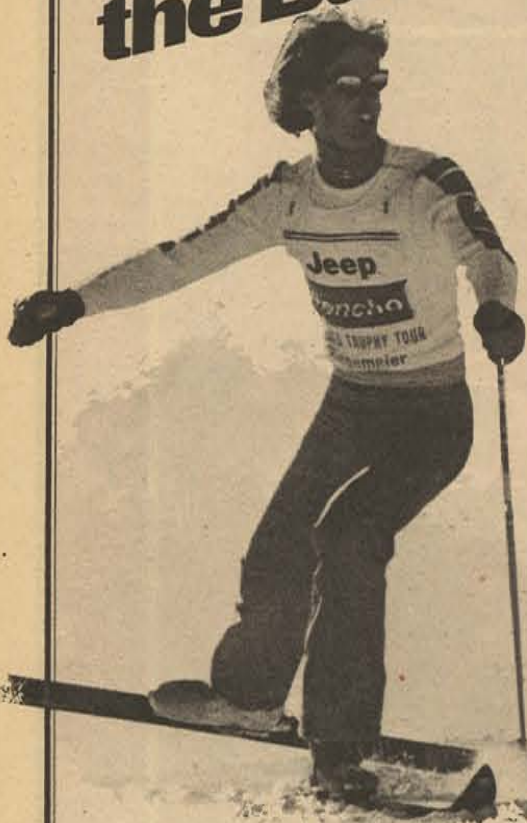




Dogging

The Insane Art of Freestyle Skiing -- The Bumps, the Bucks, the Abominable Snowpersons



BY LUCIAN K. TRUSCOTT IV

These days, they are called the bumps. In the heyday of your correspondent, some eight to ten years ago, when he skied often enough and well enough to be considered worthy of certification as an instructor, they were called moguls, or collectively, a headwall, or by the uninitiated, an expert run. Skiing has always been an elitist sport, and skiers have cultivated a private

Three faces of freestyle: (left) the aerials; (above, far right) a "daffy" aerial; (top) running the moguls; (below) ballet

parlance, akin to the language of the sailboat, words apart from the rest of the world, designed to confuse and amaze the outsider. Nearly everyone was an outsider.

Back then, skiing was all leathery braggadocio. There was more mystery than measure to the sport, and so the elitism of skiing had a rough underside, an unpracticed, whacko edge to it, as if one were laying tracks through illegal snow with only one's best friend and a sense of rash, unfettered will between the self and some unknowable, probably imaginary danger. It was necessary that certain aspects of the sport remained unknowable, or seemingly so.

This winter, your correspondent, a mild-mannered ex-newspaperman from New York, was shocked to find that a new generation of skier had dropped the pretenses of the past. Young skiers referred to skiing the moguls, shooting the impossible incline — the fall-line gravity dictates should be fallen down, not skied—as if they were talking not of danger, but of lift lines. Bumps? What bumps, goddamnit! The little bumps on your face? Those things out there on the mountain are moguls. How dare you threaten the mystery of skiing the moguls, the expert runs.

Heavenly Valley, January 10th. The bumps on Betty's run, near the top of the mountain, are tiny, sharp-edged, carved steep on the sides, with ugly, vicious peaked crests. They look like little pyramids, the awfulest moguls I've ever seen. Skiing the bumps on Betty's today will be something like riding the back bumper in one of those steel-belted radial tire ads you see on TV, where a guy in a white helmet drives a new LTD over railroad ties on a test track somewhere outside Detroit, whap-a-da-whap-a-da-whap-a-da.

About 50 feet below the Snow Cat track at the top of the run, two guys are raising a huge blue box onto a metal tripod sunk in the snow. There are 16 of them along the mogul course, 15-inch

bass speakers topped by midrange horns pushed by six amplifiers with 800 total watts of music power, backed by a yellow gas generator sitting out behind the judges' stand in the snow. It has taken almost four hours to prepare for this event.

Now Dave Lamb and Nick Powell, the soundmen, are ready. Bud Palmer, the patrician ABC-TV sports announcer, flips up his first plasticized card containing names, statistics and canned witticisms about each of the competitors, and he's ready. On the Snow Cat track at the top of the run, a great mob of freestylers shuffle their skis back and forth nervously in the snow, cracking jokes, adjusting bindings, tightening ski boot buckles. They're ready.

