

Risky Business

How Action Sports' Best Event Promoters Prepare For The Worst

By Brooke Geery

Forty-six competitors had safely made their way down the Alyeska Headwall on the first day of the 2008 Freeskiing World Championships. No one expected anything to go wrong when John Nicoletta dropped in for his qualifying run. Twenty-seven-year-old Nicoletta was an experienced and talented skier who had done this sort of thing plenty of times. But after dropping a twenty-foot cliff, he lost control and was propelled into an area of exposed rock. With the cameras rolling for a live Webcast, he sustained injuries that would cause his death.

In any action sport, the risk of serious injury or death is a very real one. For the organizers of major events this has always been an omnipresent concern, but with the advent of the live Webcast—or in the case of ESPN's X Games, live television broadcast—it has become more difficult to shield from the general public. Every event from the X Games to the Grenade Games has a plan in place in case of injury or death, but you can only plan so much.

"We are proactive and try to plan for every scenario and contingency we can imagine," X Games PR Coordinator Katie Moses Swope says. "We can't predict injuries, so we handle each one individually as they come—every circumstance and injury is different."

In the case of the Freeskiing World Championships, all efforts were made to save Nicoletta's life, but his injuries were too severe. The decision was made, with input from the other competitors, to halt the competition for the day and finish the next. That day started with a memorial on the peak where competitors shared their favorite stories and memories of Nicoletta.

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Of course, with the litigious nature of American society, the aftermath of a death or serious injury can mean more than just bad PR for the event. Mountain Sports International declined to comment on Nicoletta's death and will not confirm if they're facing legal action. MSI President Adam Comey offered this statement: "The loss of John has deeply affected us all, and at this time our thoughts, prayers, condolences, and sympathies are with the family and friends as well as the entire freeskiing community."

The tragedy was a very real reminder of just how wrong things can go, and for the other action-sports organizers, proof that all the steps they take to ensure the safety and welfare of the competitors and their organization are very necessary.

PROTECTING INTERESTS

The two major factors in dealing with an injury or death at a public event are money and publicity. There are the obvious costs associated with medical care, as well as insurance to protect the event from going bankrupt if something does go seriously wrong. But planning for a large event includes more than just making sure the event is properly covered.



Torstein Horgmo taking big risks for big air at Winter X Games 12.

"Insurance is the last line of defense in a risk-management program, not the first," says ASA Entertainment CEO Todd Shays, whose company produces more than 200 events annually. "The goal is to operate in a responsible manner so that we aren't negligent in the event of an injury or other mishap."

According to Gary Jones of Friedmann & Friedmann Insurance Services, organizers may be liable for injury to participants, staff, or spectators due to the event's negligence or failure

to meet reasonable expectations for safety and security—whether or not this is stated contractually or represented in promotion. For those reasons, all the major events take great care to make sure that doesn't happen.

The nationally televised piece of the puzzle throws another variable into the equation when it comes to insuring and protecting the event itself. It's not really the grandmothers and small children at home who the event organizers have to worry about,

but rather the large companies that actually insure the events.

As insurance companies are in the business of risk management themselves, it can be harder to purchase a policy after a highly publicized crash. One of Jones' clients is the big-wave contest held each year at Mavericks, where big-wave pioneer Mark Foo lost his life in December 1994. Jones says only a limited number of insurance companies will write policies for this type of event.

While seeking special insurance programs tailored to an event's specific risks may not be much of a concern for the larger, television-network-owned events that can afford to self-insure, it is a major issue for organizations like ASA, who puts on the LG Action Sports Tour each year.

"Coverage has gotten harder to find and substantially more expensive as a result of the major injuries nationally broadcast in 2007," Shays says. "One component of our insurance program this year was custom-created for us, as there's no one else in the market for that program. Needless to say, it was not inexpensive."

Jake Brown's now legendary bail on the mega ramp at Summer X Games was not the only major televised crash of the 2007 contest circuit. BMX dirt rider Stephen Murray was paralyzed from the shoulders down and unable to speak after his crash in the final rounds of the Panasonic Open on the AST Dew Tour in Baltimore last June.

"In order to compete in the AST Dew Tour, all athletes must sign a waiver stating they do have and are covered by their own insurance," says Dew Tour President Wade Martin. Of course, getting insurance as an athlete in a high-risk career can be a challenge, and athlete's sponsors rarely help with insurance. In fact,

contracts typically have a clause stating the athlete is an independent contractor and not connected to the company.

"Regarding insurance, we have discussed this with riders before and many of them had their own customized plans that they preferred to work with," says Sole Technology VP Of Marketing Don Brown. "We make sure that we compensate our riders the highest in the industry to make sure that we can support these insurance plans."

Snowboarder Andy Finch has one such customized plan and is himself no stranger to injuries. "I have insurance that covers me worldwide with BUPA, and in the U.S. under the same policy I have United Health Care," says Finch. "I had to go through England to get this though. It only covers me once I am an inpatient at a hospital, so all the small stuff it does not cover."

