

From surf to turf – Squaw freeriders embrace challenging sport

By Kirsten Fairchilds, Santa Cruz Sentinel

Cody Townsend freely admits to getting scared. But unlike other mere mortals who might try to avoid feeling fear at all costs, Townsend purposely faces it down on a regular basis.

He has used fear to carve out a career. While the Santa Cruz native may accurately describe himself as a professional skier, 28-year-old Townsend is more specifically a freerider. Also called freeskiing, freeriding is still a relatively new sport.

“Freeriding and freeskiing are interchangeable terms,” Townsend said by telephone from his Olympic Valley home. “It’s a pretty recent job description – about two decades old. In competitions, you go to the top of a mountain where there are cliffs and a lot of natural features and you ski down in the coolest way possible. A panel of judges scores you. It involves jumping, doing flips and spins and skiing the mountain in a challenging and aesthetic way.”

A former ski racer, Townsend started freeriding in 2004. He met former Alpine ski racer Elyse Saugstad at a ski industry event in Las Vegas in 2005. She had just moved to Olympic Valley, Townsend’s winter base and the home of Squaw Valley Ski Resort.

With Townsend’s encouragement, Saugstad took up the sport to great success. In 2008, she was the women’s overall winner of the Freeride World Tour. Sports magazines referred to the couple as “ski royalty.” Townsend proposed to Saugstad late last year and they planned their royal wedding on Maui in

October.

Both skiers embrace fear as part of the thrill of freeriding. And despite a number of occupational injuries, they agree that freeriding is a better fit for their personalities than ski racing ever was. Freeriding offers them challenges that allow them to look fear squarely in the eye on a consistent basis.

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