Bop-a-da-bop-a-da-whap-clang... it's ZZ Top, the Texas three-man rock group, playing a quickly forgettable heavy metal classic at ear-splitting volume through the 16 speakers lining the mogul course. Bud Palmer has mike in hand and is muttering something about "this beautiful day here at Heavenly, how glad we all are to..." and Jack Taylor, a diminutive bearded chap with smoky, interiorized eyes hidden behind wraparound yellow goggles, is rocketing down Betty's run, bouncing from the top of one mogul to another with precise, tight moves, an impossible number of turns, *nobody* can turn that quickly, that sharply, that easily, a leap, a giant spread-eagle leap over one, two, three moguls at once, *whomp* back onto the snow, a mogul crushes beneath his skis, bone-crunching landing he absorbs with his knees and his stomach, sitting back bending at the waist like an old elbow shock absorber of the kind one finds on Fords of prewar vintage, Jack Taylor is skiing down Betty's run at speeds approaching 40 miles an hour, he is flying from one mogul to another, four or five bumps per second, he is swatting his way through those bitter, peaky bumps like a disco dancer, leg and stomach muscles crushing and expanding, pumping, driving him seemingly in tune with the ZZ music. Somehow Jack Taylor has melded his skis and his legs and the bumps and the music into a whole, a dance, an agile routine more than a mogul run, but wait, only 22 sec-



onds have elapsed from top to bottom, that's 38.63 vertical feet per second: Jack Taylor has been dropping three apartment building stories per second!

There is money at stake here, \$30,000 in Jeep Honcho bucks for the men, and \$25,000 in Colgate bucks for the women. The winner of the men's moguls will pocket \$1800, women's moguls winner gets \$1500. (Amounts are the same for winners of the ballet and aerial competition and for the man and woman who finish first in the combined category.) So in there with the rock & roll and the madness and the snowbound mountainside is a pretty big chunk of dough—this year the freestylers will be competing for a total of nearly a half million in prize money. Many of the heavy freestylers have what's called a "winner's contract" with a ski manufacturer, which means the ski maker will match winnings dollar for dollar. Men who finish in the top 15 places, women who finish in the top 20, are in the money. Coupled with equipment endorsements for bindings, boots, ski clothing, cosmetics, goggles, gloves and what have you, and sponsorship by a ski area, this could triple or quadruple winnings for skiers with contracts. What this means is that freestylers are really competing for between \$1- to \$2-million on the circuit this year. Winning counts.

What if you're just starting out? Or what if you're a heavy having a bad year? Tough luck. Freestyle is like the tennis or golf circuits. The skiers who aren't top-money winners hold jobs in

the off-season and save their money so they can afford the air fares and hotel bills to go on tour. Occasionally, if somebody is looking hot, a deal can be worked out whereby a manufacturer fronts the expense money to hit the circuit. This privilege is enjoyed by the top men and women and a few talented hopefuls. Everybody else copes, and trains when and where they can. Being a freestyler is plenty romantic if you like bottom-of-the-lift burgers and doubling up in cheapie motels.

If there is one thing that sets this sport apart from any other, it's the monkey wrench all this dough has thrown into the politics of freestyle. In no other sport have I seen such psychic backbends performed by competitors to convince themselves, each other, spectators and the press that though winning counts, they're not really trying to beat each other in the Vince Lombardi sense. The reluctance of freestylers to come to grips with the economic success of their own sport has its roots in a kind of sweet innocence which holds that as skiers, they're really competing against the mountain, not against each other. With some \$2 million at stake this year, with 45 men and 25 women out there skiing for it, you can imagine just how long that's going to last. One senses that the winners on the Professional Freestyle Associates (PFA) world tour this year will ski with all the determination and energy of an electric meat grinder.

You take Scott Brooksbank, for example. With the possible exception of Jack Taylor, no one wants to win the moguls more than Brooksbank. He was third-ranked overall in 1975, and was heard telling a reporter this morning that "I have no friends once I get out on the mountain." That's the attitude, Scotty! Chew 'em up! Brooksbank trains incessantly and runs three miles every morning at 6 a.m. The other skiers treat him with deference. He's shooting for the top this year, they say. And he's a hell of a skier, graceful, precise, daring. He'll get more air, jump higher, more often, than anybody else in the moguls. When he skis, the crowd along the run goes wild. Brooks! Brooks! Get it, Brooks! "He's a skiing machine," admires Mark Jones, one of the hotter freestylers in the moguls, as Brooksbank takes off on his last practice run, a roostertail of powder squirting behind him.

