

SNOWBOARDING

Wild Rides

by Phyllis McIntosh





Nagano, Japan, is where snowboarding officially came of age in 1998, when two snowboarding events were included in the Winter Olympics.

Cave drawings suggest that people in what is now Scandinavia were gliding over the snow on skis more than 5,000 years ago. And it's believed that Polynesians had been using boards to skim over ocean waves at least 1,000 years before explorer James Cook described surfing in the Hawaiian Islands in the late 1700s. So it was perhaps inevitable that one day somebody would combine skiing and surfing to create a fun new sport. What is surprising is that it took so long.

The sport that came to be known as snowboarding is only about 40 years old, but its popularity has grown at a phenomenal pace. Dismissed at first as a diversion for rowdy teenagers, it now ranks second only to skiing among winter sports in the United States. Snowboarding officially came of age in 1998, when two snowboarding events were included in the Winter Olympics at Nagano, Japan. At the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, competitors in the six snowboarding events include professional athletes with international reputations and multimillion-dollar endorsement deals and their own lines of designer clothing and snowboarding equipment.

Snurfer USA

No one can say for certain who first tried sliding across the snow on a single board. Some trace snowboarding's origins back to 1929, when M. J. "Jack" Burchett of Utah reportedly crafted a snowboard out of a plywood plank that he secured to his feet with clothesline and horse reins. His feat was considered significant enough that Burchett and his snowboard were featured in one of the semifinal designs for the recent U.S. 25-cent coin commemorating the state of Utah.

Modern snowboarding, however, began in 1965 when Sherman Poppen, an engineer in Muskegon, Michigan, invented a toy for his daughter by fastening two skis together and attaching a rope to one end so she would have some control as she stood on the board and glided downhill. Dubbed the "snurfer" (combining *snow* and *surfer*), the toy proved so popular among his daughter's friends that Poppen licensed the idea to a manufacturer that sold about a million snurfers over the next decade.

In the early 1970s, Poppen organized snurfer competitions at a Michigan ski resort that attracted

enthusiasts from all over the country. Some of those competitors and others inspired by the snurfing craze soon began experimenting with new designs that would advance the sport of snowboarding immeasurably by the 1980s.

One of those early pioneers was Tom Sims, a devotee of skateboarding (a sport born in the 1950s when kids attached roller skate wheels to small boards that they steered by shifting their weight). As an eighth grader in Haddonfield, New Jersey, in the 1960s, Sims crafted a snowboard in his school shop class by gluing carpet to the top of a piece of wood and attaching aluminum sheeting to the bottom. Sims began manufacturing his own line of snowboards in 1977 and went on to become a snowboarding champion and a stunt double for actor Roger Moore in a snowboarding scene for the 1985 James Bond film *A View to a Kill*.

In the mid-1970s, Dimitrije Milovich—an American surfing enthusiast who had also enjoyed sliding down snowy hills on cafeteria trays during his college years in upstate New York—constructed a snowboard called “Winterstick,” inspired by the design and feel of a surfboard. Articles about his invention in such mainstream magazines as *Newsweek* helped publicize the young sport.

The most successful of the early designers of snowboards was Jake Burton Carpenter, a Vermont native who had enjoyed snurfing since the age of 14. In 1977 Burton impressed the crowd at a Michigan snurfing competition with bindings he had designed to secure his feet to the board. That same year, he founded Burton Snowboards in Londonderry, Vermont. The company still ranks as one of the leading manufacturers of snowboards and snowboarding equipment in the world.

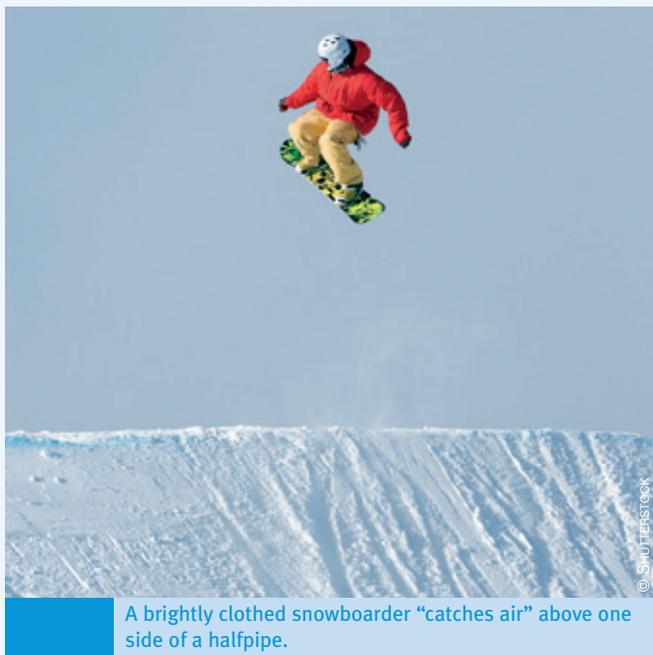
Despite snowboarding’s increasing popularity, ski resorts were loath to embrace the new sport. Snowboarders, mostly young males who rode aggressively and adopted the slang and baggy clothes of the rebellious skateboarding and surfing cultures, were considered the bad boys of the slopes. (Reflecting this culture, the first magazine for snowboarders was called *Absolute Radical*; it later changed its name to *International Snowboarding Magazine*.) In 1985 only seven percent of U.S. ski areas allowed snowboarders, a situation reflected in Europe.



