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Extreme skiing

The name “Extreme skiing” was coined in the seventies with the intention to describe an evolution in the practice of skiing centered on the difficulty of going down steep slopes in wild terrains. Like many other numerous appellations aiming at characterizing evolutions in sports, the limits of the name “extreme skiing” remain blurred, in particular because they recall the notion of risk in a purely subjective manner. Thus, extreme skiing is not an entity in its self, nor is it the invention of a single man, but rather a notion collectively built and historically situated.

The pioneers

The emergence of this practice is often attached to the achievements of the Swiss Sylvain Saudan (1936 -) in the middle of the sixties with, for instance, the successful descent of the *couloir Spencer* in 1967 (*Blaitière*, France) or the *couloir Whymper* in 1968 (*L'Aiguille Verte*, France). He is generally recognized for having been the first one to go down slopes with more than 55 degrees of inclination.

However some alpinists had already faced and succeeded at these kinds of challenges. In 1935, the Austrians Krüler, Schindelmesiter and Schlager descended the north face of the *Fuscherkarkopf* (Austria); in 1941, Émile Allais and André Tournier skied *Le glacier du Milieu* (*l'Aiguille d'Argentière*, France). And most of them saw the « skiing of steep slopes » as a practice juxtaposed to alpinism. By occasionally using guides or helicopters to take his equipment up, Saudan quickly distinguished from other pioneers such as Patrick Vallençant (1946-1989) or Heini Holzer (1945-1977), who, still at that time, privileged the ethics of

alpinism by attributing a fundamental importance to the climb. Saudan, by emphasizing the difficulty involved in descending rather than in climbing, gave birth to a new practice and, at the same time, to a wide array of controversies. In fact, alpinists consider that descending can't be achieved without its respective, autonomous in fashion, climbing. For them, it's an ethical question. One that still gives room to contemporary debate: the use of helicopters to transport skiers and snowboarders to the different peaks of the world remains a subject of many polemics.

During the seventies, extreme skiing begins to leave its landmarks and the first ones are achieved rather quickly: North-East slope of *Les Courtes* (France) by Cachat-Rosset in 1971, South-West and North face of the *Huascarán South* (6750m), Peru in 1978 by Vallençant, first 8000 with the *Hidden Peak*, Pakistan in 1982 by Saudan ... These achievements draw important media coverage, capturing both newspapers' and the public's attention. Taking advantage of its sudden success, the commercial exploitation of these achievements reaches the peak in the eighties. Yet, this practice remaining inaccessible to the vast majority of skiers and snowboarders, its development remained limited to the inner circles until the nineties, decade during which this practice becomes a mainstream.

The mainstreaming of extreme skiing

In the nineties, ski industrialists face an escalating decline of the market for alpine ski and a shift of profits towards snowboarding. To limit this process of conversion, they conceive new products inspired by the technical specifications of snowboarding: parabolics. These skis flatten the learning curve, and associated with the mastery of trajectory, make turning easier, and add to the evolution of skiing in powdery snow. The skier's experience then becomes more entertaining and less technical. The evolution of this skiing practice makes the practice of freeride – initially “reserved” to snowboarders – possible. Freeride adepts privilege natural,

unmanaged spaces and fields with significant amounts of powdery snow. This style was symbolized by athletes such as Craig Kelly (1966 – 2003), who was world champion many times, retiring at the top of his career to no longer practice but in wild terrain. At that time, some snowboarders start to notice a commercial evolution of their practice and a loss of the entertaining value that characterized the practice in its origins. Borrowing from the principals of a protest movement (Soul-surfing) that appeared 30 years earlier in the surfing circles (Booth, 1995), they call for a stop of the competitive aspect of the sport and its evolution in skiing station and for the rescue of the more traditional practice in wild terrains.

The invention of freeride skiing is followed by a marketing strategy oriented towards the practice of off-piste skiing, achieving both goals of embracing the rising public's appreciation for environmental values and seducing a new wave of potential skiers. This evolution of the skiing practice lays down a favorable platform for the development and importance of extreme skiing.

However, it is worthwhile to note that extreme skiing and freeride skiing are two different entities and usually appeal to different kinds of audiences. While freeride skiing possesses a level of unrecognized risk (i.e. avalanches), the level of assumed risk is less than the one presented by extreme skiing, where fatal risk is present at each drop.

The media, competitions and organizations

The visual media is developed in the early nineties and some producers like Warren Miller and Greg Stump start to produce films dedicated to extreme skiing. Some of these productions rapidly reach international recognition (i.e. *The Blizzard of AAHHH's* in 1988) and contribute to the increasing popularity of this practice. In the same fashion, the athletes featured in these films start earning a celebrity status often reaching beyond national borders (i.e. Glen Plake (1964 -), Scot Schmidt, Mike Hattrup ...), becoming the new icons for this type of practice,