Alone among the male competitors, Brooksbank seems to have come to grips with the astounding amount of money which will flow on the circuit this winter. He is skiing for Rosignol, the largest ski manufacturer in the world—one presumes, for the money they'll put into the sport this year. He doesn't hang out and carry on with the rest of the freestylers when the lifts have shut down and the mountain is dark. He is a winner.

Now you may have guessed that I do not like Brooksbank, and you are right. I don't like Brooksbank because of the look in his eye, the measuring, the planning, calculating cast to his vision. I will not put my faith in him precisely because he will never fail me. The mystery and the magic are missing.

For old-time magic consider a character by the name of John Clendenin, 28, from South Lake Tahoe, California, who was top freestyle money winner in 1973, and was named Hot Dogger of

the Year in 1974. He runs the moguls with a drugged frenzy, shooting up a crest, legs and arms askew, ski tips pointing at opposite sides of the run, crashing back to earth in a shower of snow, a great burst of motion, a rush of speed, off the next crest with one leg horizontal, parallel to the snow, the ski waving in the air, the other ski barely hugging the mogul, dug in at the heel, ski bottom advertising its brand name to the sky, ass dragging the top of the last mogul, hands above head, scraggy hair blown, snow covered. There is nothing pretty about the way Clendenin skis but there is great electricity, the sense of immediate danger one gets watching a guy punch a stocker on the quarter-mile dirt track, push it right up to that point at which nobody—not the driver, or the crowd, or the other drivers on the track—is quite sure when the stocker is going to cut loose and roll for the railing.

One senses that Clendenin is in touch with an unknowable essence of the sport. Where Brooksbank is the technician, Jack Taylor the artist, Clendenin is the Pig Pen of freestyle, an irregular, dangerous man who skis the bumps, afraid, in awe, having figured out nothing beforehand, creating questions rather than answering them. "They may be able to ski better than I can," he told me, "but I have more imagination."

There are those who have been heard to argue that Jack Taylor is possibly, just possibly, the best skier in the world. The argument goes like this: if the different kinds of ski competitions were stripped of their trappings—ballet and flips from freestyle, gates and arbitrary courses from giant slalom and downhill racing—and a man were presented instead with the raw challenge of skiing down a mountain, from the top to the bottom, in any manner he deemed best, they say that Jack Taylor in such a primitive competition might prevail over all comers. It's hard to tell. Jack Taylor is the best argument I know for the disciplines of Eastern meditation techniques and t'ai chi, which he uses to focus his concentration and energy while skiing. But John Clendenin is the best argument I know for excess, for self-indulgence, for self-abuse, for drug-abuse, for sexual depravity, for irresponsibility and all attendant risks and costs. It makes one feel more alive to watch him ski, obviously not a criterion within the purview of freestyle judging. Jack Taylor: first. Scott Brooksbank: seventh. John Clendenin: 11th. Judges, shame on you.



Everyone has a gripe with the four judges, all of whom are former competitors. My own preference for Clendenin in the bumps, for example, was shared by exactly no one. Most spectators seemed to favor a local boy and former racer, Chris Thorne, whose strength was his speed. Another favorite was Henri Authier, of Tigne, France, known as "the French Bull," because of his brute strength. But he fell, lost a ski and was disqualified. After only one competition, competitors could be heard grumbling about the judging, and there was talk of getting the PFCA, the Professional Freestyle Competitors Association, to call a meeting at Stowe, Vermont, and discuss revising the judging criteria. This is unique to freestyle, the fact that the competitors have final say on the criteria by which they are judged. Not only that, they choose their own judges. So it seems odd that the people who pick the judges and set their own rules would be complaining about their choices so soon.

This is not a new problem. There have been complaints about judging for every one of the five years there have been freestyle competitions. Last year, judging criteria were finalized and judges were chosen at Snowbird, Utah, during a clinic run by Mark Stiegemeier, who placed first overall last year. Several of the top freestylers were in on the clinic—Jack Taylor, Penny Street, Robert Young and Bob Salerno. It occurred to me then, as I watched the sport's superstars pick the judges who would judge them and the rules by which they would be judged, that there might be just the slightest conflict of interest. This was dismissed by those involved. Freestyle is such a young sport, I was told, no one else is qualified to set criteria or pick judges. Uh-huh. And what of the new competitors who would qualify for the circuit two weeks later? What voice in the criteria had they? None.