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As far as the publicity goes, it can cut both ways, affecting the event and the athlete themselves. Of course the audience wants to know, so events must be careful to bridge the line between informing and exploiting.

"We do not have a philosophy of 'get the guy off the ramp as fast as possible,' but rather want the medical team to do the best they can regardless of the lights, crowd, and TV cameras," Shays says. "Once the athlete has been moved from the competition course, we slowly ease back into competition and do our best to

provide the crowd with updates on the athlete's condition as appropriate."

And just because the event ends, it doesn't mean the injury goes away. "We are as proactive as we can be about any aspect of publicity surrounding our events," says Moses Swope. "Because ESPN has good relationships with the athletes, we work closely with those who participate in the X Games on any media issues."

TAKING CARE OF THE TALENT

Without the athletes, action sports events would not exist, so every major event is careful to take care of its most important asset. This pro-

cess starts long before the first athlete drops in. After ensuring all courses are up to par, trained medics are put in place before any athlete is allowed to touch the course. The medical staff at the largest events includes certified physicians, certified athletic trainers, orthopedic surgeons, and advance life support ambulances on-site at all times.

"Last year at the LG Finals in Dallas I smashed my face and had a bad gash on my chin, and they had a doctor stitch me up right there after the event," skateboarder Neal Hendrix said. "That definitely beat having to go wait at a busy ER on a Saturday night."

These physicians aren't just plucked off the street either. "Our medical staff know the athletes and track their performance and injury history across all events through the season and through the years," says Shays. There is overlap between the medical staff at the major events, with most events opting to use the services of Winning Medicine International. The X Games, however, uses its own medics.

For the athletes, it can almost be preferable to get hurt at a major event because all these precautions are taken. The X Games has a policy where it will cover any injury incurred on site not covered by an athlete's insurance. "Since my insurance doesn't cover anything until I'm an inpatient, X Games covered pretty much all my medical bills for two years in a row," Finch says.

BRIDGING THE GAP

After the event is over and the crowd has gone home, the injured athletes don't get to stop dealing with their injury.

"The key for us is to make sure that Sole Technology is there to support our riders that may encounter injuries and get them back and riding as soon as they can with whatever support we can offer," Brown says. "We've paid for more knee surgeries than I can count, to the point of knowing most of the best surgeons from around the world and have them on our speed dial."

The amount of post-support offered by the events themselves is also growing, but only the X Games and the Olympics really go above and beyond in that regard. These events assist athletes with continuing care if the athlete chooses to continue to use the event's doctors; however there are a lot of hoops to jump through.

In the case a career-ending injury, such as the one suffered by Stephen Murray, there is a major gap in assistance for the athlete. This prompted



Don Brown has a vested interest in keeping Braydon Szafranski out of the E.R.

Aaron Cooke of Proper Management to start the Athlete Recovery Fund in 2007. The ARF is a non-profit organization to provide professional athletes in BMX, FMX, and skateboarding with financial support after a severe injury, granting funds for rehabilitation, equipment, long-term disability, and educational scholarships.

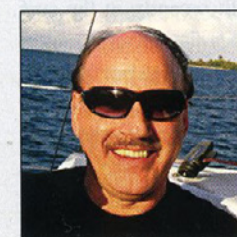
"I started the idea immediately after Stephen Murray's injury," explains Cooke. "I was at X Games when Jake Brown took his five-story fall in Skate Big Air and that just made it more clear that something needs to be done."

Event organizers have been eager to help so far. The Dew Tour was instrumental

in getting ARF off the ground by providing the start-up funds. ESPN invited the ARF to be one of a limited group of charities that will benefit from their annual Celebrity Golf Tournament.

"We have a long way to go, but we have received a lot of support in a very short time," says Cooke. "The bottom line is that everyone that I talk to—athlete, organizer, or sponsor—agrees that something needs to be done. ARF is taking away all the reasons that it hasn't been done before. There shouldn't be one company out there in action sports who can't contribute." ■■■

Tips From A Retailer: How To Minimize Risk At Your Next Event



George Leichtweis
Owner
Modern Skate & Surf

George Leichtweis is the owner of Modern Skate & Surf, with four locations in Michigan, including two indoor skate parks. He has been in business for more than 29 years and hosted hundreds of events. He has been a member of the Board Retailers Association for five years and is currently director of BRA's Skate Committee and a Senior Advisor.

- 1 Have adequate insurance that covers both bodily injury and property damage to a limit that is sufficient.
- 2 Require the signature of the participant on a thorough and complete liability waiver (including the right to administer medical aid in case of an accident). You must have the participants' parent or legal guardian (with actual papers) sign for a minor.
- 3 Utilize a secured area that is free of pedestrian and vehicular traffic.
- 4 Make sure that your skating surface (both ground surface and obstacles) are well maintained and free of debris.
- 5 Require protective gear. We live in the age of lawyers and even though a skater is righteous enough not to sue, their insurance company will sure try to recover their expenses toward any damages incurred.