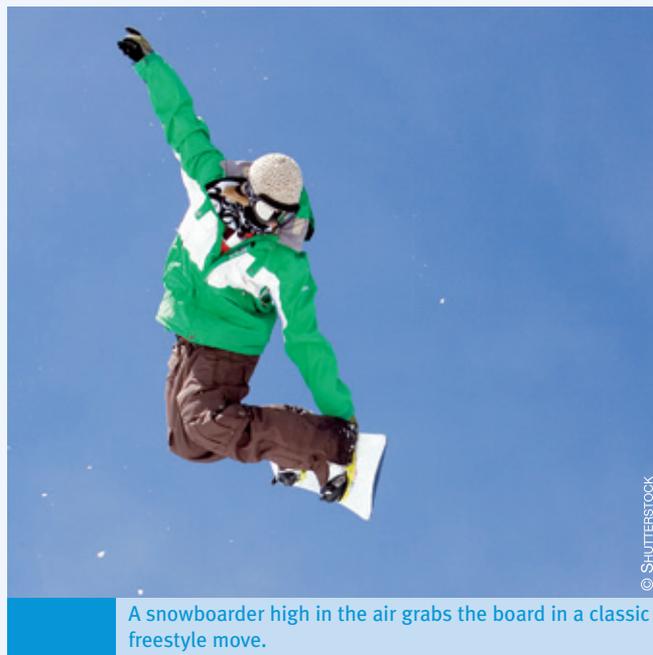
A daredevil snowboarder launches into a jump off a jagged, snowy slope.

However, by the end of the 1980s, realizing that snowboarding was big business, ski manufacturers such as K2, Atomic, Rossignol, and Mistral began producing snowboards. As equipment and skills improved and organizations such as the United States of America Snowboard Association and the International Snowboard Federation (now defunct) were founded to provide guidelines for instruction and competition, snowboarding became more accepted.

Now, virtually all ski resorts in North America and Europe welcome snowboarders, and many have constructed special terrain parks with jumps and other features that encourage boarders to hone their skills and showcase their techniques.



A brightly clothed snowboarder “catches air” above one side of a halfpipe.



A snowboarder high in the air grabs the board in a classic freestyle move.

Boarding Basics

At its most basic, snowboarding is akin to skiing; participants in both sports rely on gravity to descend a snowy slope. But in terms of technique, snowboarding more closely resembles surfing and skateboarding. While skiers exercise control by shifting their weight from one side to the other, snowboarders shift weight from heel to toe. When their weight is forward, their boards speed up; as they shift back, their boards slow down. When snowboarders press their heels down on the edge of their boards, they stop. In a straight race between a skier and snowboarder of equal skill, the skier probably would reach the bottom of the slope first, because skis allow the rider to attain greater velocity.

A snowboard is constructed of a wood core surrounded by fiberglass to make it stiff and light. Steel along the edges helps the rider turn and control speed. Like skiers, snowboarders who race wear hard-shell boots for greater support, but most snowboarders prefer soft boots that provide the flexibility needed to perform the tricks and maneuvers for which the sport is famous.

Bindings that hold the rider’s boots onto the board are fastened to stainless steel inserts on top of the board. The most popular type, strap bindings, secure the boot with an ankle strap and a toe strap. Step-in bindings are used mainly for hard boots. A new design, called flow-in bindings, combines

the control of strap-in systems with the ease of step-ins. Flow-in bindings have a large tongue that covers most of the top of the boot; the rider’s foot enters through the rear. Bindings may be positioned differently on the board depending on whether a snowboarder rides with his left foot in front of the right (regular stance) or with the right foot in front (known as a goofy stance).