No wonder there were complaints at Heavenly Valley. The new criteria set by the top freestylers and adopted by the PFCA is stiff and detailed in every area of competition. In the moguls, for example, competitors are judged in three weighted categories: number and execution of turns—40%; speed—40%; number and execution of jumps—20%. In ballet this year judges are looking less for spectacular stunts than for what amounts to a choreographed dance routine. In the aerials, judges are applying

gymnasts' standards to the jumps and flips competitors do.

Skiers were heard to complain at Heavenly Valley that the whole judging business is being taken too seriously, that the sport is being moved uptown, that the freestylers themselves are indulging in exactly the kind of bullshit they intended to avoid back in 1972 and 1973 when they first sought to gain some control over the destiny of the sport. These are the classical complaints one hears in any emerging organization, the pains of growth.

Freestyle was called hot-dogging at first, a term which was meant to capture the feel of a hot recreational skier bombing down the mountain, letting it all hang out, shooting the curl, as it were. Indeed, freestyle is perhaps more deeply rooted in recreational skiing—the sport enjoyed by some 4 million Americans each winter—than in ski racing. The first freestyle competition was held almost five years ago in response to an ad run in *Skiing* magazine which asked: who is the hottest skier on the mountain? The competition was held in Waterville Valley, New Hampshire. It was one long run which combined stunt, or trick skiing, moguls and aërials. A skier started at the top, skied to the bottom, and that was it. What he did in between determined his place. Anything went. In the earliest freestyle competitions, falls were all right, mistakes were commonplace, near disasters were a turn-on. According to Wayne Wong, who was named the first Hot Dogger of the Year, the way a skier recovered from a fall or a near fall—showing class on your ass—was often the factor determining who won or lost. In those days, John Clendenin's brand of whackem-smackem mogul running put him at the top of the sport. "Those were the days," he recalls now, "when it wasn't uncommon to drop a couple of hits of Orange Sunshine during the practice runs so you'd be completely gonzo by the time your turn came to compete."

Not long after the first freestyle competitions in 1972, which were marketed, sanctioned and judged by *Skiing* magazine and Chevrolet, the freestylers met and formed IFSA, International Freestyle Skiers Association, which would sanction future freestyle competitions and give the skiers a hand in the destiny of their sport.

The competitors were seeking to move the sport away from the strictures which they felt were bound to be imposed upon it by the ski industry (they considered it conservative) and *Skiing* magazine (in reality, one man, Doug Pfeiffer, who reportedly considered himself the godfather of freestyle, and whom many freestylers considered dictatorial). "We didn't want freestyle limited to the imagination of the industry," recalls John Clendenin, who was one of the founders of IFSA. "The whole thing about freestyle is that it came about in spite of the industry, not because of it. The ski industry is run by ex-racers, and for years, racing was the only marketable skiing phenomenon. Freestyle was started, at least in part, as a reaction to the old racing ethic. When we started it, we wanted it to be more than a sport. We wanted a whole lifestyle, we wanted to celebrate skiing!"



IFSA lasted two years. The competitors themselves gave up on IFSA when its director, whom they had hired, started moving the organization from simply a sanctioning body into a company which could market as well as sanction the sport. This caused consternation among the competitors who, feeling the onslaught of big business, were not sure they could trust those with whom they had gotten involved.

"That was when Mike Lund and I went to Curtis Oberhansly," remembers Clendenin. "We spent two weeks talking to him every day. He was the guy we trusted. He had been the lawyer for IFSA and had helped set it up. So we asked him to set us up with a professional marketing scene that was profit making, and yet still represented our interests. He formed PFA and got involved because we asked him to. And he owns 100% of the stock because we asked him to. We didn't want anybody else getting a piece of it, who could later sell us out. We, the competitors, sign an exclusive contract to ski for PFA, and PFA in turn signs an exclusive contract with the competitors association, PFCA, to market only contests which are sanctioned by us."

PFA ran the freestyle circuit for the first time last year, and this year is marketing the circuit as a "World Trophy Tour." Wordings are important here. There will be at least one other circuit this year, the "Chevrolet American Freestyle Skiing Tour," produced by Harry Leonard and Company from New York. Oberhansly and PFA sued the Chevy tour to restrain them from marketing their circuit as a "Class A" or championship tour. So far, there has been one hearing in Federal District Court in Salt Lake City, where the judge issued a temporary injunction against Chevrolet and Harry Leonard and Company, restraining them from soliciting contracted PFA skiers and from calling the Chevy tour a world or national championship freestyle tour.

