



Wait, did I just eat yellow snow?
PHOTO: ALEX GIESBRÉCHT

JANINA KUZMA

ONE SEASON FIVE PODIUMS

INTERVIEW BY JACOBINA MILNE-HOME

Those who know Janina Kuzma from skiing in New Zealand or Fernie already know she is superstar. Lately, however, the recognition has gone global, with Janina storming the international circuit to bag five podiums this year.

Janina's skiing has always made people stand up and watch. She skis hard and fast. And, as good friend Ross Janzen points out, while she is always keen to "rip the toughest line" she knows how to keep it professional. There is nothing scary about watching Janina ski; she is strong and knows exactly what she is doing.

Although Janina is known for Big Mountain, she also kills it in the park. I first met her back in 2005 at the NZ Freeski Open, where she stood on the podium for both Freeride and Freestyle. In the park, she has the same attitude as she has on the slopes. Mainly, that fear is there to be conquered and there is no reason not to be pushing the boundaries for women in the sport. She won't admit any of this, as she doesn't shout about her skiing. She is purely out there for herself, ripping because she loves it. Even on the competition scene, I get the impression that she is not in it for the glory, but for the challenge that competing presents.

Janina is also well-known for helping out friends and encouraging others. In the 2007 NZ Open, she made half the kids she coached enter, to show them there is nothing to be scared of. Although she was competing herself (taking the title for the third time in a row – fourth when you include 2008), she didn't hesitate to stop to help the kids or anyone else who was nervous or needed advice on a line.

Her spark on the snow is also evident off the mountain, as anyone who has ever partied with her will tell. I remember one night in 2005, crawling my way home at 9pm, done in already after going out with Miss Kuzma. Amy Sheehan agrees, describing Janina as "the life of every party. But when it comes to the crunch she is the most focused person."

In fact, wherever you are in the world, you're bound to hear stories about her, the lines she skied in comps that scared off half the guys, or how she saved her friend's life, digging them out of a backcountry avalanche. Or that she was standing on a podium, took up the bet and shouted ... I'll let you guess what she said.

Janina makes you sit up and take note. She lives her life with full dedication to everything, be it the skiing, friendships or even the partying. There is never a dull moment; hanging with Janina is a ride in the fast lane.

PHOTO: DOMINIQUE DAHER





PHOTO: ALEX GIESBRECHT

Janina pillaging powder and podiums



PHOTO: MARC WEILER.CH

QUICKFIRE

Age: 23

Home Town: Wanaka, NZ

Sponsors: Helly Hansen, Dynastar, Lange, Smith, Resorts of the Canadian Rockies, Cardrona

Best powder: Fernie BC, Revelstoke BC, Snowbird Utah, Fieberbrunn Austria, Chamonix France

Has it all: Europe

Bang for buck: Austria

Hidden gem: Schweitzer, Idaho

Favourite event: Canadian Freeski Champs, Red Mountain

If you weren't a skier: I'd be no-boarding everyday

Trees or Big Faces? Happy Faces

Chairlift or Gondola? Skins

Fruit or Veg? Smoothies big

3 Celebs you would like to punch in the face? Punches are for losers... I'll challenge them to a ski race

RESULTS

1st Canadian Ledcor Freeski Championships, Canada

3rd Scott Big Mountain, Fieberbrunn, Austria

1st Stimorol Engadin Snow, St Moritz, Switzerland

1st Winter Mysticxperience, Monte Rosa, Italy

7th Nissan Freeride de Tignes France

2nd Nendaz Freeride, Switzerland

7th Freeride World Tour Final Ranking

You've had a pretty mental season with a massive competition schedule, both in North America and Europe. Can you run us through the events you have competed in this winter?

Yeah, this season has been crazy. I started off in Canada with the Canadian Ledcor Freeskiing Championships, then I headed to Europe the start of February to compete in the Freeride World Qualifying tour.

The first comp was the Scott Big Mountain in Fieberbrunn, Austria, followed by the Freeride De Chamonix. Then I got an invite to the Engadin Snow in St Moritz in Switzerland. It wasn't part of the FWT, but it had invited skiers from the top tour and was pretty amazing. From there it was off to Monterosa, Italy for the Winter Mystic Xperience, and then I got a Wild Card for the third stop on the Freeride World Tour in Tignes, France. Then it was back to Switzerland for the Nendaz Freeride, which was the sister event of the Nissan Xtreme Verbier.

This reply only goes to prove that she doesn't boast, as Janina has failed mention her results from these comps. See the sidebar for the list of her accomplishments: a total of five podiums.

Can you tell us more about the Engadin Event, the type of skiing, what you actually did to win, and what it was like seeing Kiwis Sam Smoothy and Fraser McDougall also on the podium?

The Engadin Snow was an invitational freeride comp in St Moritz, Switzerland. The competition venue was on this mountain called Mt Corvatsch. You could only visually inspect your lines, which is great because the venue face stays fresh for the competitors. It just brings freeriding to another level. I love it! There's this massive tram that goes right over the competition face so you can inspect it bird's-eye-view style from the tram as

many times as you want. We had a couple of weather days, so I was on the tram a lot checking out my line; I knew exactly where I had to go. The crazy thing about this comp was that they had to rappel you down 15 metres from the tram onto the venue face to the start gate. Gnarly! It was definitely an adrenaline-starter.