There are three main styles of snowboarding, each of which demands its own type of board:

- **Free-riding.** The snowboarder rides down a slope taking advantage of bumps and curves in the natural terrain to “catch air” (leave the ground) and perform tricks. The free-ride snowboard, or all-mountain snowboard, is the most popular, accounting for half of all snowboards sold. It moves well on a powder surface and is maneuverable enough for beginners but stiff enough for sharp turns.
- **Freestyle.** Inspired by skateboarding, freestyle snowboarding emphasizes tricks such as flips, spins, and grabbing the board in midair. These tricks are usually performed on manmade features in snowboard terrain parks. The freestyle board is short, wide, flexible, and responsive to the rider, which also makes it a good choice for a beginner. With less edge grip, freestyle boards are not built for fast cruising or sharp, carving turns.

One of the most popular terrain features for freestyle riders is the halfpipe, a U-shaped trench patterned after the wooden halfpipe ramps popular in skateboarding, inline skating, and BMX bike racing. As snowboarders ride down one side of the halfpipe and up the other, they gain enough momentum to become airborne and do tricks. The snowboarding halfpipe was born in 1978, so the story goes, when a group of high school students in Tahoe City, California, began piling snow around a gully to make it deep enough to ride their snowboards and perform skateboard-inspired tricks. The idea caught on when snowboarding pioneer Tom Sims built a halfpipe for the World Snowboarding Championships he organized in California in 1983.

Early snowboarding halfpipes were constructed by hand with shovels and rakes. The invention in 1990 of a cutting machine called a Pipe Dragon has made it possible for ski resorts to groom their halfpipes regularly and consistently.

- **Alpine.** Similar to skiing, this racing style of snowboarding emphasizes downhill speed and sharp turns rather than tricks. Best for advanced riders, alpine snowboards resemble large skis and are narrower and less stable than other types of boards.

Like skiing, snowboarding poses a risk of injury, although the two sports strain different parts of the body. In skiing, the knees are most vulnerable. The snowplow maneuver (bringing the tips of the skis together into a V) that novices use to stop puts tremendous pressure on the inside of the knee. Among more advanced skiers, bad knee twists during falls cause most injuries. Snowboarders, on the other hand, are most prone to wrist injuries. With their feet firmly locked into non-release bindings on the board, they instinctively reach out a hand to break a fall.

Because falls and tumbles are common, especially among beginners, snowboarding has its own protective gear. Helmets and wrist guards are essential, and knee pads are also popular. Some beginners



A snowcat fitted with a Pipe Dragon grooms a halfpipe in preparation for a competition.



A helmet is a crucial piece of snowboarding protective gear.

rely on hip pads that pull on like biker shorts under snow pants to help cushion the seat and tailbone during frequent falls. Snowboarding pants themselves may have extra padding in the knees and seat and usually are looser fitting than ski pants to allow more freedom of movement during spins and jumps. All snowboarders, like skiers, should dress in layers for warmth and wear waterproof jackets and pants. Any style of snowboard requires a safety leash, a strap wrapped around the leg to prevent the board from getting away in case the bindings accidentally release.



This snowboard has strap bindings that secure the snowboarder's boots to the board with ankle straps and toe straps.



A snowboarder performs a trick in midair as other competitors awaiting their turns watch from the sideline.

Competitions

Part of the thrill of any sport is competition, so it's not surprising that snowboarders have been vying with one another almost since the first riders took to the slopes. The very first snowboarding contest, a small event called King of the Mountain, took place in Leadville, Colorado, in 1981. That was followed the next year by the first National Snowboarding Championship at Suicide Six Ski Area in Vermont, an event so low-tech that an upside-down kitchen table was used as a starting gate. By 1983, such contests were so popular that Jake Burton and Tom Sims organized competing championships, Burton's in Snow Valley, Vermont, and Sims's in the Lake Tahoe region of California. Meanwhile, the Europeans were catching on to the new sport, and in 1985 Austria hosted the first World Cup of Snowboarding.

In the mid-1990s, snowboarding received a major boost when the sports television network ESPN launched the X Games to showcase "extreme" sports such as skateboarding, BMX bicycle racing, and snowboarding. The Winter X Games publicized snowboarding to a worldwide audience, demonstrated its commercial appeal, and most importantly, paved the way for its acceptance as a legitimate winter sport and its inclusion in the Winter Olympics.

