



Elena Hight at the Vans Cup, Northstar-at-Tahoe, California.
PHOTO: DAVE LEHL

THE CONTEST CIRCUS

For women aspiring to be professional snowboarders there is one certainty: competitions will be a major part of life. Whether you're a rookie like Jamie Anderson or Spencer O'Brien, at the top of your game like Torah Bright, Kelly Clark and Hana Beaman, or a seasoned veteran like Tara Dakides, each season will include at least one—if not 10—events. In the past, competitions were the only venue for women to gain exposure. And while videos are beginning to open new doors, many women still opt to focus on contests, or try to manage both.

By Brooke Geery

THE CIRCUIT

Contests these days take place globally and year round. In the northern hemisphere major events throughout the winter and spring draw competitors to places like Aspen, Colorado for the Winter X Games, Stratton, Vermont for the US Open, and Lake Tahoe, California for the Vans Cup. In our fall, competitive snowboarders can be found in Saas Fe, Switzerland or Valle Nevado, Chile riding in the World Cups. And summer doesn't mean a break—it means extra long flights to events like the Global Opens in New Zealand and Australia. The circuit is grueling, but for many riders, it is just another day at work.

"For me, I guess contests have been my career. Ever since I started snowboarding I've been competing," said 2007 Winter X Games champion Torah Bright. Mostly known for her pipe skills, Bright can also be found regularly on the slopestyle course, where she is beginning to build a name for herself as well.

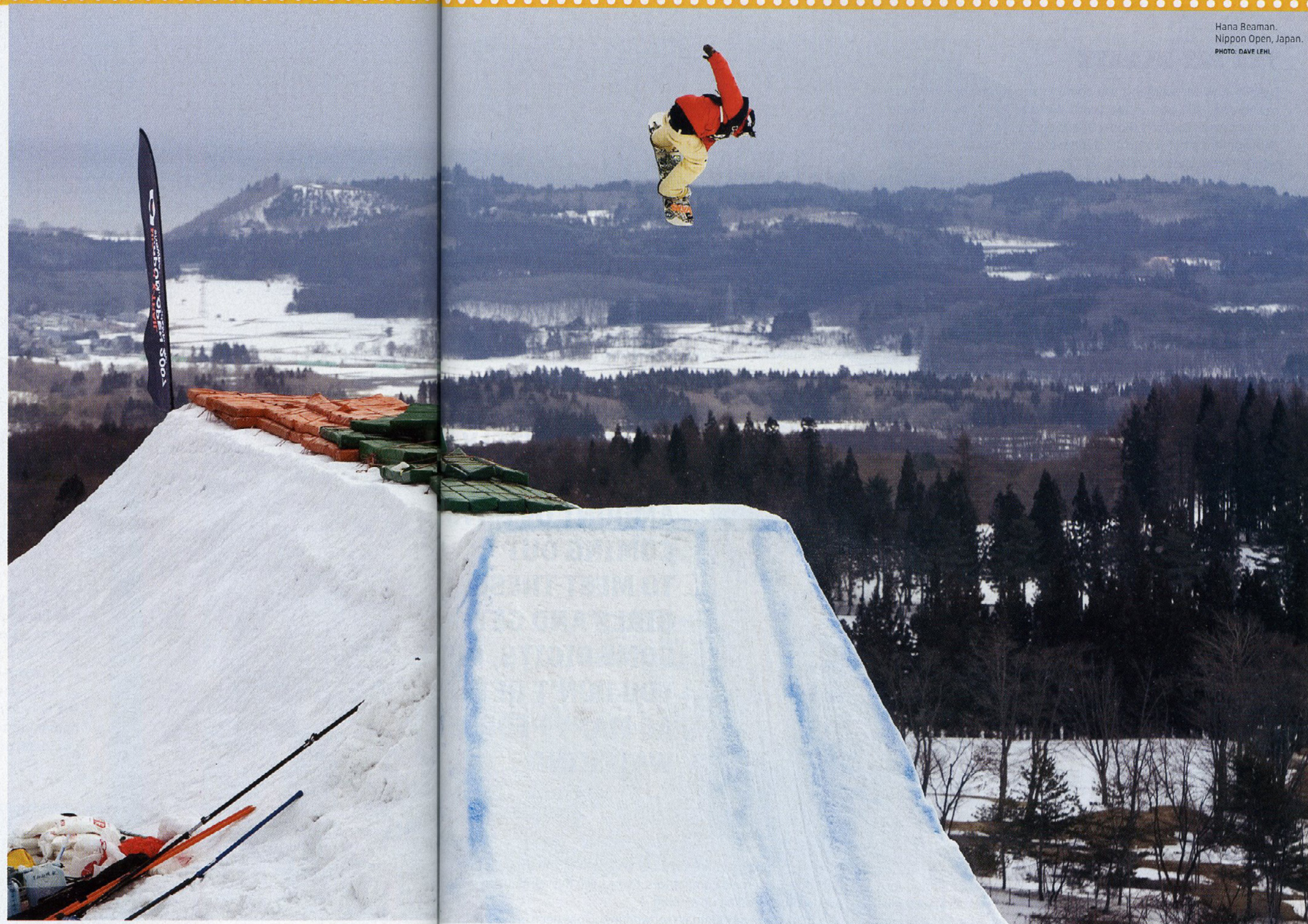
For pipe riders, an entire career can be spent building up to the ultimate contest—The Olympics. And in Olympic years, the face of



