

Snowboarding opens up to women Female riders advance sport, become legends

Snowboarding has been a male-dominated sport from the very beginning, with mostly men helping to establish the sport early on. It took time and effort for women to carve out their own well-deserved area in snowboarding, but the entire industry has slowly been changing for female boarders.

Initially, women didn't choose to snowboard for the industry or financial support – because there was none – but because it was a lifestyle. Norway snowboard legend Stine Brun-Kjeldaas explains, “I started snowboarding in 1990 and back then I think I was pretty much the only girl snowboarding in my home resort. I think back then all of the girls kind of dressed like guys ... the girls were not really allowed to be seen as girls.”

An initiative to include female snowboarders in more mainstream snowboarding, with their own gear and sponsors, “didn't happen overnight. There wasn't a market for girls, there were very few girls that were in the limelight back then,” snowboarding pioneer Tara Dakides remembers. Tara eventually received her own Billabong snow clothing line, Vans snowboard boots and signature snowboard with Jeenyus. Many other women experienced a similar upswing.

Steamboat Springs native Shannon Dunn helped forge a path for women in snowboarding during the 1990s. In addition to being the first American woman to win a snowboarding medal in the 1998 Olympics after taking bronze in the halfpipe, Shannon racked up numerous other halfpipe victories and was the first woman to perform many halfpipe tricks in competition. Along with Canadian big-mountain snowboard superstar Victoria Jealouse, Shannon developed Burton's women-specific equipment line Feelgood.

Janna Meyen, who began dominating women's snowboarding at a very young age, credits female snowboard gear as helping to put women's snowboarding at the center of attention. “I think women-specific brands probably made it more mainstream even, because ... it made it more inviting to girls who wanted to look cute while they were shredding.” Stine Brun-Kjeldaas adds, “I think it helped for girls to feel like they had a place in the sport ... not just trying to be part of something that the guys did. ... It made it possible for girls to actually do their sport and they could make some money on it.”

During the 2005-2006 season, a Women's Tour was incorporated in the Swatch Ticket to Ride (TTR) World Snowboard Tour, providing an opportunity for female snowboarders to break into the industry and ride at the same level of competition as men. An overall champion is crowned after tallying riders' six top results from slopestype, halfpipe, big air and quarterpipe season events, offering female riders international respect. “I think the TTR World Tour is spearheading women's snowboarding, really laying down a foundation, and putting us on a podium where we can really show what we have and by giving us equal prize money, it definitely keeps girls motivated,” says Janna Meyen.

Today, female snowboarders have entered a world of photo shoots, pro model boards and equipment, prize money and sponsorships. But it didn't always used to be this way. In the early 1990s, women had essentially no product or industry support. “\$3,000 to \$5,000 grand was really significant back then ... And now here we're looking at overalls getting \$50,000 to \$100,000 and snowboarders making a very significant living off of doing what they do,” says Tara.

Pro model boards were finally created for women in the mid-1990s. Sims introduced the first female pro model snowboards with The Dunn by Shannon Dunn, and the Tina Basich Pro Model. Burton quickly followed suit and launched their first women's pro model in 1996, the

Dolphin 44, from Shannon Dunn, after she moved over from Sims. Gnu's Barrett Christy then presented her first pro model (she also oversaw the Gnu Girls line starting in 2003). With these women paving the way for pro model boards, the gates were opened and others followed, including Victoria Jealouse, Cara-Beth Burnside, Tara Dakides.

Women who continually push the sport as well as draw the mainstream spotlight, like Kelly Clark, Torah Bright, Jamie Anderson, Kjersti Buaas, Lisa Wiik and Aspen resident Gretchen Bleiler have followed in the footsteps of early icons: Tara Dakides and Janna Meyen who pioneered freestyle snowboarding, Victoria Jealouse made a name for big-mountain women riders, halfpipe legends Shannon Dunn and Stine Brun-Kjeldaas, and Barrett Christy who dominated halfpipe and slopestyle. All of these icons, early and current, have helped equalize women's snowboarding in very positive ways. Although it still isn't quite at the same level as men's snowboarding, it has come quite a long way since the 1990s.

Of course, snowboarding as a whole has made huge advancements itself. From its humble experiments in the 1920s, the Snurfer and further improvements in the 1960s and '70s, eventual resort acceptance and contests in the 1980s, to global recognition, fame and adoration in the 1990s and now. Naturally, athletes and innovators of the sport will continue to break barriers. We will just have to wait and see what is unveiled next in the world of snowboarding.

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