Bernie Weischel, a spokesman for the Chevy tour, reached in Waterville Valley, New Hampshire, at the tour's first competition, had this to say: "I don't believe freestyle skiing should be in the courtroom. To this day our tour hasn't done anything aggressive against Oberhansly or PFA or their tour, and yet he seems to feel very threatened by us. We don't label our events "A" or "B." That is up to the press and the public. We've always been open about what we're doing and were hoping we wouldn't have to go to court, but now it looks like we will. I don't believe the business and

politics of freestyle skiing should be publicized. We've got a good, exciting circuit, and it's too bad both freestyle tours can't live with each other."

A direct line can be drawn between the onslaught of lawsuits, the constraints of rules, the fights over judging criteria,

and the appearance of big-time money on the freestyle scene. When it became theoretically possible for one skier, male or female, to win over \$7200 in three days of competition, it was inevitable that the image of the acid dropping, coke whiffing freestyler would follow the bear-trap binding and become a fond, if rather haunting, memory.

The PFA is headquartered, for reasons known only to Curtis K. Oberhansly, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Since Oberhansly owns 100% of PFA voting stock, the profits (or losses) which accrue to freestyle skiing will be his. So far, freestyle hasn't been too good to him. He has personally sunk \$22,000 of his own cash into the sport, partially paying office costs, salaries and assorted other expenses since he quit his six-figure law practice in July 1974, and started devoting full time to freestyle. When he counts back salary he has coming to him from last year, the sport owes him \$75,000. This makes him a man with an understandable interest in the future of the sport. He does not think of himself in terms of other, better known, entrepreneurs in the world of sport, like Rozelle or Don King, the fight promoter, but the comparison is obvious. And it doesn't go unnoticed by the freestylers who handed him the keys to the sport, lock, stock and barrel. "When one of these kids accuses me of selling them out," Oberhansly said, "I feel like cashing my chips, taking the loss and going back to being Salt Lake City's token ACLUer. Sometimes I wonder why I listened to Clendenin and bought his bill of goods in the first place. Then, like today, I'm up on the slopes, and I watch a new kid, like Frank Bare, do something incredible, turn a perfect double backflip, the best I've ever seen, and the payoff comes. Zap! It all comes together in a magic moment like that. It's all worth it."

On the last day at Heavenly, Airborne Eddie Ferguson, 28, a former construction worker from Boise, Idaho, is perched at the top of California run, 9500 feet above sea level, shivering, brushing the blowing snow out of his hair, away from his eyes. What a day to have the aerial competition! The top of the mountain at Heavenly Valley is so socked-in you can barely see the judge's stand, less than 50 yards down the slope. A fine, powdery snow is blowing, coming from all directions at once, sifting into the senses like a whispered curse.

But here's Eddie Ferguson, adjusting the buckles on his boots (they pay him money), pulling his goggles down over his eyes (ditto), checking them for fog, for condensation, tightening his bindings (more bread), which are fastened to Dynastar skis (bucks again), grinning, waving at the freezing spectators lined

up behind the storm-fencing. Airborne Eddie, one of the grand old men of freestyle, one of its all-time top money-winners (and money earners), the man credited with the memorable phrase, "If mankind were not meant to fly, God would have given us roots." On this abysmal day at 9500 feet, Airborne Eddie does not want to fly. But his "flight plan," listing the two jumps he will perform in competition, is filed with the judges. He is scheduled to turn a back lay-out flip on the top jump, and after a short run, to flip again on the second jump, a frontflip this time, a delayed lay-out with a pike. They are not particularly difficult jumps. A couple of years ago they might have garnered him a first place, no matter how they were executed. But this year several guys will be turning double backflips, even more will be trying the mobius, the back- or frontflip with a full twist of the body, and at least one guy, Robert Young, a former gymnast from Ogden, Utah, will attempt what no freestyler has yet done in competition, a double mobius, a backflip with two full twists. So as Airborne Eddie prepares for his third practice run of the day, his fifth and sixth jumps into the foggy Heavenly sky, he knows he doesn't stand much of a chance. It is not a comfortable feeling. At this moment he is perhaps feeling a bit old, out-of-date, outdistanced by the specialists like Young and Mark Stiegemeier. Ironically, Stiegemeier, 23, who got his start in the sport only a couple of years ago when he signed up for Airborne Eddie's summer freestyle training camp, was top-ranked in the combined three freestyle events in 1975. Ferguson placed second.