Roxy Chicken Jam Podium. Manuela Pesko 1st, Torah Bright 2nd, Paulina Ligocka 3rd.
PHOTO: DAVE LEHL

competition is a much more serious one. Hopefuls like Gretchen Bleiler, Kelly Clark, and Elena Hight are not as likely to compete in slopestyle, and schedules are full of World Cups and Grands Prix, events that other times may be skipped for filming and heli trips. "In the past few years I've mostly focused on pipe contests, especially last year with the Olympics," 2006 U.S. Olympic team member Hight said. "But this season I'm definitely still competing and I think contests play a big role in what I do in snowboarding."

And while slopestyle-oriented riders such as Hana Beaman and Leanne Pelosi might not be vying for a chance to represent their country, they are still driven to compete for other rewards. "All our sponsors pretty much expect that if we're at the top of our game in snowboarding, they expect us to be at the top level winning contests as well as getting coverage," Pelosi said. With lots of rail jams and slopestyle events like the Honda Session in Vail, Colorado, there is plenty of room for the jibbers to excel for the judges.



Hana Beaman.
Nippon Open, Japan.
PHOTO: DAVE LEHL

WHY COMPETE?

This is not to say that riders are forced to do competitions against their will. "I think that competing definitely is fun," Hight said. "I do snowboard for myself and for fun and competing is just a part of it." Contests are a chance to meet up with your friends and there are often killer parties tacked on for good measure. Traveling the world, winning money, getting exposure, and of course, the pride of winning are just some of the perks. And contrary to popular belief, you do not get to be a top pro just riding powder in the backcountry.

The name Kelly Clark is synonymous with progressive pipe riding and giant airs, and she has the Olympic gold to prove it. But how did she get there? "Doing well at contests when I was young was helpful in establishing

myself as a pro snowboarder," she said. For Clark, she started small with amateur events like the USASA Green Mountain series before getting into big money events like the US Open and Grand Prix series. For the younger girls coming up, competing is the best way to get their name out there. Jamie Anderson is a great example of a rider who has used strong results to propel herself into stardom. "I like to see how I line up against all the other girls who are older than me that have been looking up to for awhile," she said.

The money isn't bad either. Last season Bright had an especially banner year, collecting nearly \$185,000 (and a brand new Volvo) in prize purses alone. That doesn't include sponsor incentives and her base salary. Most riders' sponsor contracts include a matching clause that gives riders extra cash when they do well at a contest. Because

of the very public exposure riders are getting at most events, it is in the sponsors' best interests to have their team there and doing well—another big reason to compete every weekend.

But of course, there are drawbacks. Courses can be bad and weather can be worse. The event schedule doesn't care if you have jetlag, a hangover, or an injury. Sometimes you're just not feeling it. "I think competing is kind of one of those love/hate situations," Hight said. "It definitely can be a lot of fun and I feel like it really pushes my riding a lot just because of the adrenaline and everything that goes along with competing. But there's always those days when it's snowing and you definitely don't want to go snowboarding but there's a contest so you've gotta get it done anyway."

