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## Alternative Chicks: Examining Women Freeskiers and Empowerment.

Kevin Krein

University of Alaska Southeast

Alaska, USA

[kjkrein@uas.alaska.edu](mailto:kjkrein@uas.alaska.edu)

Charlene Weaving

St. Francis Xavier University

Nova Scotia, Canada

[cweaving@stfx.ca](mailto:cweaving@stfx.ca)

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## **Alternative Chicks: Examining Women Freeskiers and Empowerment.**

**Kevin Krein**

University of Alaska Southeast

**Charlene Weaving**

St. Francis Xavier University

### **Abstract**

We consider the possibility of rethinking gender through alternative sports. In particular, we focus on freeskiing (often referred to as extreme skiing) and argue that freeskiing offers a space in which traditional mainstream values can be questioned to a far greater extent than in mainstream sport cultures (like those of football, softball, and ice hockey). If so, they provide an opportunity for alternative understandings of gender to emerge. We examine what would need to happen within the world of freeskiing in order for a more inclusive understanding of gender to emerge through the process of worldmaking. More specifically, we consider various factors within the subculture of freeskiing that influence questions concerning gender constructions including the presentation of women athletes in films, magazines, and other sport media, conceptions of gender among non-competitive back-country skiers, and the general understanding of the relationship between humans and nature within the sport. We argue that gaining a better understanding of these features is an important step in considering how conceptions of gender may be altered in the sport of skiing.

**Keywords:** freeskiing, skiing, gender, empowerment, alternative sport

### **Resumen**

Consideramos la posibilidad de repensar el género a través de los deportes alternativos. En particular, nos centramos en el *freeski* (a menudo denominado esquí extremo) y sostenemos que ofrece un espacio en el que valores dominantes tradicionales pueden ser cuestionados en mucha mayor medida que en las culturas deportivas convencionales (como el fútbol, softbol, y el hielo hockey). Proporcionan una oportunidad para que las comprensiones alternativas del género puedan surgir. Examinamos lo que tendría que

sucedan en el mundo del *freeski* para que una comprensión más inclusiva de género aparezca en el proceso de “construcción de mundos”. Más específicamente, consideramos varios factores dentro de la subcultura del *freeski* que influyen en las cuestiones relativas a las construcciones de género, incluyendo la presentación de las mujeres atletas en películas, revistas, y otros medios de deporte, las concepciones de género entre los esquiadores de travesía no competitiva, y la comprensión general de la relación entre los seres humanos y la naturaleza dentro del deporte. Sostenemos que la obtención de una mejor comprensión de estas características es un paso importante en la consideración de cómo las concepciones de género pueden ser alteradas en el deporte del esquí.

**Palabras clave:** freeski, esquí, género, empoderamiento, deporte alternativo.

## ***1. Introduction***

Women athletes continue to struggle for acceptance, positive media coverage, sponsorship and equal prize money. Here, we consider the possibility of rethinking gender through alternative sports. In particular, we focus on freeskiing (often referred to as extreme skiing) and argue that the activity offers a space in which traditional mainstream values can be questioned to a far greater extent than in mainstream sport cultures (like those of football, softball, and hockey). If so, they provide an opportunity for alternative understandings of gender to emerge.

The subcultures of alternative sports have their own values and social structures. However, these values and structures are not static. There are often matters of contention and they are continually developing and shifting. Thus there is potential to develop new ways of thinking about social hierarchies and power relations within alternative sports. In this respect, alternative sports are worldmaking activities. We are interested in the possibilities they offer women athletes in this regard.

This being said, although there is ample flexibility in the culture of freeskiing, in its current state, the culture is hypermasculine. Women athletes are often excluded from full participation, dismissed as irrelevant, sexually objectified, or all of the above. The true question remains, what would need to happen within the world of freeskiing in order for a more inclusive understanding of gender to emerge. This essay is an attempt at answering that question.

In the essay, we consider various factors within the subculture of free skiing that influence questions concerning gender constructions. These include the presentation of women athletes in films, magazines, and other sport media, conceptions of gender among non-competitive backcountry skiers, and the general understanding

of the relationship between humans and nature within the sport. We argue that gaining a better understanding of these features is an important step in considering how conceptions of gender may be altered in the sport of skiing. While we specifically address issues concerning gender in freeskiing, it should also be emphasized that much of what we argue is applicable to other alternative sports as well.