Below, the first jump looks like three gigantic skis lined up side by side, running down the slope. They curve up at the tip, just like a ski, two of them with sharper, more radical curves than a ski. The lips of the jumps are sprayed, hardened, packed, and scraped with a rake before each jumper hits the lip and is thrust up over the edge. On the left is the backflip jump, an even, steep curve aiming just off the vertical about 15 to 30 degrees. In the middle is the "floater," a jump

nearly flat, very little rise at the lip, used for upright jumps. And on the right is the frontflip jump, zero degrees off the vertical at the lip, a virtual brick wall. A jumper's ski tips catching the lip will stop him cold and flip him forward almost involuntarily. On the other side of the jumps, a carefully groomed

run-off slopes down, providing as soft a landing as possible for the jumpers. But standing above the jump where Airborne Eddie is now standing, all one can see beyond is air.

To get upside down, to turn a flip, a backflip, a double backflip, a mobius, to perform any of these seemingly impossible aerial maneuvers with skis upon the feet is a blood-red, gut-lightening rush of an experience. No one, not even the hottest of the freestylers, not Robert Young, who was first in aeriels last year, not Airborne Eddie, who has taught many of these guys to flip, not anybody really knows what's going to happen once they get upside down. Airborne Eddie appreciates the unknown perhaps as well as any of them, and as he takes off, skating once or twice in the soft snow to pick up speed, one sees the look on his face change . . . just slightly, but enough to let one know what's happening inside. He is frightened. On a day like today, with the sky a low gray-white overcast, a fog really, it's hard to tell the difference between up and down, between the sky and the snow, once you're in the air. When he gets up there, halfway through his back lay-out, which is performed with the body always in a stretched rather than tucked or bent position, he'll start looking back, as if he were trying to lean over backward and examine his heels. He's looking for the ground, for his landing, so he'll know if he threw the flip too hard or too soft. If he can't see where he is, he might overthrow the flip and land on his back, skis shooting out in front of him, the tips coming back. Possibly he'll catch a tip in the face—lots of freestylers have facial scars like hockey players for just this reason. Or maybe he'll underthrow it, and come around with the skis too far under him, bent [Cont. on 71]



Running the bumps: (upper left) Jack Taylor; (below) Scott Brooksbank, followed by Airborne Eddie Ferguson. Opposite page: Suzy Chaffee and John Clendenin.

Hot Dogging

[Cont. from 38] at the waist. At the last minute he'll try to uncoil and bring his ski tips up so they don't dig in the snow. He'll make it — just barely—but the shock of the landing will throw him face first into the snow, his bindings (hopefully) releasing at the heel, skis slinging up in the air, out of control, and he'll tumble, head over heels the length of the run-off, landing in a snow-covered heap at the bottom, stiff, miserable, out of the money. This is what they call "eating it."

And this is what Airborne Eddie is thinking about as he reaches speed and shoots off the backflip kicker. He doesn't get much air, he isn't high enough, didn't have the ramp speed, and coming around, he sees he has underthrown the flip. He tucks in his knees, speeds the flip around with a backthrust of the head and neck and lands it safely. Airborne Eddie got air, but it was piss-poor air. It was not the kind of air that will win today, what with Rick Wood, out of Gunnison, Colorado, possibly trying his *double* back lay-out flip, another one that's never been tried in competition. Maybe he won't try it today. Conditions are not the best, they're lousy in fact, but there's a showbiz side to freestyle, and somebody is going to try something hot, really hot, today. You can feel it in the air.

Several men and women will turn mobius flips in competition today. A mobius, because of a difficulty/danger factor that's worked automatically into the score of the judges, will beat a back and a front any day. When somebody starts turning triples in competition (a few have been turned in practice already, and it's just a matter of time), he'll be almost unbeatable.