THE PAY DEBATE

Despite how far women have come in snowboarding, the glass ceiling does still exist in the sport. While a few forward-thinking events such as Burton's Global Open Series pays the same for men and women, some contests still have discrepancies in winnings totaling thousands of dollars.

In the early days, the reasoning was obvious—there were fewer girls than guys present and competing. Sometimes there weren't even enough females to fill up the podium. But these days, while the numbers are still slightly smaller, it has become very difficult for the women to even qualify through the large talent pool to the money round. There are still arguments for both schools of thought though.

Young gun Anderson has probably never done a paying competition where she was one of only three women in the event (although she did win her first-ever contest as the only rider in her age group.) But she believes the riding level is what's responsible

GIRLS ONLY

Any girl who's ever done a contest with a guys division can tell you: women often get the short end of the stick. Whether it's riding first, early in the morning when the course is bulletproof, or late, when the course has already been worked over, women are often pushed aside in favor of the men.

An event called the Chicken Jam, started in Europe in 2004, gave girls another option. At today's Roxy Chicken Jam, there are sizable prize purses and courses, and no guys. That means the entire weekend can be devoted to letting the girls get in plenty of

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Tara, post win interview at the Chicken Jam.
PHOTO: DAVE LEHL

for the pay gap. “I actually do think it's fair that girls get paid less,” Anderson says. “We do have kind of hard competition for ourselves but the stuff that the guys are doing is like, crazy. I think they should be getting paid twice what we get. They're working twice as hard and doing triple as hard tricks. When girls complain, we do threes and they're doing 10s. It's like a no brainer.”

But the other side argues that it is just as likely for a woman to get hurt at a competition. After all, they are riding the same courses and expected to perform in the same conditions. Experienced competitor Dakides disagrees with Anderson. “I absolutely don't think it's fair,” she said. “I understand why it was like that. In my day there weren't as many women as there were men, so I can understand why [the prize purse] was less. But these days there are so many women ripping it. At a contest where it's men and women, if they're all hitting the same features, I think it's only fair to have prize money to be even as well.”

runs. Open qualifiers are possible and each of the events brings out some 50 female competitors. Events like this continue to help push women's riding up a notch.