## ***2. Background***

In 2007, sport philosopher Mike McNamee edited an important collection of philosophical work on adventure sport, *Philosophy, Risk and Adventure Sports*. The book contains thought-provoking pieces on risk and nature sports and provides an excellent overview of many of the prominent philosophical issues related to such sports. However, the text is missing analysis from a feminist perspective. In the sociology of sport field, there has been significant research focusing on women participating in adventure and alternative sport. And, it has been convincingly argued that women's participation in sports like skiing, snowboarding and skydiving has been constrained as female athletes navigate the masculine landscapes that constitute the subcultures of such sports.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is a significant lack of philosophical literature examining gender construction in alternative sport. We believe that a philosophical analysis can point to suggestions concerning options that will lead to reconceptualizations of gender in alternative sports.

Weaving (2012) examined the media treatment of the death of Canadian freeskiier Sarah Burke and concluded that media presentations of this very talented athlete problematically focused as much on her feminine sexual attractiveness as her athletic ability. As in other sports, and contemporary mainstream North American culture, women athletes are, to a harmful extent, treated as body-objects rather than body-subjects. Krein (2008) argued that subcultures of alternative sports serve as spaces in which new and alternative world-views can be created and that from these spaces; the mainstream values of culture can be altered. This leads us to question under what conditions would we expect to see changes in gender constructions within extreme sports? In other words, what would have to happen within the cultures of extreme sport in order to bring about changes in the construc-

tion of gender within the sports? And, just as importantly, what obstacles stand in the way of such development?

We used the term ‘chick’ in the title for numerous reasons. The words we use to identify things often reflect our conception of those things. Baker and Elliston (1994) point out how common it is in our language to use animal terms to refer to women (chick, bird, vixen and bitch are a few examples). The term ‘chick’ is regularly used to refer to women in extreme sport culture. For example, each winter, the sporting manufacturer *Roxy* hosts a *Roxy Chickadee Jam* competition for women snowboarders. Although once it was used primarily by men to refer to women, ‘chick’ has been widely adopted by women athletes in these sports. This trend has spread well beyond the narrow use and into mainstream media discourse on alternative sports. Nora Zelevansky, a journalist writing for *Self Magazine* claimed, “If there's one thing I've learned from interviewing athletes, it's that action sports *chicks* are the coolest people ever. They're laid back, friendly, humble and funny” (2011). The term, chick, then as we apply it, is meant to provoke the reader while examining the case of women in extreme sport. We propose that the term ‘chick’ could be, and in some contexts has been, reframed to imply something not demeaning or derogatory towards women, but begins to represent a new conception of women – a new way to legitimately be a women. Finally, we also consider it to be a better descriptor for female skiers than the term ‘ski bunnies’, which suggests that the women being referred to are not actively engaged in the activity, but rather participate as ‘pretty supporters’ or companions in the mountains.<sup>2</sup>

Our use of the term ‘freeskiing’ refers to skiing that does not fit into the category of traditional competitive alpine events of racing and freestyle. There are freeskiing events that evolved from snowboarding such as half-pipe and park competitions, which are included in Winter X-Games, and are considered by participants and fans to be alternative sports. ‘Freeskiing’ also and more generally refers to non-competitive skiing of both amateur participants and of professional freeskiers as seen in ski films and magazines. In both cases, however, it refers to either off-piste or backcountry skiing or to skiing in terrain

parks (basically skate parks made of snow). In general, those referring to themselves as freeskiers see themselves as participating in an activity which is alternative to the mainstream (whether this is the case or not is another matter, but it is certainly part of the meaning of the term ‘freeskier’). The term ‘freeskiing’ is used synonymously with ‘extreme skiing’ by some people. We see extreme skiing as a narrower class contained within freeskiing. In our usage, ‘extreme skiing’ refers to freeskiing activities in which mistakes clearly expose one to possibly fatal consequences. Many people participating in freeskiing activities do not perceive themselves to be involved in an extreme sport or to be exposing themselves to a significant risk of death. In the following sections, we first examine professional competitive freeskiing, and then turn to the culture of participatory backcountry freeskiing.