and acting an efficient means of communication for industrialists. Taking advantage of this fad and of the support of ski companies, the first competition appears with the creation, in 1991, of the World Extreme Skiing Championship (WESC) in Valdez (Alaska) and a year later of the U.S. Extreme Free Skiing Championship in Crested Butte (Colorado). These competitions also generated competitors, and late legends, like Doug Coombs (1957 – 2006) and Kim Reichhelm (1960 -), who won the first WESCs in both male and female categories. Athletes participating in this kind of competitions join, in 1996, the International Free Skiers Association (IFSA). This association aims at spinning off from the “Fédération Internationale de Ski” (FIS) and to gather all competitors from “different specifications of the alpine sport, especially free skiing off-road, free riding, slope style skiing like skiing in fun parks, half pipes or other man made obstacles as well as skiercross” (IFSA, 2006). This association then set its goal to “enhance the sport of Competitive Freeskiing”. With the introduction of the competitive mode in extreme skiing, skiers are therefore evaluated on five criteria during their course (IFSA, 2006): 1) line choice: high scores are given for choosing difficult routes, determined by steepness, exposure, air, snow and course conditions. 2) aggressiveness: the energy with which a competitor descends his chosen line. 3) technique: judged on style and turn quality. 4) fluidity: including continuity, pace and smooth transitions between sections of the course. 5) control: any loss of control will result in a lower score.

At the same time, with the introduction of the competitive mode, the term “extreme skiing” is abandoned because of its mundane connotation, produced by mainstream merchandise and T.V. stations. “Freeskiing” or “big mountain skiing” is then adopted as a recognized appellation. This evolution is not only a change of vocabulary, it also symbolizes a change in the practice and state of mind of the athletes. The objective becomes less of doing first descents in couloirs nearing 60 degrees of inclination where a drop is synonymous of death,

but more of competing against each other in less dangerous terrains, where jumps and figures are the common denominator.

Sponsors and organizers of competitions have influenced the evolution of the discipline.

Athletes' deaths and accidents being detrimental to the public image of the sport, industrialists have successfully framed the sport within safe boundaries while keeping the extreme character. Thus, even though the evolution of extreme skiing is still in the athletes hands, it is extensively influenced by industrialists' will, who use the discipline's image to sell gear to neophytes.

Community values

The development of extreme skiing fits into a context of transformation of the sporting practice in general, and more specifically in the practice of skiing. Initially, winter sports mainly focused on skiing, but diversified greatly because of the questioning of traditional values associated to skiing. Inspired by the American counter-culture of the sixties, these new practices abandoned a certain number of traditional sporting principles such as competition, technique and performance, to adopt notions like freedom, creativity, aestheticism and the pleasure of sensations. Considered as a privileged way to access pleasure, risk has become an important value (Stranger, 1999). In extreme skiing, it now occupies a central place even if it is seldom claimed as such. While outsiders can see in this practice suicidal impulses, extreme skiers insist on the notion of control they feel when in a risky situation and on the pleasure that it brings to them (Drouet and Keimo Keimbou, 2005; Lyng, 1990).

While risk is seen as a way to feel sensations, other notions are also associated to the pleasure of the practice and enable athletes to gather around a community spirit. The aesthetic character of the practice comes back as a leitmotiv among extreme skiers. In the first place,

this pleasure is due to the wild landscapes in which skiers evolve. The beauty of the site is characterized by its virginity because extreme skiers give a lot of importance to the fact that the slopes they use are not already “marked”. The wild character of the environment means the absence of traces on the slope that we are about to go down. Skiers evoke the notion of aestheticism again to define the best way to ski. Short turns are associated to an obsolete practice and the width of the curls used, synonyms of style (Drouet & Keimo Keimbou, 2005). Control then reappears as a theme associated with the beauty of skiing. Extreme skiers can perceive the athlete who skies on a slope too difficult for his/her technical skills, and the tensing of the skier is then described as a disgraceful element. Thus, the technical virtuosity of extreme skiers in the trickiest areas enables to identify the best skiers who implicitly set the aesthetic standard.

Extreme skiers plebiscite the practice of off-piste by explaining that it implies a sense of responsibility missing in resorts. While mountains are connected with symbols of freedom, the context of security in resorts limits the extreme skiers’ possibilities of evolution and, according to them, diminishes the interest of the practice.

Evolution of extreme skiing

Between the appearance of extreme skiing in the sixties and the full commercial use of its image at the end of the nineties, the practice changed. The designation “extreme skiing” still has a lot of meaning considering the skills that are necessary to face the slopes in some championships. Nevertheless, the appearance of contests enabled this practice to develop. The equipment has evolved a lot, the skiers’ technique has also risen, and the risk now comes more from the contestants’ will to offer a more spectacular slope- and a better marked one, than from the dangers of the plot of ground itself. Another change intervened in the modification of certain values associated to extreme skiing and in its bringing together to

freeride. Today, extreme skiing and the images it creates are largely used for the commercial potential they represent. Contests have become one of the standards in this milieu, encouraged by industrialists and by the profits the freeride market represents for them. Athletes are becoming products used to attract beginners tempted by the practice of off-piste and by the values of counter-culture, and are submissive to the demands of their sponsors. Thus, extreme skiing- like many other sports, has undergone the process of commodification, durably modifying social relations between extreme skiers under the increasing influence of the commercial sphere.

Further Reading

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