

## Nat Ross

The *Total Telemark* movie producer and driving force behind the freeheel competition circuit talks about the challenges and rewards of his work.

Photo by Brett Batchelder



**Telemark Skier:** Most people recognize you as the producer of the *Total Telemark* movies. Where did your role in organizing freeheel competitions come from? How does trying to put together a competition circuit compare to making a film?

**Nat Ross:** Actually, I put on my first telemark big-mountain competition ten years ago at Arapahoe Basin, Colorado. At the time, I was skiing professionally for Volant; I even competed in the first X-Games in Crested Butte. Several of us were entering International FreeSkiing Association (IFSA) comps on telemark gear competing against alpine skiers. Unfortunately, my career was going nowhere, so my teammate Shane McConkey along with Justin Patnode helped me establish the competition rules that we still use today. We based these rules off of the IFSA, but adapted them to fit the telemark turn. Back in the day, the insurance requirements were not as stringent, so I was able to charge only \$65 for the entry fee. There were 65 competitors entered for the two-day comp, with the first day slated as a qualifying day where a third of the field advanced to the finals. Scott Murray and Leslie Ross took top honors that year.

I was motivated to create an arena for telemark skiers to showcase their skills. I knew that the comps would never blow up in popularity, but I felt it was important to have our own competitions. The camaraderie that these events brought about was unparalleled and very fulfilling. Telemarkers from all over the States got together to ski. In the beginning, it was more about meeting people with similar passions than it was about winning the event. The second year, Jeff Wright and Jimmy Ludlow from USTSA showed up and approached me about adding big-mountain events to their gate racing calendar. They felt the telemark scene needed a change with an injection of newschool style to its format, as gate racing was fading in popularity. USTSA helped grow the scene and add great venues in Utah, California and Wyoming before ultimately facing a lack of financial support from the industry.

But with the USTSA running the comps, I had some free time on my hands. I was already filming the events, and decided to venture

into producing telemark ski films five years ago. Josh "Bones" Murphy had already made one film, and I had my own ideas for the direction of portraying the sport. From the comps, I had the chance to scout plenty of talent. Scott Barady, Luke Miller, Kasha Rigby, Ross Richards, Heather Paul, Leslie Ross, and Ben Dolenc were just a few of the big-mountain competitors who were at the top of their game. It only made sense to take it to the next level and produce segments consisting of these amazing athletes. Little did I know, filmmaking is an incredibly difficult task. The logistics are phenomenal, and it takes an immense budget, something that I still struggle with today.

Putting on a competition or an event is a lot easier than producing a film. Last year Crested Butte Mountain Resort put up a \$20,000 cash purse. When you have ski area support like that, it's basically like hosting a party. Their mountain hosts big-mountain comps for snowboard, alpine, and telemark. The crew at Crested Butte has been doing this for so long that basically all they need are the right conditions, a lot of snow and competitors.

**TS: What has changed in putting on competitions?**

**NR:** Several changes have definitely made putting comps on difficult, to say the least. Insurance is my number one headache. Most ski areas require multi-million dollar policies, and in order to keep the entry fee affordable for the competitors, we need financial support to help offset the huge cost of the insurance policy. Three years ago, I found a great venue to put on the slopestyle, big air, and Tele X event that became Nationals. However, we had to pull the plug on Nationals because we have not found enough support to offset the costs. It is also difficult to find ski areas that are willing to close their steep terrain or terrain parks for the weekend. Taos is a new venue this year with plenty of steeps that we are really excited about.

**TS: What is the biggest challenge to putting on freeheel competitions? What are you battling against?**

**NR:** Insurance costs are our biggest battle. Getting the events aired

on TV or coverage of any sort is another big issue, so we are currently working with M3 Relations, a public relations firm that will help change the industry. Why would any company want to sponsor an event that not too many people get to watch or follow? For the past three years, I have been pursuing the promoters of the X-Games to try to add telemark to their event. The Gravity Games were interested in telemark skiing, but that event has been cancelled. Hopefully ESPN will someday listen to what we have to offer.

**TS: What is the value of competition?**

**NR:** Competition establishes the boundaries of our sport. What additions to the beautiful turn can be performed? Just how far can the envelope be pushed? Putting the best athletes together in the same place at the same time drives the sport to new levels. Junior categories help feed the competition pool and allow for new growth to the sport. This year we are creating a Masters category for the opening day so even more skiers can experience the value of competing. We want to provide an outlet for all telemark skiers to challenge and push themselves to new levels. Competition helps one find new challenges while trying to overcome them.

**TS: What needs to happen to increase the numbers and the success of the competition circuit?**

**NR:** The events need to be covered by more of the media—local papers, magazines, TV stations, news stations, etc. More people would see what these competitions are all about, and we would be able to get more support in turn from sponsors outside the direct ski industry.

**TS: With so many telemark festivals and gatherings happening around the country, many with their own competitions, do you see any chance of incorporating them into one, cohesive series?**

**NR:** Telemark festivals and competitions are made up of different skiers on the same equipment. Festivals are a great place for athletes to demonstrate their skills. Athletes can be involved in teaching clinics, steep camps, and lessons. These talented skiers can also put on demonstrations to showcase their skills in the halfpipe, bumps, terrain parks, steeps and other types of terrain. TGP plans to grow the current festivals with the addition of our newschool approach. Currently, we put on our own format of a traveling festival called the Total Telemark Tour.

**TS: What do you see for the future of freeheel competition?**

**NR:** I see slow growth with the incorporation of new sponsors and out of the industry support. It will take a while for all this to happen, but it is necessary. The East Coast should have a big-mountain event. There needs to be slopestyle specific comps and events in Europe. TGP will need to bring new and vibrant support to the industry to make this happen.



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