### ***3. Sarah Burke and the Media***

Iris Marion Young argues that sport is a celebration of the body-subject that celebrates the human bodily capacities for their own sake. For Young, masculinist culture defines women as body-object, that is, sexy, passive flesh sunk in upon itself. Even the idea of women athletes, she argues, has a tension within it:

...the sense of incompatibility between women and sport which still dominates in our society is not a social accident, but a conceptual and symbolic necessity. To the degree that in our society the female body is objectified, women must be excluded from the concept of sport. It follows that if there is a particular female person participating in sport, either she is not “really” a woman, or the sport she engages in is not “really” a sport” (2010, 15).

Young argues further that changing the masculine excess and objectification of women requires new sports and a liberalization of the concept of sport. Alternative sports, especially freeskiing and superpipe, are new emerging activities and have just gained access to the Olympic program. In effect, this paper explores whether or not alternative sports can provide what Young claims is needed.

If we consider professional free skier Sarah Burke, we see an example of Young's claim. Burke was the most decorated female athlete in the history of the Winter X Games and had successfully lobbied the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to include superpipe on the Olympic program and it was predicted that she would win the gold at the 2014 Sochi Games. On January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the Canadian freeskiier fell while attempting an 'alley-oop flatspin 540' in a half-pipe in Park city. The trick was well within her ability. On this occasion, however, she over-rotated on the landing, coming down from 16 feet above the snow, she whiplashed forward, and sustained a critical head injury from which she died nine days later. The Canadian and American media covered the story intently. Headlines described her in the following manner: "too pretty"; "too young"; "a beautiful pioneer"; "articulate and good looking," and a "snow angel."<sup>3</sup> As one journalist described her, she was, "the brightest star of a young sport: articulate and good-looking, she cultivated a high profile off the hill, designing clothing and appearing on television as a commentator, gaining a legion of fans and admirers around the world" (Brady, 2012).

While Burke was attractive and was known to have a charismatic and engaging personality, we see a problem in such a characterization. Although everything said of her is complementary and positive, it is problematic that, as talented of an athlete as she was – one of the best women freeskiiers in the world – it is her attractiveness and traditional feminine traits that seem to define her. In the terms used by Young, she is defined as a body-object rather than a body-subject.

In 2006, Burke was named number ninety-one in *FHM (For Him Magazine)*'s top 100 sexiest women. In one image, she stands straight up, and seductively holds skis (without bindings) in a cross-formation covering her bare breasts and the caption bubble above her head reads, "most guys don't believe I am a skier." In other shots, she wears lingerie (a bra and underwear) and straddles what looks like a tree log. Another image depicts Burke on her knees, crawling seductively through fake-snow. While Burke was a powerful athlete, the photos portray her as passive—existing, as the magazine claims in its title, *for him*.



Of course, Burke is not the only female athlete to pose seductively in a magazine. In fact, successful women athletes doing so may be the norm rather than the exception.<sup>4</sup> It seems that, for women, it is not enough to be an athlete, even at the top of one's game. Women athletes are also pressured to exhibit traditionally female qualities. On a strong interpretation, to gain public acceptance, women athletes must demonstrate that they are willing to submit to being objectified. A woman can win competitions without being sexually attractive, but sponsorship and media coverage in extreme sports also seems to depend significantly on her marketability as an attractive woman. We are not attempting to provide a full analysis of sexuality and sport nor are we arguing that it is a problem for women athletes to publically express their sexuality. However, in the case of professional freeskiing, it is at least problematic that women always *have* to be both athletes and sex objects. To be slightly more accurate, it should be noted that while being a woman in this sense most often is synonymous with being a sex object; women may also sometimes get by with the display of other feminine characteristics such as being sweet, supportive to others, or helpful and forgiving.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, however, the female athletes who are most successful with the media have it all – like Burke – they can be sexy, but also feminine in less sexual ways that allow one to be described both as a 'snow angel' and as one of *FHM's* 100 sexiest women.<sup>6</sup>

Reinhart (2005) argues that media has pushed the values of mainstream sport onto extreme sports where females are portrayed as sexual objects for the gaze of mostly males. For example, in November of 2013, *Freeskier Magazine* published a list of 'the 10 hottest women in freeskiing' and a brief description of each athlete accompanied a photograph. None of the photos were action shots, but are best described as 'glamour shots.' There was some public objection to the hottest women freeskiers list.<sup>7</sup> Professional free skier Jen Hudak responded to the top ten list in eloquent fashion and described her own experience of being recognized solely as an object:

Female athletes should be acknowledged for their success in their athletic pursuits, not for how "hot" they are. I'm guilty myself of falling into the trap of using my sexuality to gain exposure...I was asked to be a part of *Freeskier's* "Women of Freeskiing" issue... in

the fall of 2004...Back then, I was known for having “man-sized air” as one article noted, and I burst onto the scene with so much motivation and enthusiasm for what would lie ahead. Little did I know that my first chance to be in a ski publication would have more to do with my good looks than my skiing talent. I posed in a bubble bath. *A bubble bath!* (Hudak, 2013).

#### ***4. Making Changes?***

How might the media change its representations of female freeskiers like Burke and Hudak? Ideally, the media should adopt the same tactics and approaches for female athletes as they do for males. Athletes’ physical appearance, fashion, and sex appeal ought not be emphasized over athletic accomplishments in reporting results from competition. Treating men and women the same in sports reporting should result in viewing female and male freeskiers more equally. According to professional freeskier Janina Kuzam:

in order for gender equality in free-skiing to improve, the advertising, marketing and promotional side of the sport need to be catered toward women in a more eloquent manner. The ski and sports publications have an important part to play in the promotion of female participation. What is also required are some heroines; some characters! (Quoted in Berry, 2014).

Women freeskiers should also be able to receive sponsorship regardless of their physical appearances.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there should be increased media coverage of participants in extreme sport. Currently, in North America, such athletes are only reported on during the Olympics and X Games. For example, during the 2014 Sochi Winter Games, there were many tributes for Burke when superpipe debuted and most competitors dedicated their victories to Burke’s legacy (Pells, 2014), however, as soon as the games ended, Burke’s name disappeared again from the press.

It would be nice to see these changes in the media. We have, however, serious doubts that simply asking media to change will result in any significant positive effects. The primary concern is that professional alternative sports athletes, and their sponsors, are in the business of selling images to a public that has expectations about what they are buying. Un-

less mainstream culture changes its understanding of gender, the same types of images will continue to sell. If the editors at *FHM* Magazine are asked to only cover someone like Burke for her athletic talents, the request may not even be understood, and if it is, it is difficult to see what would motivate them to do so; if they did make such changes, all of their readers might just buy *Maxim* instead. And, while the ski specific media might be slightly better, it will not be by much. This is an industry that already knows how to sell images of women athletes – just as it would sell any other images of women – traditionally feminine, and as sexy as possible.

Since the structure of professional freeskiing is financially tied to mainstream culture, for the most part, the way professional athletes are marketed, and thus make their living; reproduces the values and beliefs of the mainstream. Because of this, we can hope for change in this area, but it is difficult to expect in the short term. If mainstream media is to change, it is likely to follow changes in cultural beliefs rather than lead to them.<sup>9</sup>

### ***5. Backcountry Skiing***

Since competitive park skiing, especially as an Olympic sport, so closely resembles traditional sports, and since the media's portrayal of such athletes has to appeal to a general market, we can expect this aspect of the sport to reflect standard conceptions of gender. We should remember, however, that competitive park skiing is only part of freeskiing. Skiing in North America is not primarily a spectator sport. If we are interested in changing gender conceptions in ski culture, perhaps the non-competitive participatory freeskiing world is a better place to start.

Unlike in traditional sports, women have long been welcome co-participants in freeskiing as a non-competitive leisure activity. In a very positive way, this allowed women to participate in an athletically demanding activity along with men.<sup>10</sup> However, while women have been welcomed in the world of skiing, there have always been clear differences between the roles men and women play in the subculture of the sport.