To perfect those triples, however, skiers will have to train at one of the special camps which have sprung up as fast as the sport has grown. The summer camps and dry-land jumping schools have become de rigueur in order to keep up. You've got to ski year-round, train almost incessantly in order to stay competitive. This is a major problem for those freestylers who have to work in the off-season in order to earn enough money to pay their way on next year's tour, but most of them find the time to work out ballet routines on a moving belt that simulates a gentle slope or practice aeriels on a dry-land jump, which rockets you down a steep ramp on skis with wheels and shoots you either into a lake or onto foam pads like those used by pole vaulters.

The best-known camp is Airborne Eddie's summer camp at Crystal Mountain, Washington. There are perhaps a dozen others, and most of them follow Ferguson's prescription: mornings spent skiing June corn snow, practicing ballet and moguls, afternoons spent on a trampoline or diving board, gaining proficiency in the air.

Ferguson has become freestyle's largest individual corporation, grossing \$130,000 before taxes last year, turning away almost 100 applicants to his freestyle camp, endorsing and appearing and performing at so many functions that he had virtually no time left to ski.

"It's going to be tough this year," Ferguson admits. "You know who taught most of these new people out there? Me. Nowadays these kids are learning flipping first off a diving board, then on a trampoline, then on a lakeside jump, and last, when they've got all their shit together, on the snow. Christ. The first flip I ever turned was on a pair of skis. I was 14 years old, and I saw a movie about Stein Erickson and he turned a flip, and I said to myself, I'm going to do that. So I went out and found a steep slope, about 35 degrees, with a Cat track across it 15 feet wide. My father made a movie of it. I came down that slope with my hands up over my head, and when I hit that snow cat track, I started over, and on the film, you can see my knuckles dragging in the snow. I got no air. I just went over and landed on my head. The second time, I made it. That was two years before I ever thought about building a jump. We turned flips off moguls, Cat tracks, rock ledges, anything that was there. It was incredible how dangerous it was. Now we're probably going to get our asses kicked by these kids who are more gymnasts than skiers."

Ah, well, it's only the first competition of the year, there are seven more to come, three in Europe, two in Vermont, one in Colorado, ending up in Snowbird, Utah, April 9th through 11th, and between now and then, anything could happen. Even the old crazies, the guys who started the sport and taught most of the people who now dominate it, could make a comeback.

Consider Suzy Chaffee, the former Olympian, currently starring in your hometown on an Ultra Brite "How's your love life?" commercial, who has just returned from Vail, Colorado, where she spent a widely publicized day skiing with Gerald Ford. Four years ago, Chaffee first brought music to the [Cont. on 72]



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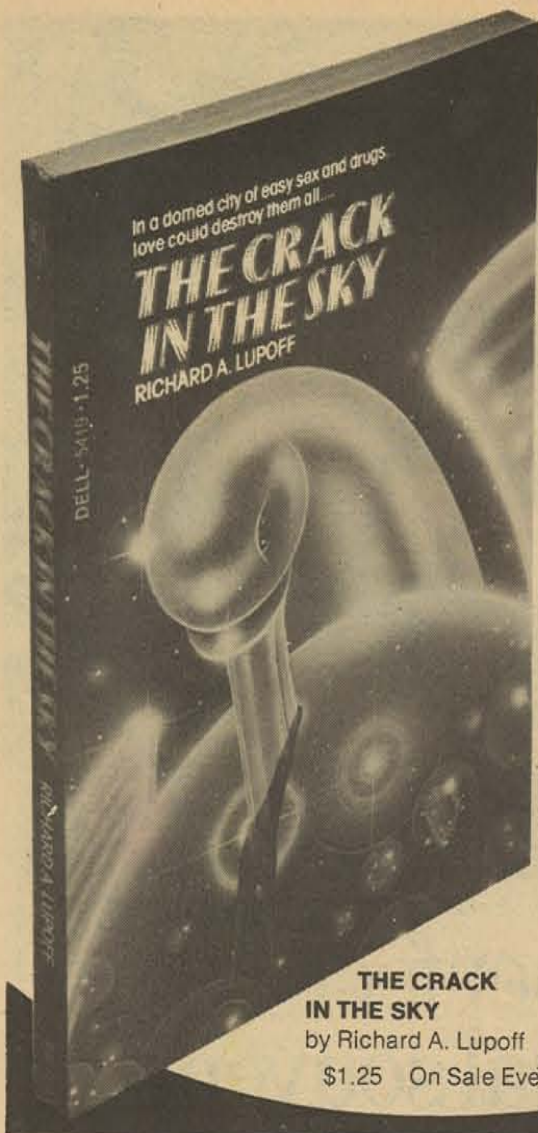
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[Cont. from 71] slopes, carrying a portable tape recorder to play Santana's "Black Magic Woman" over the announcer's hand-held mike. It wasn't the best sound anyone had ever heard but it turned the sport upside down. Today ski ballet is accompanied by music which ranges from the 2001 theme, "Thus Spake Zarathustra," to John Denver's thin-air arias.

