

Olympian Birk Irving Hopes To Bring Freeskiing “Back on the Map”

By Charlie Bickham

When someone thinks of skiing, they likely think of a race or a fun family activity. Birk Irving thinks of skiing as massive air, flips, and an exhilarating adventure.

At 23 years old, Birk has already been to the Skiing World Championships, the World Cup, the X Games, and the Olympics.

While the world watches live NFL and soccer games, skiing has become a sport dominated by social media and film.

Traditionally, racing and alpine dominated the scene. In the late 1990s, professionals created freeskiing, initially known as hotdogging, which is defined as a specific type of alpine involving tricks, jumps, and terrain park features.

Instead of tuning into competitions, fans began tuning into films with their favorite professional skiers. According to Birk, freeskiing has to find new ways to stay relevant.

“There's a few World Cups where there's lacking kind of interest. There's less people in it; there's less people there watching. I don't know, it seems like it's not what it used to be. So I've kind of been trying to use TikTok to build a new audience and put new people onto the sport.”

Birk wants to take skiing beyond competition, bringing the sport back on the map with his unique outlook.

“There's a lot more ways to get freeskiing out there because it's, I don't want to say underground, but when people think of skiing outside of skiers, they think of Alpine,” Birk said. “When I think of the whole new push of social media in our world, it'd be sick to just put pipe, slope, all that on the map with socials.”

In freeskiing's short history, it has become one of the primary branches of the sport. It is extremely dangerous, and there have been numerous deaths, like freeskiing legend Shane McConkey.

There isn't much data about the number of freeskiing deaths because it is an underground sport. A quick search on the internet, however, comes up with articles discussing the greatest skiers to have died in a sport less than 40 years old. So professionals like Birk have to keep a level head.

"It's kind of nerves building up to the event, and then as soon as if you're in the gate and it's your turn to go, then it's not nerves anymore," he said. "It's like this crazy adrenaline feeling that you have, and I don't know, it's pretty sick. You zone out. I guess you just kind of go, and your body does the work."

Birk attributes his skill and goals of elevating the sport to his background: growing up in a ski town in Colorado and starting to ski at just 5-years-old.

"[Growing up in Winter Park] was sick. It was nice just to be in a super tight, small ski community. And growing up skiing with the Winter Park team, it was super dope to just have a bunch of buddies to ski with all the time and be able to train and ride with those dudes was sick," Birk said.

Birk eventually went on to compete in the youth Olympics, winning a gold medal, before moving on to professional freeskiing events.

Birk believes a reason for the drop in interest is accessibility. Skiing is very expensive between buying a pass, owning the gear, and living near a mountain.

Brendan Dube, a skier from Massachusetts, has been racing since he was three years old and agrees there is an accessibility issue with skiing.

"I don't know if there's a way to get it back up there. We've talked about social media, which is definitely something that could factor into it, but at the end of the day, it's expensive," he said. "People don't have access to it typically. It's like, do you live near a mountain?"

Birk is confident social media and films can allow freeskiing to come back, and his following is evidence of this.

Karly Teegarden, a skier from Colorado that has never really watched the sport, found out about Birk through TikTok.

"I was scrolling while he was in the Olympics, and he was posting funny videos," she said.

Birk also uses films to get his freeskiing out, appearing in three in 2022.

“Filming is like a whole different way to express your skiing, and nobody's judging you but yourself. I really like the whole filming side of things because you can just do things, you can do exactly what you want to do, and you can make it as perfect as you want it to be.” Birk said.

Flynn Olden, a freeskiier from Colorado, has recently become interested in ski films but consumes most of his ski media from social media.

“Most of my Instagram reels are skiing videos,” Flynn said. “If I’m just trying to relax, I watch some skiing.”

Despite newfound fame and a hectic schedule, Birk has the same love and mindset for skiing.

“I think I still ski the same; I still ski for me,” Birk said.