In the freeskiing world, the ski bum culture in the 1960s and 70s seems to have combined elements of mountain culture and classical romanticism with the hedonism associated with the beat and counterculture movements of the 1950s and sixties.<sup>11</sup> The result was a hyper-masculine culture in which young men can demonstrate their manhood by exposing themselves to the harsh elements of nature, and do so in a rebellious, yet pleasant, way. Whether one buys into this understanding of skiing or not, in practice it often appeals to adolescent males for whom it provides a kind of clubhouse atmosphere into which most males are welcomed but few, females are allowed access.<sup>12</sup>

On a more contemporary note, Canadian sociologist Stoddart (2010), argues that the most common images of the backcountry, and the discourse surrounding them in ski media are some version of the trope of the male explorer traveling and experiencing the “masculine sublime”(116). Further, within the groups of skiers he interviewed, both men and women seemed to agree that backcountry skiers are most often men, and that in mixed gender groups of skiers those who play a leadership role are almost always men. Skiers described the backcountry, in Stoddart’s terminology, as a masculinized sportscape (117).

While Stoddart acknowledges that there are women actively resisting the dominant understanding of gender in skiing, he is skeptical, given their current number, of seeing a change in the subcultural worldview. As he puts it:

Individual resistance to dominant discourses about skiing, gender and place is undoubtedly useful for many female skiers. Resistant skiing performances and discourses need to become more widespread, however, if they are to have a significant impact on the gendered power relations that work through the gender-environment nexus of skiing (119).

We share Stoddart’s skepticism, and also think that the changes necessary for rethinking gender in backcountry skiing will be very difficult to bring about. We also think, however, that increasing the number of women in the backcountry is unlikely to influence gender and power relationships unless the activity as a whole is reconceptualized and a new worldview is adopted. In order to see why, we need to look more closely at the reason the current view is problematic in the first place.

It is not that male skiers actively try to keep women out of the mountains. Instead, it is that the subculture of backcountry skiing is predominantly populated by men who understand the mountains to be places where they can establish or reinforce their own masculinity. Women may be allowed and even encouraged, to enter the mountains, but given that the mountains are understood to be a male space – an environment in which man confronts nature in ways that establish masculinity, it may not be very attractive for women participants.

The community is, at least on the surface, enthusiastically accepting of women skiers. But this of course is not the entire story. As noted above, the backcountry is predominantly seen as a place for heroic male action – a place where man can prove themselves by battling the forces of nature. While this might make sense to a traditional male ethos, in which willingness to risk one's health is a key part of one's worth as a man, this is less appealing to anyone who either rejects this conception of masculinity or does not see it as applying to themselves. It is logical to think that this contributes to the fact that there are fewer women than men in the backcountry.

We think this view of the mountains leads women to feel less welcome in the backcountry in a more personal way as well. Because the backcountry is a hyper-masculine space, the enthusiastic welcoming of males does not always make it a comfortable place for women. In fact, the hypermasculine narrative likely leads to more pronounced sexist behavior among males. Women who enter into the backcountry are entering into a space claimed as male terrain – a *boys' clubhouse* so to speak. It is a space in which sexist attitudes toward women, extreme heteronormativity, and hostility toward any view that challenges very traditional masculinity are the dominant and often explicit views. Women who enter the space are either expected to become 'one of the guys' – not be offended by comments or jokes, or, to be very traditional women — happy to exist for the males who are present while assuming the 'ski bunny' role. Consequently, while women are welcomed in the backcountry, it is in a very conditioned way and the male dominated subculture of the backcountry also protects it as a masculine space.

Changing this conception of backcountry skiing in order to make it more inclusive to women requires a deep reconceptualization of mountains and human's relationship to them. This conception of the mountains is important to men, and if they are participants in nature sports that take place in mountain environments, it is likely to be tied to their conception of themselves. Because this understanding of the relationship between humans and nature is so central to the subcultural worldview of backcountry skiing, we do not think it will be easily undermined, especially by any view that questions the heroic self-image of male athletes.

We turned to a discussion of participatory backcountry skiing when we concluded that it would be extremely difficult to bring about change in media presentations of female athletes. However, given that the worldview according to which men heroically confront nature through sport is so deeply rooted, it is also difficult to imagine how views of gender in the backcountry might change.

### ***6. What is a chick to do?***

We have argued that the media's portrayal of professional women freeskiers is not likely to change under direct pressure and that the non-competitive culture of backcountry skiing is not particularly friendly to women and is also unlikely to change.

