here. Kirkwood is teeming with rocks, cliffs, cornices and some of the deepest snow in the Sierra.



The Cirque at Kirkwood is closed except during competitions. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

"Kirkwood terrain pushes you," Dan Durkin, a local freeskier, said. "I mean everywhere you look there's jumps to jump,

there's chutes to go through, there's just natural rock airs that are going to progress you and make you look for the next bigger line."

And in the end, skiing Kirkwood terrain on almost a daily basis paid off for local competitor Josh Daiek, 27, who took home this year's title. Daiek, who won the Freeskiing World Tour in 2008, dominated the entire weekend, earning the highest score in the qualifying round, winning Day 1 of the finals and solidifying his place on top with a smooth run on Day 2.

Daiek attributed his win to "good snow and skiing at Kirkwood all the time. It's one of the coolest training grounds." He added, "It's what I do every day; I go out, jump off rocks and try and land on my feet."

Having primarily stepped away from competition for the last two seasons due to injury, Daiek spends most of his days skiing at Kirkwood or in the nearby backcountry with friends like Durkin and fellow freeskiier and two-time winner of Kirkwood's North American Freeskiing Championships, Craig Garbiel.

Garbiel was prequalified for the weekend's competition as a result of being in the top 10 overall on the tour last year. He stuck solid runs during both days of the finals earning him a 12th place finish.

Though they both call Kirkwood their home mountain, neither Daiek nor Garbiel grew up in Tahoe. Garbiel, 35, hails from Vermont where he dabbled in ski racing as a kid, but spent most of the rest of his time on a snowboard. He moved to Tahoe 15 years ago because someone told him that it snowed every night and was sunny every day. He has been here ever since.

Daiek, on the other hand, never had any formal ski training.

"I grew up skiing trash heaps in Michigan," he said.

“Basically, when I came here, I couldn’t really buy a turn. I didn’t know how to turn very well or ski very well and just started following Craig (Garbiel) around and skiing with him a bunch, and my skiing definitely got a lot better.”

That was nine years ago, around the same time Garbiel began entering freeskiing competitions. He recalled how a group of friends paid for his first one at Kirkwood:

“The night before they were like ‘OK, who’s got money?’ and they all just pulled out cash and paid for me to do it. I’ve been doing it ever since,” he said.

Garbiel was ranked the seventh best freeskiier in the world three years ago, a standing that earned him the opportunity to spend two seasons skiing around the world as part of the Freeride World Tour. However, a knee injury during the second season took him out of the competition.

Daiek and Garbiel are healthy again and hungry to regain their places on the podium. They ski together often, sometimes at Kirkwood, sometimes hiking in the backcountry, sometimes using snowmobiles. Daiek admits his style and line choices somewhat mimic that of Garbiel because he basically learned to ski by watching and skiing with him. There are, however, still some notable differences.

“Josh is younger and crazier so he goes full out all the time: big backflips, lots of 360s, just kind of full bore going for it,” said Durkin who skis with the duo regularly. “Craig is a little bit older and more reserved ... He’s just real calculated and just nails his lines. Everything he looks at, he just seems to stomp like a cat, just landing on his feet all the time, and real fluid.”

The money to ski

These are the skills that earned both skiers sponsorships from big-name companies like Blizzard and Moment skis and Smith

Optics. Moment, who sponsors Garbiel, even created a signature ski that bears his nickname, Garbones.

Sixpoint Snowwear, owned by South Shore local Teri Jones, also sponsors Garbiel and Daiek. Jones said she has known both skiers for years and was honored when they agreed to ride for her company. A Kirkwood rider herself, Jones admits she cannot keep up with them on the hill, and calls them "friends that are some of the best skiers in the whole world." She is currently working on the design for a limited edition line of Garbones beanies.

Sponsors are a big part of being able to compete in events like the one at Kirkwood. Entry fees generally run \$200 to \$300, not including travel, lodging and lift tickets. While the winner of a competition can take home thousands of dollars, skiers can often spend more than they make entering contests.

Money and sponsors add to the pressure to do well in competitions, and both men admit to feeling a little added pressure on their home turf.

Even though they ski Kirkwood all the time, neither skier said they felt like it gave them an advantage. Unlike some of the other mountains on the tour, the terrain Kirkwood offers for the competition is closed except during the competition.

"The local skiers here have no advantage over the other skiers because it's closed terrain," Daiek said. "We ski it once a year like everyone else."

So they choose their lines by looking at the slope from the bottom just like the rest of the field, and hope for the best.

"I got a little off my line and I didn't quite hit what I wanted to hit," Garbiel said of his final run. "But I skied fast and that's what I wanted to do. I skied fall-line top-to-bottom through the Hour Glass."

However, in a competition that's judged heavily on factors such as steepness, exposure and airtime of the skier's chosen line, getting a little off can have big effects. Both Daiek and Garbiel plan their lines ahead of time and stressed the importance of trying to stick to it, but also having a backup plan.

"I have a visual idea of exactly what I want to do. What I want to hit, where I want to land, where I want to take off," Garbiel said. "It's ideally 100 percent planned. But it doesn't always work out that way; sometimes you improvise."

Back at the comp

Whether they were carefully calculated, or improvised, nearly all the descents at this year's competition seemed larger-than-life. Big-name pros including JT Holmes, Sebastian Hannemann and Henrik Windstedt from the Freeride World Tour joined the field of competitors making this one of the most stacked competitions of the winter.

And judging by the technicality of the lines and the amplitude of the crowd, no one was holding back. Some skiers, like Garbiel and Daiek, were sticking their lines. Others, like Holmes, were blowing up. However, with this degree of all-out skiing comes inherent danger. Competitors and spectators alike commented on the higher than usual number of skiers coming off the hill with injuries. Two competitors were taken to nearby hospitals by helicopter on Sunday, and at least that many came down in toboggans.

Ryan Hawks, 25, was the second skier to be taken out by helicopter. Just after 3pm on Sunday, as the sun was starting to move behind the peak and the light on the Cirque was getting a little flat, he dropped in for his turn at the rocky terrain. Mid-run, Hawks threw a backflip off a 40-foot cliff, but showed little movement after landing.

Ski patrol immediately tended to the injured Hawks, and the

waiting Care Flight helicopter rushed him to Renown Medical Center in Reno. He was treated for internal injuries, but passed away early Tuesday morning.

Still on a high from his recent win, Daiek's voice went somber when asked about Hawks. Daiek had befriended the young skier earlier this season at a competition in Revelstoke, Canada.

"He was a super positive guy," he said, "always had a smile on his face."

Daiek said he lives by the philosophy that life is short, so you better live it up while you're here. In the past, he found himself getting stressed out preparing for competitions, but has tried to let that mentality go.

"That's never why I fell in love with skiing," he said. "Skiing's just an awesome sport and an awesome feeling of freedom. That's why I do it It's not about the comp, or it's not about being the raddest skier or anything like that. Skiing's about having fun."

Daiek and Garbiel plan on competing in the Freeskiing World Tour Championships at Snowbird, Utah, March 8-13.

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