

## Spring Fever, Spring Festivals

Friday May 11, 2007

Written For: Ski Press

Skiing naked grabs peoples' attention.

A guy skiing naked with a sock covering his privates really grabs peoples' attention — as one guy did one spring at Quebec's Val-d'Irène. He'd reached about 130 kph, took air and tried to skid across frigid Picalo Lake — all to win the ski area's annual Aqua-Neige challenge. The crowd gasped. Moms covered young girls' eyes. He had to know the sock just wasn't gonna make it...

That contest has been a staple in Quebec's spring ski calendar for 30 years. Other Canadian ski areas do the same with Spring Flings, Over-the-Hill Downhills, Cardboard Dummy Races, Big Airs, Slopestyles, Slush Cups. Spring fever strikes skiers around mid-March when the snow corns up, steep terrain bumps up, and the sun gets so hot it sizzles. What a lovely way to burn. Skiing is a social sport, says Doug Perry, president of W1, a sports-and-entertainment marketing firm. "People love to ski and ride with their friends, and when you add live music, arts, cultural events and throw in a few epic parties, it becomes a magnet for social snow lovers. Who doesn't like a good party? It feeds on itself."

Perry should know. In 1996 he put a little event together called the World Ski and Snowboard Festival (WSSF). His intention was to get some action going in Whistler in April, when the ski town became a ghost town. The skiing was usually still good, but no one knew it 'cause no one was there; hotel occupancy hovered around 22%.

Create a spectacle, Perry thought. Invite the media. Get the word out. "Basically it was an outrageous idea that met with resistance at every turn," he says. "I can't count the number of people who told me it wouldn't work, that it's all over in April, that it would fail, that I was out of my mind."

Guess what? It worked. Eleven years later WSSF makes Whistler the busiest mountain resort in the world in April. One particularly good year, Whistler clocked more skier visits on a single day during WSSF than all resorts in Colorado combined. In 2006, it generated \$7,000,000 in media exposure and was televised in 122 countries.

Also in '06, an economic impact assessment by the Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance concluded 86% of the people in Whistler in April were there because of the Festival. WSSF delivered \$37.7 million to the province of BC and nearly \$17.9 million in new economic activity for the province.

Uh, yeah, Mr. Perry. Guess you weren't so out of your mind.

Aimed squarely at 19-to-34-year-olds, Whistler's Festival these days has become a must-b-there annual event. As one skier put it: "It's morphed into WOW."

WSSF is to skiers what a Stones concert is to rockers. Think: the Leafs making it to the Stanley Cup. Athletes are onsnow rock stars — taking huge air and sliding on rails at night under dazzling lights. Ski fashion is not just shown but exposed. The world's hottest action-photographers return from odd ski places like Iran and tell their stories in music and pictures to enraptured audiences that surpass 2,000. And from the start, WSSF fans are whipped into a feverish frenzy by totally free, extremely loud outdoor concerts: the Black Eyed Peas, Justin Timberlake, Bif Naked, Jurassic 5, Swollen Members, Finger 11, Nickelback, Blackalicious, Michael Franti, Spearhead.

As Ski Press writer Lisa Richardson summed it up: "WSSF continues its Crusade to unite the faithful under the banner of music, arts and sports, with the add-on promise to blow your mind." The phenomenon has the world's other ski areas perking up. Yes, they've noticed. "I know for a fact that other resorts are preparing for battle," says Perry, who cut his ties with the Festival in late 2006. "Some are mobilizing plans to blow WSSF out of the water." In today's mountain-resort industry, business is flat, so the race may be for market share. "Get ready to see some exciting new offerings out there in springs to come," says Perry. "This is not a time to be asleep at the wheel."

On the roster so far is a spun-out selection of concert dates, freeride events, and silly, crazy, homegrown stuff that regular skiers can compete in. There's the Spin Symposium at

Tremblant, the Spring Episode at Lake Louise, The US Open at Stratton Vermont, and the North American Freeskiing Championships at Kirkwood California. That's in addition to countless local events. [See our Spring Calendar for dates] "I say, bring it on," says Perry. "Anything that lengthens the prime time of a seasonal industry like ours is good for the mountain-resort business as a whole. Competition in the marketplace is healthy. It will raise the bar. The strong will rise to the top every time."

The key to success may be in not copying WSSF. Matt Mosteller, senior director of business development at Resorts of the Canadian Rockies (RCR), recognizes the spring event's potential for boosting business at RCR resorts like Fernie and Lake Louise. But his team is forging its own path. "We're going the organic way," says Mosteller. "Our focus is our community. It's the end of the year. We're all about saying thank-you to people who have supported us all season."

The main event at the Spring Episode at Lake Louise is the Shop Showdown. Local ski and snowboard shops team sponsored riders with store employees to prove their shop is the best on snow. The Showdown is matched with concerts by big-name acts — Swollen Members showed up last season. There are tented beer gardens for adults and Rock Star corrals where kids under drinking age can get up and dance.

Sure, it's a way to say thanks to Lake Louise regulars. But Mosteller admits to a 50% increase in skier visits during the Spring Episode weekend over the same eventless weekend four years ago. "You always hope people get excited and extend their season. We now see some great numbers on our spring weekends."

Choosing events that spike spectators' fever is an art. "The single key component to WSSF's success, in my view, is its open-design philosophy," says Doug Perry. "In contrast to over-governed events where the out-of-touch suits decide what goes on, WSSF's continual evolution is the result of the work of multiple design teams comprised of the best in the business. Think tanks of the best skiers, snowboarders, photographers, filmmakers, musicians and fashionistas were created to steer WSSF each year. The paintbrush is put in the hands of the true artists."

On board with that is Shannon Ballard, manager of events at Ontario's Blue Mountain. Her team of "in-house consultants," are all young, she says, and all living the ski and snowboard lifestyle. In her words, "They know what's relevant."

Ballard admits taking her lead from WSSF— what she calls "the leader in action-sport festivals." For one, she considers Blue's most popular spring event, the Telus Triple Challenge, as not just an event but an experience. Like WSSF, the Challenge combines slopestyle, rail, halfpipe and big air with music, outdoor concerts, fashion and adrenaline.

Upping the energy is the Challenge's strategic location — not in the terrain park, but in the Village, the mountain's highest traffic area. "Sponsors like it," she says. "Athletes can show off. And everyone can see it. Events that work engage both athletes and spectators," she explains. "People want to see and be seen."

To see and be seen... making the scene... fever... spring sizzle. There's a common thread unfurling here. Joe Healy, a writer and photographer who's used to snapping photos from the lip of pipes at major events, sums it up: "The culture [at the US Open] is roughly: Ride, socialize, ride, party, watch the world's best rail-jammers, sing, party, chill, ride, demo stuff, watch the world's best halfpipers, party, chill, ride, watch the world's best slopestylers, ride. Chill..." You get the picture.

Will skiers' thirst for spring events ever be sated? Unlikely, predicts Doug Perry. Success will only run its course if the guys and gals in charge grow complacent... if they "decide what worked last year should be good enough this year." If instead organizers' mission continues to embrace the evolution of the game, if they keep challenging themselves to raise the bar, Perry says: "I think the future is bright."

Especially if competitors continue to wear nothing but socks over their privates.