We think that there is a further option that backcountry skiing leaves open. Again, unlike many areas of sport, the most significant problem does not seem to be an active attempt to prevent women participant's access to the backcountry or to dissuade women from backcountry skiing. As well, along with the very male worldview in the backcountry, there is a no-rules, do-your-own-thing ethos. Alternative sports have traditionally seen themselves as places in which the norms and values of mainstream culture have been

contested. Backcountry users tend to be very tolerant, if not accepting, of different views. Women and men who support feminist principles can provide an alternative to both the culture of competitive free skiing and the culture of backcountry skiing. They can create a different subculture that can exist independently of those already in place.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than trying to directly undermine or overthrow the current conception of the relationship between humans and nature in skiing, it may be more effective for women to simply create an independent subculture and worldview. But what this requires is self-consciously stepping away from what is currently the core of ski culture.

We see this happening in informal ways. As Stoddart (2010) notes, there are women who are forming their own backcountry ski groups (118-119). And we support any activity of this sort. As well, there are more formal attempts to bring women into the backcountry. In 1996, Leslie Ross started *Babes in the Backcountry*, a company with the goal of providing backcountry skiing and avalanche training specifically for women. In its current form, now *Backcountry Babes*, the website states, "...gender-related feelings of objectification, vulnerability, and fear often limit women's participation in [outdoor recreational] activities. Gender-related dynamics also alter the experience and empowerment that some women gain while participating in co-ed instruction or outdoor recreational activities." The organization has been leading successful trips and courses for over fifteen years.

The important point is that the goal need not be to change male ski culture, but to create a culture that works for women skiers. Such a culture should provide meaningful interaction with the mountains and with other skiers. It need not be immediately recognized by mainstream media and culture. As well, it need not be recognized by the bulk of skiing subculture, but it does need a way to build and maintain its own community.

As it turns out, technology is a big help here. Until the recent past, skiers kept up with the culture of the sport largely through magazines and films that required a significant amount of capital to create and distribute. Thus, if someone wanted to spread the word about an event or trend, the mechanism was to either buy advertising, attempt to have an

article written, or attract a ski filmmaker (of which there were two, Warren Miller and Dick Barrymore, with reasonable distribution).

Now, social media works to spread the news of events, and affordable digital video cameras and GoPros® and have made filmmaking far more accessible. It would be a mistake to think that this is a mechanism for creating media that directly influences the understanding of gender in mainstream culture or even the subculture of backcountry skiing. It does function very well, however, as a way of creating and maintaining a sense of community. This can occur on a local level, where it might be most effective. But it can also aim at a much wider target. We have chosen three examples to highlight:

i) *FemaleWolfpack.com* – is a website created to increase female visibility in action sports through video footage without any financial requirements. The site does not have the option for commentaries, opinions, or any kind of rating system. There are rules, and rule number three, concerning sexualisation, is particularly relevant here:

No nudity or exploitation of femininity: There are ample opportunities for women to promote themselves as sex symbols. Female WolfPack is designed to promote female visibility in another light: as athletes. Don't exploit your femininity to gain visibility: the point with the website is that now you don't have to. Take this opportunity to be sexy just by kicking ass at your sport. If you have a problem with this... then start your own sexy site. Sorry.

This site provides opportunity to empower women in alternative and nature sports via a variety of action videos. In Young's terms, the site takes care to ensure women athletes are promoted solely as body-subjects. Videos of extreme sports are generally dominated by males and women are rarely highlighted outside of a sexual object framing, hence the impact and importance of such a site.

ii) *Tits Deep Facebook/Social Media group/blog* – is a group that, like FemaleWolfpack, promotes women athletes, but does so with a slightly different take on sexuality. The site's founders adopted the name 'Tits Deep' from a descriptor used to indicate how deep one is in powder—tits' deep. As the group clarifies their use of the term, "our interpretation of the title 'Tits Deep' is...doing what you want to do, living life to the fullest, and



just plain GIVIN'ER!" According to their Facebook page, Tits Deep are "Ladies who are charging in Extreme Sports. These chicks are considered Tits Deep. We are real, powerful, and bring the most substantial amount of style and ease into everything we do." The group posts images and videos of women athletes participating in extreme activities (such as white water kayaking, free skiing, and mountain biking). The name, Tits Deep, does not ignore or downplay the women's embodiment, but advertises and promotes the recognition of women as body subjects. It explicitly links women's bodies to athletic activities. By reclaiming and emphasizing words like 'tits,' the site provides an avenue for the celebration of women in sports. The group showcases women dominating in activities and provides alternative empowering interpretations of what it is to be a woman.

