

Hight may go to new heights at X Games

By Pat Graham, AP

There's a snowboarder working on a trick so difficult that if the feat is pulled off in a competition, it just may be game over for everyone else.

Heard this one before?

Only, this time it's not Shaun White honing the mechanics of an intricate maneuver in a hush-hush location as he did before capturing gold at the 2010 Vancouver Games.

No, this is Elena Hight, South Lake Tahoe's 23-year-old two-time Olympian who doesn't have White's name recognition – who does, really? – but she can alter an event just like him, especially once she dials in her game-changing trick that's essentially two backflips with a 180-degree rotation.

She plans to debut it this weekend at the Winter X Games in Aspen.

That is, if she can work up the nerve. Because, really, it's still a work in progress.

"There's a lot that can go wrong," said Hight, who's chasing after an elusive Winter X gold after taking second in Aspen and again in Tignes, France, last season. "More than anything, it's getting past that fear."

Hight has landed the trick – the one snowboarders refer to as a "double alley-oop backside rodeo" – on a trampoline, into a foam pit and then onto an air bag set up at the end of the halfpipe. Her breakthrough moment came last May at U.S. team camp, when she successfully performed the feat on the course to become – as the snowboard community is saying – the first

female to do so.

Now comes the tricky part: Taking it from practice and attempting the endeavor in a competition, under the bright lights and in front of a big audience.

Pull this off, though, and Hight instantly leaps into the role of favorite heading into the 2014 Sochi Games. As it stands, she's someone that everyone is carefully watching.

"I was there that day when she landed it and what she did was just amazing," said Gretchen Bleiler, an Olympic silver medalist at the 2006 Turin Games. "By doing that, she's already progressed women's snowboarding. It's already on everyone's mind. It's like, 'OK, maybe this is something I need to start doing?'"

This is the sort of trick that even White is trying to incorporate into his repertoire.

That's saying something, right?

"It's the only double I've tried," Hight said. "I wouldn't want to do some of the doubles that Shaun or some of the guys do. Hopefully, I can get it going and show it off at X Games."

She very well may need it, too, given the talent in the halfpipe these days. Also expected to compete this weekend are reigning Olympic champion Torah Bright of Australia and 2002 Salt Lake City Games gold medalist Kelly Clark of West Dover, Vt. Clark also is the two-time defending champion in Aspen.

"Kelly is riding amazing," Hight said. "She's out there doing her thing, always pushing it. It's great to see. We're all such good friends, so it's awesome when someone is stepping it up, because it makes you push yourself even more."

Born in Hawaii, hardly a hotbed for snowboarding, Hight's father moved the family to the mountains of Lake Tahoe when she was a kid. She's been constantly pushing the field since

bursting on the scene, landing a 900 – two full rotations – in a competition at just 13.

“Snowboarding was just our family’s sport,” she said. “Once we started, we just never stopped.”

Hight has had plenty of unique experiences on a snowboard, including this: Gliding down a volcano.

That’s right, a volcano.

A few years ago, she coasted down the side of Mauna Kea, which is on the island of Hawaii and has an elevation around 13,800 feet.

“It was really cool,” she said.

Almost as cool as this: Landing her new trick a few times in practice. Obviously, she had to build up to it. The trampoline helped, as did the foam pit and jumping into an air bag, with each stage giving her more confidence.

“I didn’t go out and just throw it. You have to be safe about these types of things,” she said.

Then, she attempted it for real. Not in some secretive place, either, but in Mammoth Lakes at a training camp.

That’s a little bit different from White. Before the Vancouver Games, the snowboard icon trained in seclusion on a halfpipe built for him in the back country of Colorado. White perfected his daring Double McTwist 1260 in secret, before unveiling it for the world to see, ultimately leading to an Olympic gold medal.

Ever thought about keeping her trick a secret until closer to Sochi?

“One of my favorite parts of snowboarding is snowboarding with all of my friends,” Hight said. “I think it’s way easier to

progress when you have your friends there rooting for you. We want each other to progress and we cheer each other on. I'm not a ... secretive person."

And when she finally landed it?

"It's like landing any new trick: You come around and you're like, 'Whoa, I actually did it,'" Hight said. "I was definitely really stoked."