Chaffee's ballet routine is expected to give the other top women freestyle ballerinas—Genia Fuller and Marion and Ellen Post and Penny Street—a run for the money. But warming up, Chaffee looks tight and tired. She has been neck deep in other projects, pushing herself too hard, and it shows. The spins and leg crossovers and tip-rolls that comprise her routine are off, just a bit. When her music ("Thus Spake Zarathustra" incidentally) says she should be sashaying, she is recovering from a grand christiana, a slow spin down on one ski with the other leg and both arms extended. She might place today, but it's going to take all the concentration and effort she can muster.

Chaffee has a knack for getting attention matched only by her ability to do something with it, once she gets it. She competed against men in the early days of the sport, and in 1973, raised the issue of separate prize money for women. "It was at a meeting before the world championships at Sun Valley," she recalled over a cup of coffee one night in Heavenly Valley. "I said women should get their own prize money. People like to see the ladies crash through the moguls and get air. Well, the guys from Chevy and *Skiing* magazine wouldn't hear of it. So I kept bugging them, and finally I started crying, and they said, 'Okay, we'll give you \$1000 to divide up among women if you'll just stop your weeping.' That was the first money we saw. Nowadays the sport couldn't get along without us."

This year, only \$10,000 separates the total prize money of the sexes (the men are ahead), but the realities being what they are—total prize money depends on what sponsors are willing to pay—the women could pull ahead next year.

On the slopes, it is generally agreed that the best men can beat the best women in two of the three events, the exception being ballet, which requires great coordination, balance, poise and a talent for choreography, while putting less emphasis on the strength and endurance involved in aerials. Yet in the moguls, there is Karen Huntoon, from Brandon, Vermont, a virtual Jack Taylor in the bumps, who could give, according to most opinions, bet-

ter than three-quarters of the men a run for their money. In the air, however, the argument becomes academic. The women learned to jump from the men. For the most part, they presently lag a year behind in number and variety of jumps, and in skill. There are those who contend that the day will come when they catch up, but most believe it is doubtful.

At a restaurant on the main drag of Lake Tahoe after the awards ceremony for the Heavenly Valley contest, a few freestylers gather to eat, drink and talk over successes and failures. Airborne Eddie Ferguson, a complete failure, 24th overall, was disqualified in the moguls, 21st in the ballet, and an almost nonexistent 17th in the air. Suzy Chaffee, having spent the weekend meditating, "centering myself," she called it, was 22nd in ballet (bad fall), 6th in the moguls, and 4th in the air, ending up 10th overall. John Clendenin, 16th in ballet, 11th in moguls, and what's this: 27th in the air? This gets you 10th overall? A crime. In fact, the old crazies of freestyle are a bunch of hurting cowboys on this night. Chaffee won \$1125, Clendenin \$240 and Ferguson, zip. They have no excuses. A young kid of 18, Frankie Bare, won in the air, Jack Taylor in the bumps, and Brooksbank in ballet and the combined. Genia Fuller, the 21-year-old skiing machine from Tahoe, took the women's combined, Ellen Post took ballet, Sandra Poulsen, 22, a former Olympic racer, beat out Karen Huntoon in the moguls, and Karen Colburn, another young tiger, won in the air. Young punks, all of them, with the exception of Brooksbank, who at 26 has become a career young punk, and Jack Taylor, who defies categorization.

Behind the sport of skiing, there was once the premise that skiing hard, having fun and looking good was all that counted. One might have called it mixing beauty with pleasure. Freestylers have helped keep this spirit alive. It is almost as if there is an appearance requirement to get on the freestyle circuit.

Skiing is an immensely narcissistic sport, and freestylers have admitted to this, flaunted it, in fact. They have held skiing aloft, examined it, and found it wanting in only one way: as beautiful as skiing was, it wasn't as beautiful as they were. The old crazies added elements of mystery and danger. Now the sport is overrun with specialists and technicians and corporate executives. Freestyle is growing up. Sad to say, nothing is unknowable anymore.