We are a bit hesitant to advocate solely for a do-it-yourself (form your own club) option for women. In most instances, the claim that women have to allow men to maintain the positions they have held, and start from scratch themselves, comes at a tremendous cost. In most traditional sports this means not having access to equipment, training spaces, and other important resources. The nice thing about freeskiing is that resources are not limited in this way and can be shared by both men and women. There is enough space for women to pursue their goals without any perceived loss to men.

To reiterate, if the goal of such sites is to directly influence gender construction within the subcultures of the various sports represented, they are unlikely to be successful. Viewers have to seek out the communities and be willing to participate in them. Thus, we can expect that they are by women athletes and for women athletes. What they provide that is important is a venue to create a community and subculture. If we think of sport as a worldmaking process, the experience of community matters. It allows the participation in sport to be meaningful. Once that community grows strong enough, it can support the creation of media that is made to be sold.

iii) For a recent example, consider pro freeskiier Lynsey Dyer's current film project, *Pretty Faces*. Dyer points to the fact that, given the number of female participants in the sport of skiing, women are underrepresented in ski films:

Despite women's presence in: ~40% of the skiing population and ~30% of the adventure sports film viewership ...only 14% of athletes in major ski films were female this past season. Additionally, last season's 14% was record female representation, up from 9% the previous season. We see this as an opportunity to provide an inspiring documentary ski film told from a female's perspective to connect with and celebrate skiing's female population.<sup>14</sup>

Her film, which focuses on women skiers, was released in the fall of 2014. Its title, *Pretty Faces*, offers a response to Dyer and other female skiers of being viewed as only 'pretty faces' in the mountains. This initiative involves celebrating female free skiers and moving away from the ski bunny portrayal that is all too common in most contemporary ski films. The film's mission is stated as follows, "Young girls need more positive role models to offer then an alternative to the world of skinny jeans, reality TV and fashion magazines. We aim to provide a positive source of inspiration for young girls first and foremost."<sup>15</sup>

One danger with such a film is that, because it must sell, it very well might run into the same traps as prior representations of women in skiing. Our critique of the presentation of skiing within ski media and of its subcultural value system is that the activity as a whole is conceived of in terms of heroic male action in the mountains. We listed this as one reason that women may not be attracted to backcountry activities. As well, that understanding of the activities can be linked to masculine attitudes in general and to the hypermasculine atmosphere of the sport. In the attempt to promote female alternative sport athletes, that worldview may simply be replicated. The men in the films can be replaced with a few women that differ little in attitude or action from them. If so, the films and websites themselves may actually be perpetuating a problematic worldview and not making the backcountry any more attractive to women in general. Still, the very existence of such projects shows the possibility of creating a space in which current conceptions of gender can be altered and new ones can be developed.

## ***7. Conclusion***

In this paper, we have argued that marketing and media representations of female freeskiers often reduce them to the status of body-objects and undermine their status as athletes. Further, we have argued that given the economic and institutional context in which such media function, it is difficult to see how changes could be brought about. We also argued that in non-competitive backcountry skiing the dominant worldview takes the activity to be one in which men heroically pit themselves against the sublime forces of nature, and that this leads to a subculture into which women fit in only limited and often negative ways.

We suggest that rather than attempting to directly bring about change in these worldviews, women work to build a community of skiers that is an alternative to that of the principal subculture of the sport. Just as women athletes in traditional sports, women freeskiers are expected to fit stereotypical feminine ideals in order to be accepted despite participating in an emerging extreme sport.

The real key is to avoid the idea that what one is doing has to sell to the wider audience. This is not to suggest that women should not seek careers as professional freeskiers or to criticize those who can make a living in the sport. A lot is expected of female professional athletes and we propose that we should not lay the further responsibility of changing the culture of sports on them. In order for freeskiing to be a meaningful place for women, as it is for men, at this point, there needs to be a standalone culture of women skiers. Finally, we argue that, *Female WolfPack*, *Tits Deep*, and *Pretty Faces* all move in this direction. If successful, they will offer different ways of seeing sport and gender – new worldviews that can challenge the dominance of the narrative of heroic males facing the wilderness. In doing so, they may, in turn, influence the subculture of skiing as a whole and contribute to reconsiderations of sex and gender in broader culture. If the idea of women skiing in the backcountry becomes normalized, rather than being exceptional, conceptions of gender are likely to change.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Thorpe, H. (2005). :Jibbing the gender order: Females in the snowboarding culture. “*Sport in Society*, 8:76-100; Reinehart, R. and Sydnor, S (eds). 2003. *To the Extreme: Alternative Sports Inside and Out*. New York: SUNY; Wheaton, B. (ed). 2004. *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*. London: Routledge; and Wheaton, B and Beal, B. 2003. Keeping it real: Subcultural media and the discourses of authenticity in alternative sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38:155-176.

