

## Snowboarding at Winter X Games

The Winter X Games are a huge annual event, attracting thousands of competitors, spectators and members of the press to Aspen each year. But the beginnings of this now-popular competition grew out of humble roots, much like snowboarding.

In the early 1990s, Entertainment Sports Programming Network, more commonly known as ESPN, began to recognize the huge growth potential in action sports like skateboarding and snowboarding, in their ability to attract a younger generation of fans. So ESPN first developed the Summer Extreme Games in 1995 in Middletown, Rhode Island and Mount Snow, Vermont, which attracted almost 200,000 spectators.

The following year, the name was shortened to X Games, and by 1997, the franchise was popular enough to merit a Winter X Games. Over 38,000 people arrived in Big Bear Lake, California to watch this first winter competition which featured sports like snowboarding, ice climbing, snow mountain bike racing and even modified shovel racing. The snowboard halfpipe was a mere 12 feet tall.

After moving the Winter X Games to Crested Butte for the second and third years, where attendance dropped slightly, the competition was held at Mount Snow in 2000 and 2001 with stronger spectator numbers and the addition of the snowboarding superpipe event, which has garnered incredible attention, records and competition from top snowboarders.

The Winter X Games finally came to Buttermilk Mountain in Aspen in 2002, where they have remained until this year. In 2006, ESPN signed a contract with Aspen Skiing Company to keep the games there until 2012.

Unlike the Olympics, the Winter X Games have more freely experimented with offering eccentric and perhaps more obscure winter events. This independence has helped to popularize less mainstream sports – especially snowboarding, which has been an integral part of the Winter X Games since the first competition in 1997.

In 2002, the first year the X Games were held at Aspen, the entire U.S. Olympic Freestyle Snowboarding Team surprised everyone when they showed up at the competition, which was just weeks before the Olympics at Salt Lake City. By 2003, the X Games not only included medals but also \$500,000 in prize money for snowboarding, skiing and snowmobiling events.

Many “firsts” have been accomplished at the Winter X Games in Aspen. After Peter Olenick landed the first double flip (dubbed the Whiskey Flip) in 2007, snowboarding tricks were changed forever and riders began pulling out all the stops. Two years later, Shaun White became the first to win consecutive gold medals in the superpipe. In 2011, Kelly Clark was the first woman to land a 1080 in the superpipe, while Norwegian snowboarder Torstein Horgmo completed the first triple cork in snowboard big air.

Shaun White captured the first four-peat in superpipe that year as well, and in 2012, added another superpipe win to become the first to win a five-peat, after also securing the X Games’ first-ever perfect score of 100.

Aspen’s own Gretchen Bleiler took gold in the superpipe in 2010, placed sixth in 2011 and fourth in 2012. Additionally, Steamboat Springs native Shannon Dunn won a gold medal in the halfpipe at the inaugural X Games in 1997 and in 2001.

The Winter X Games have now permeated the international market. In 2010, the first Winter X Games were held in Tignes, France and have returned every year since.

As an annual and popular competition, especially with younger fans, the Winter X Games and their athletes have become household names and assisted in legitimizing many sport events along the way, including snowboarding. Much has changed in the world of snowboarding competition, but it is clear that the riders will continue to do one thing: push the bounds of snowboarding, attempting new tricks, new technology and never stop improving.

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