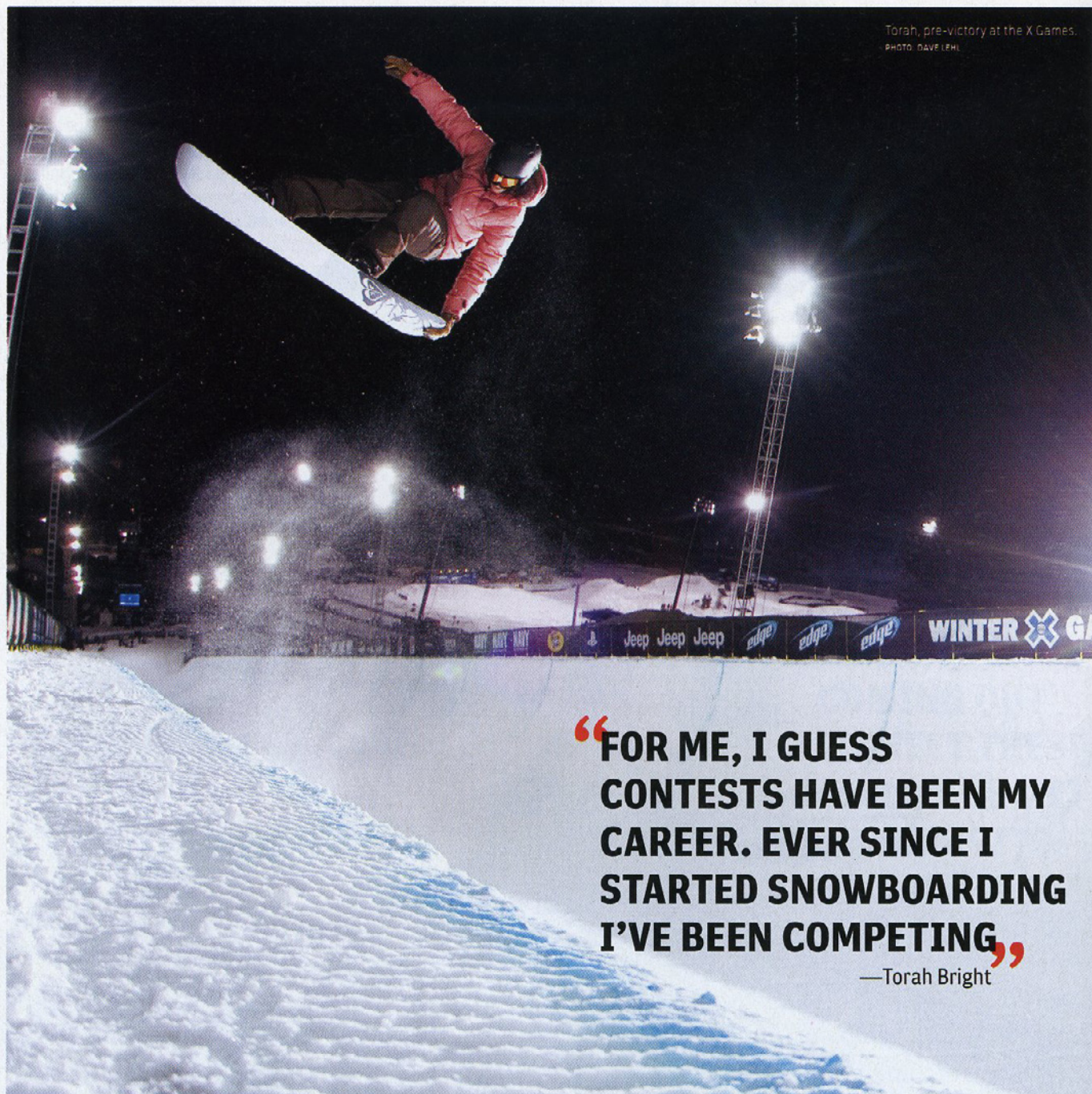
“I think the level of female snowboarding has been growing a lot just the last four years,” Chicken Jam Co-founder Tina Birnbaum said. “I think it is because suddenly there were girls only events and films that motivated the girls to push themselves. Because of this they also got a chance to ride together with other female riders, which helped them to be more self confident to do their thing and try out whatever they want to.”

But while the Chicken Jam brings out plenty of competitors, the draw of spectators still isn't as large as the co-ed events. “You definitely get a good amount of guys coming out to meet these girls and get some digits,” Dakides said, “but you don't get as many people watching and you don't get to see the guys riding. The level the guys are at is just amazing.”



Claire Bidez at the US Open, Stratton Mountain, Vermont.
PHOTO: DAVE LEHL

Torah, pre-victory at the X Games.
PHOTO: DAVE LEHL



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THE OTHER WORK

In recent years a new element has been introduced to women's snowboarding: the opportunity to film. In the past, a select few women like Dakides and Victoria Jealous had appeared in the "guys' movies" but for the general population of female snowboarders, there was no outlet for their footage.

And while this season is seeing more movies featuring females than ever before, (see page 36 for our complete list of the season's movies) what many of the younger girls are finding out is that filming is very difficult. The amount of time and effort required to produce a strong video part takes an entire season, if not more. And the number and level of tricks needed to pull off a three-minute video part are often a lot more than needed to win a slopestyle contest. Since girls are generally trying to balance both,

filming presents an even greater challenge.

Beaman thinks the guys have the whole video part thing dialed. "They just take off for the season and go film and don't even have to think about competing," she said. "They can produce video parts like that. I don't think girls are quite at the point that we can guarantee a video part, so it's always good to have some strong contest results just to back that up."

This juggling act makes for an especially hectic schedule for most women. "Basically it's just a mad rush," Pelosi says. "You feel like you are racing against time all season. OK, you've done a contest, let's go film. You're scoping stuff out around town [to shoot] while you are at a contest, and then you are traveling to the next spot."