<sup>2</sup> According to *Urban Dictionary.com*, a ski bunny is, “A girl who goes up to a ski mountain not to ski, but to pick up guys.” Moreover, there are some sites like *Ski-bunnies.com* which advertise for “gorgeous ski companions” to accompany individuals on their next ski trip. The site notes, “We are all attractive, sexy ski-bunnies eager to be invited by you on your next ski holiday! We are ready to meet you at your ski resort or the closest airport to it and we will make your ultimate holiday dream come true.” See <http://www.ski-bunnies.com/home.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See Brady 2012 for an example.

<sup>4</sup> See Weaving, 2012b.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the portrayal of world class ski jumper Lindsey Van in the documentary *Ready to Fly*. 2012. <http://readytoflyfilm.com/>

<sup>6</sup> In reference to the *FHM* spread, Burke commented on *ESPN*: “I can't believe the photos are still one of the first things that pop up online when you Google my name...I try not to have regret in my life. But I definitely wish the photos could fade a little bit!”(Hoppes, 2011). At least according to the world wide web, these are the most significant photos of her.

<sup>7</sup> In response to the backlash, or so it appears, in December of 2013, *Freeskier* created a top ten ‘hottest guys in freeskiing’ Specifically, the website announced, “Following up on the heels of our “hottest women in freeskiing” post, as promised, we’re delivering the 10 hottest guys in freeskiing right now... There were some tough cuts that had to be made given the abundance of chiseled jawlines and six-pack abs, but we took the extra time to ensure the list was accurate.” See “The Top Ten Hottest Guys in Freeskiing Right Now”. *Freeskiing Magazine*, December 4 2014. <http://freeskier.com/stories/hottest-guys-freeskiing-right-now>.

<sup>8</sup> One reason this is particularly difficult is that in alternative sports sponsorship is rarely based only on an athlete’s ability. Unlike traditional sports, where winning competition is generally the main goal, in alternative sports it is often the case that the best athletes don’t even compete. Sponsorship often depends on one’s marketability. While one has to be good to make a living as a professional athlete in such sports; one also has to do a certain amount of promotion of oneself. The point here is that in these sports, there is often no clear separation of ones abilities as an athlete and one’s personality, look, or style.

<sup>9</sup> Sport media is capable of influencing its readers. Indeed, many consumers of extreme sport media are participants trying to learn the cultures of their sports or pick up on and follow trends. The difficulty in expecting the media to lead extreme sport cultures in advocating for women athletes is that in the thoroughly masculinized cultures of extreme sports, it seems unlikely that the motivation to pursue a feminist agenda will be found.

<sup>10</sup> We see, for example a significant number of skiing women featured in marketing posters from ski resorts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Stoddart (2012) says of Whistler, British Columbia during this time that there were two distinct cultures, one interested in business and tourism development and the other "...a subculture of squatters who inhabited makeshift cabins and who combined their love of skiing with a back-to-the-land ethos and counterculture political values"(8).

<sup>12</sup>See for example, Dick Barrymore's 1969 film, *Last of the Ski Bums*, in which women are only featured sunbathing or dancing in clubs off of the slopes, Or Barrymore's, *The Performers*, produced for K2 skis in 1971, in which women are only features as participants in a GoGo dance style "who looks best in a K2 t-shirt" contest held as a US Ski Team benefit.

<sup>13</sup> We are influenced here by Pam Sailors (2012) work on women and roller derby and reconfiguring cultural systems by adopting a "do-it-for-yourself-ethos."

<sup>14</sup> See *Pretty Faces*

<sup>15</sup> See *Pretty Faces*