



PHOTO © NINA C. LAO

Welcome to the Big Leagues...

The Freeride World Tour Descends upon the Eastern Sierra

My heart races just thinking about it.

A looming mountain is blanketed with untouched snow. On its peak, a helicopter is landing, spewing smoke-like snow into the crackling blue sky. The thud of spinning rotors is barely audible from so far below.

At the mountain's base, a crowd has gathered. They crane their necks and peer through binoculars as a voice comes across a walkie-talkie.

"Judges ready?" they ask. "Is safety ready? Are riders ready? Ok... Send 'em!"

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For many who ski and snowboard, this is what it's all about. This is heli-accessed, big-mountain freeriding competition at its finest and between Jan. 22-26 this will be the scene unfolding at our very own McGee Mountain. The contest, called the Nissan Mammoth Challenge, is one of an international circuit of five contests known as the Freeride World Tour with events in France, Russia, and Verbier, Switzerland. The winner of the entire tour will be crowned World Champion on March 25 in Verbier and awarded \$300,000 in prize money, the largest purse ever for a freeriding competition.

These are the big leagues of skiing and snowboarding and the significance of having such an event in our area has not been lost on anyone involved. "Everyone who's played a role in this has been nothing but supportive," explains Rebecca Paranick, Government Relations Manager for Mammoth Mountain Ski Area. "It's a colossal effort to make an

event of this magnitude a reality but it's worth it and everyone's been excited about it."

None more so than professional big-mountain snowboarder and local celebrity Steve Klassen who is, for the Nissan Mammoth Challenge, both competitor and Event Coordinator. "It's just going to be so cool," Klassen says. "To my knowledge, this is the first-ever helicopter-accessed freeriding contest to come to North America outside of Alaska and it's right down the road from Mammoth. There's going to be the best snowboarders and skiers from across the globe doing their thing and you can watch it from inside your car."

As a member of the international Pro Freeriders Board, Klassen was instrumental in bringing the event to the area. He gave the final go-ahead for McGee Mountain under one condition—the event had to give local riders a chance to compete. Therefore,

an open qualifying round will be held on Mammoth Mountain between Jan. 15-17. The top three qualifiers from the men's and women's skiing and snowboarding fields will then head to McGee Mountain and become competitors in the 2009 Freeride World Tour.

As with any major sporting event, there are a few different ways spectators can witness the action. Areas will be set up at the base of McGee Mountain for anyone wanting a firsthand glimpse. There will also be a helicopter filming each rider's descent to be seen later on ESPN. The final day of the competition, Saturday, Jan. 26, will be capped with an awards ceremony and big-screen viewing party in the Village where riders will narrate footage from the competition.

However you choose to view it, the Nissan Mammoth Challenge is shaping up to be a thrilling and unique twist to our winter's beautiful activities here in the Eastern Sierra.



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