

An interview with FESTIVAL FOUNDER, Doug Perry

The Three Pillars of Partying Telus World Ski and Snowboard Festival, Whistler

They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. So Doug Perry, President of W1 and founder of the World Ski and Snowboard Festival can take it as a compliment that pro-photographer showdowns, extreme games events and spring festivals are popping up all over North America. Because he knows that his came first.

“My entire life was built around skiing,” said Perry from the sun-soaked patio of Moguls’ café, amidst the swirl of the festival’s finale. “I organized the first competition (the WSSF precursor, a World Technical Ski Championships, in 1994), because I genuinely wanted to contribute to the sport. It was the first ever international freeski competition in the world. I parked myself on the phone and called every world champion I could find, and racked up \$10,000 in phone bills. And they all came. But what was so interesting was that all these athletes and high-level media had never before been to Whistler.”

In 1996, the event morphed into the World Ski and Snowboard Festival, a quiet event which spawned the present-day bacchanalia, but whose calendar of events bears little resemblance to the current 10 days of action, competitions, free concerts, A-list parties, and talent parades.

For Perry, although it started from his passion for the sport and elite performance, the athletes are just one component of what makes the Festival unique. “This year, it was our goal to allow the festival to increase its arts focus. I think if it was just about the sports, it wouldn’t be nearly as interesting as it is with the film, music, photography, words and stories, all the things creative in nature. There are three pillars in our festival content – sports, music and the arts. But the three pillars really do intersect. The Salomon Big Air is a sports competition with live music and other artistic elements; the Pro Photographer Showdown always showcases leading athletes, but it’s an artistic expose of the sports, choreographed to music. When those three pillars come together, it creates a really unique moment.”

A decade after it all began, the sold-out arts events included the Pro Photographer Search and Showdown, the 72hour Filmmaker Showdown, and Words and Stories, an evening of tale-telling from the ski industry’s most eloquent writers. Crowds also packed the Skiers Plaza for the Big Air events, and the Festivals’ piece de resistance, the free outdoor concert featuring the Black Eyed Peas and surprise guest Justin Timberlake. “Those were great events. They really help make Whistler,” says Perry, looking back on ten days that ski and snowboard industry insiders have come to schedule into their calendars, as the ultimate chance to network and do business.

Athletes, photographers, journalists, manufacturers all head into town. Contracts are being signed, connections being made, stories being sold, focus groups analyzing new gear. There are more meetings and private parties going on than any calendar of events could take account of. Whistler during the WSSF is ground zero for the snowsports industry, and the name of the game for the outsider is twofold : to pace yourself, and scam your way into the A-list parties. This is where the next season’s deals get made, like a World Economic Forum for the vertically-inclined. It’s not too late to start planning ahead.

At least, that’s where Doug Perry’s at. “This time of year is a time of reflection and planning for next year. My company’s job is to build the framework, and every year, what happens within that is fluid. We ask the athletes, the photographers, the filmmakers, what they want. It’s a very open design philosophy, but we like to put the paintbrush in the hands of the artists.”

A festival is the way a community celebrates its defining elements. Not only do we connect with ourselves during a festival, we reinvigorate our sense of place.

That the World Ski and Snowboard Festival is a defining celebration of Whistler is evidenced by two things : the locals who pack the house for many of the afterdark events, and the 400 odd volunteers who pitch in to make it happen. What’s Whistler about? A concentration of talented athletes laying down jaw-dropping tricks. Dog-lovers, après on the patio, articulating your love for the mountains in whatever way you can. Grey days when everyone stays inside and the band plays to an empty arena. Telling stories, riding the chair, hunting down schwag, rocking to the Aussie equivalent of Ben Harper, Xavier Rudd, while the sun shines on.

Not a bad combination at all.