Most ski resorts offer competition opportunities for snowboarders of all skill levels. Through amateur contests, novice boarders can get a feel for competing and sometimes pick up small sponsor-

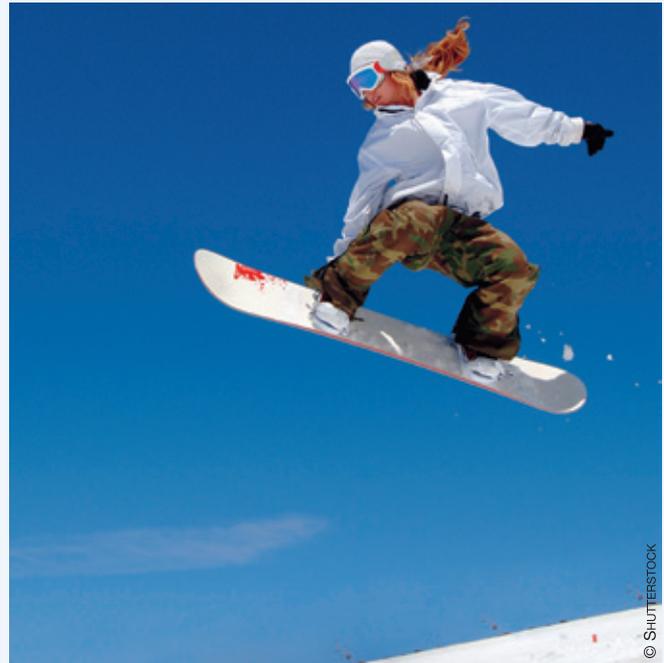
ships from local companies. For more advanced boarders, many resorts offer season-long competition programs, complete with coaching, intensive training, and frequent contests. The most serious high school age competitors can enroll in mountain academies, which combine schoolwork and snow time and teach the discipline needed to compete successfully at the highest levels.

Currently, there are four main categories of snowboarding competition:

- **Alpine racing.** As in slalom skiing events, snowboarders race downhill making sharp turns around a series of flags, or "gates," and the competitor with the fastest time wins. Races may be designated slalom, giant slalom, and super giant slalom (super G), depending on the length of the course and how close together the gates are set. The super G, which has the longest course and gates set farthest apart, is the fastest race of all, with competitors reaching speeds up to 72 kilometers per hour.
- **Slope style.** Boarders descend a course while performing jumps and stunts on a series of obstacles, which include boxes, rails (see Snowboarding Slang), and almost anything the boards can slide on. Judges score competitors on the difficulty, variety, and execution of their tricks. The rider awarded the highest score wins.
- **Halfpipe.** Competitors speed from one side of the snowy trench to the other, performing tricks while in the air above the sides of the pipe. Judges rate the tricks on difficulty, the cleanness of the performance and the landing, and the amount of "air," or how high the rider soared while doing the trick. Often, there are two or three rounds of competition, and the rider with the highest combined score wins.
- **Boardercross (also known as Boarder X).** Snowboarders race down a course patterned after a motorcycle motocross track, with jumps,



Making a quick turn past a gate in a slalom competition, a snowboarder goes airborne on the slope.



Exhibiting graceful form, a snowboarder flies through the air during a slope style competition.

berms, and other obstacles made of snow. Competitions consist of a series of rounds, or heats, with the first two riders in each heat advancing to the next round. The rider who finishes first in the last round is the overall winner.

Snowboarding has become so popular that major competitive events are held all over the world and offer prizes of up to a quarter of a million dollars. The FIS (International Skiing Federation) World Cup Circuit, for example, includes snowboarding competitions in Argentina, Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, Russia, Sweden, and Switzerland, as well as the United States. The largest U.S. competitions, which feature a series of events that attract professional riders from all over the world, are the U.S. Snowboard Grand Prix, with prizes totaling \$300,000, and the U.S. Open, with a total prize purse of \$250,000. The Revolution Tour offers competitions at a half dozen top-notch venues for talented teens hoping to advance to the elite ranks. Another launching pad for young riders is the Alpine NorAm Cup, which stages more than 20 men's and women's races throughout the United States and Canada.

Also popular are the showier “big air” competitions, such as the X Games and the World Extreme Snowboarding Championships. In these competi-

tions, boarders perform outlandish stunts while riding through difficult terrain such as narrow chutes and steep drop-offs.

Like other sports, snowboarding has produced its share of stars who are skilled businesspeople as well as talented athletes. One of the best known is 23-year-old Shaun White, who has been a professional rider since he was 14. Known as the Flying Tomato because of his long red hair, the California native has won eight gold medals at the X Games and a gold medal in the halfpipe at the 2006 Winter Olympics. His fame has paid off handsomely in terms of numerous corporate sponsorship deals and his own line of snowboards, snowboard equipment, and clothing.

For everyone from professionals like Shaun White to youngsters just learning to stay upright on a board, snowboarding is a thrilling part of the winter sports scene that provides a showcase for individual athleticism and artistry. Snowboarding coach Jim Smith, in his book, *The Art of Snowboarding*, describes the sport thus: “When you do it and do it right, you are doing it like no one else. It's purely individual—an art form as much as a sport. Whether you're on the green run [novice slope] or the biggest terrain park going, you paint your own picture on every descent.”



In a furious boardercross race, one rider goes down as others speed toward the finish line. The top two finishers will advance to the next round.

Snowboarding Slang

carve – turn sharply on a snowboard’s edge, leaving a thin track in the snow

catch air – become airborne on a snowboard

fakie – riding a snowboard backwards

goofy – a riding stance in which the right foot is forward; in a regular stance, the left foot is forward.

halfpipe – a U-shaped channel constructed in the snow, with walls five to ten feet high, on which snowboarders perform jumps and tricks

jib – ride briefly on a non-snow surface, such as a log, tree stump, picnic table, or rock, usually to add style to a jump or trick

ollie – small jump in which the snowboarder uses his or her energy to spring into the air

rail slide – a wooden or metal rail, or downed tree, that snowboarders slide on and use to become airborne

rider – a snowboarder

shred – race down the slope at high speed, carving with intensity

wipeout – a spectacular fall

Websites of Interest

ABC-of-Snowboarding

www.abc-of-snowboarding.com

Calling itself “your complete snowboarding portal,” this site has detailed information about everything from how to get started in the sport to the best resorts for snowboarding vacations and profiles of top professional snowboarders.

Mountain Zone

<http://snowboard.mountainzone.com>

This website features information about and reviews of snowboarding gear, as well as articles ranging from the basics—“How to get on a ski lift with a snowboard”—to instruction on how to perform snowboarding tricks.

Olympic Snowboarding

www.olympic.org/en/content/Sports/All-Sports/Skiing/Snowboard

The snowboarding section of the official Olympics website describes the events of Olympic snowboard competition and provides information about the history of the sport, equipment required, and a glossary of snowboarding terms.

Transworld Snowboarding

<http://snowboarding.transworld.net>

This official website of *Transworld Snowboarding* magazine speaks to experienced snowboarders with photos, product information, schedules of snowboarding competitions, camps, and workshops, and practical advice on how to get the best performance out of a snowboard.

PHYLLIS MCINTOSH is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many national magazines and newspapers.



A snowboarder exhibits the speed and balance needed to win downhill racing competitions.

Snowboarding and the Olympics



© SHUTTERSTOCK

Snowboarding champion Shaun White soars effortlessly on his snowboard. White won a gold medal in the halfpipe at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy, and is favored to medal at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver.

At the 1998 winter games in Nagano, Japan, snowboarding became the first board sport included as an official Olympic event. (Surfers and skateboarders are still waiting for an Olympic nod.) But its entry into the ranks of the sporting elite was not without controversy.

Many snowboarders objected when the International Olympic Committee named the International Skiing Federation (FIS) as the governing body to oversee Olympic snowboarding instead of the International Snowboard Federation, which until then had sanctioned most snowboarding events. As a sign of protest, Terje Hakonsen of Norway, then considered one of the best snowboarders in the world, refused to compete in the Olympics.

In 1998 snowboarders competed in only two Olympic events, the halfpipe and the giant slalom. In the 2002 games at Salt Lake City, the giant slalom was replaced by the parallel giant slalom, in which competitors race against each other on side-by-side courses. At the 2006 Olympics in Torino, Italy, boardercross was added as a third event. The 2010 games in Vancouver are featuring both men's and women's competition in those three events.

For the 2010 Olympics, the FIS created a world ranking list for the World Cup competition to determine who would qualify for the Olympics. To participate, a country must have snowboarders who place in the top 40 for men and in the top 30 for women. The number of boarders who place at those levels determines how many a country can have on its Olympic team, up to a maximum of four for each event.

Americans have dominated Olympic snowboarding so far, winning a total of 14 medals, almost twice as many as the nearest competitor, Switzerland. Favorites for the Vancouver Games include Americans Shaun White, Hannah Teter, and Kelly Clark. However, Austrian, and perhaps Canadian, snowboarders are predicted to be strong contenders in a sport that has become truly a worldwide phenomenon.