I had a really solid run and skied this line that had some sweet drops. Right before the Engadin Snow, I was in Chamonix for a FWQT comp, and I crashed super hard ... lost my helmet, goggles and skis. It was a full on garage sale, so to come to the Engadin Snow and win was exceptional. To see the Kiwi boys also on the podium was phenomenal. It was such a boost for us as a team. We were all jumping up and down in a circle in front of all the cameras, just yelling and screaming. We partied super hard that night.

In the final event in Nendaz, you narrowly came second to Canadian Jen Ashton, who I understand you have always looked up to as you have come through the ranks. What's it like, making the change from young gun to podium threat?

The event in Nendaz was a sister event for The Verbier Xtremes. If you won that comp, you automatically got a wild card for the Finals in Verbier. Pretty daunting to know that this was the big comp of the whole season. I came second to Jen by 0.8 or something. Damn! Ha ha. She's been one of my idols for years - just a ripping skier, and also has a lot of comp experience.

On this new world tour, I definitely feel like the young gun. It's pretty entertaining coming out and skiing, having a blast and also doing extremely well. Especially on the FWT, where the women are a lot older; but this has shown me that I can have a long skiing career. As for being a threat on the tour, that's a funny thought. Either way, I'm just out there to show people



Janina stomps cliffs for breakfast...
PHOTO: YVES GARNEAU



lunch ...
PHOTO: YVES GARNEAU



"What are you having for dinner?" "Cliffs"
PHOTO: DOMINIQUE DAHER

the way I want to ski: to always be raising the bar for women and our sport. As much as I am an athlete, skiing and training, I like to have a good time meeting people and partying. It's all about having a balance.

What have been the highs and lows of such a hectic schedule?

Highs: Getting to travel and compete with my sister on the tour for the first time and both of us sharing the experience together. It has been really special. Having the opportunity to meet so many new people in the freeriding community, all of whom have been amazing. Going to so many incredible resorts in Europe, and not having to be based in one place for the whole time. Getting to ski some sick terrain, partying, and skiing so much pow it's ridiculous!

Lows: Living out of my ski bag and having to wash most of my clothes by hand sucks, eating way too much pizza and pasta. I think that has been my diet for the whole time I've been in Europe!

What are your ultimate goals in competition?

To podium, of course, but to have a blast at the same time.

There is a lot more to your skiing than competitions. Where are you happiest in the mountains?

I definitely am happiest skiing around with my friends. I really missed them this year being on the road for so long competing. I love riding with my sister. We get super amped riding together. I love touring, being out in the mountains, sledding and riding park. But I'm always happy when I have my skis on. Couldn't ask for anything better!

I understand you have already skied a first descent in Fernie. Did you get to name it?

Yeah I have – back in 2006, I think, on the Lizard Headwall. It's a permanently closed area, but if you're lucky you can hike up and wait for the hill to close and ski it at 5pm after the patrollers have finished doing avi work on it. It was the last day of the season and I had been skiing with a buddy, Stokie, all day; we were talking about what line we were going to ski on the headwall later that afternoon. Then he said, "we can ski a line or we can ski a sweet line," which was in fact a first descent. We shredded it, and it looked sick! It now has a cool name, 'BJ': Ben and Janina.

When you're not doing first descents, might one find you coaching back in NZ?

Yes, that's my job when I'm back in NZ. I work with a programme called HPC at Cardrona, Wanaka. It's a park, pipe and freeride programme. It's a great job, and it means that I'm always on the snow skiing. Coaching has been a great way for me to give back what I've been taught when I was younger. I love getting the kids stoked on freeriding. I took a crew of kids to the club fields last year and it was a riot. Crazy times. Coaching is so much fun, and the crew I coach are all rippers. It's really cool to see the talent that is coming out of New Zealand; these kids are really on their game and will be top riders for NZ one day.

For those girls just starting to come into the Freeride scene, what is some advice you wish you had when you started?

Some advice for girls who want to come into the freeride scene is just get out there and ski. If I saw something I wanted to ski, I'd hike up and just ski



Epic tree skiing in Tignes, down to Lac Du Chevril
PHOTO: DOMINIQUE DAHER

it. If there are freeride clinics, do them. Don't be embarrassed if you crash, because if you never crash you're not pushing yourself hard enough; and don't be afraid to ask question because people will be stoked to help you out. For comps, it's not about the winning or losing, it's about getting out there and having fun and meeting the coolest people!

What advice do you have for girls, or guys for that matter, wanting to get into skiing more powder, backcountry, and skiing lines with cliff drops?

If you want to ski more pow, get out of the park and go rip big lines. Don't head out into the backcountry without having the gear and the knowledge. I can't stress that enough. Get out and do an avi course if you can. It will be well worth it. And as for skiing lines with cliff drops: no hesitations. Go fast and don't stop. Speed is your friend.

You have had a unique upbringing. Can you tell us about where you have lived, and how skiing came about with living in the jungle?

I was born in Brisbane, Australia. After we were born, my Mum headed back to Papua New Guinea, where my parents and brother were living at the time. I lived there for three years. Then we moved to Indonesia and lived in Borneo for eight years. Then my sister and I were sent off to boarding school back in Brisbane for a couple years, and then, in 1998, my parents moved back to Australia.

We'd always have a family ski trip during the year. The first time I ever skied was actually in Austria when I was five. Then we skied in France and Switzerland. I even remember skiing in New Zealand when I was seven! During the time in Borneo, my Dad was working for a coal mine. There was a family from Fernie that were also working at this coal mine in Indo with

my Dad. They knew we liked to ski so they told us about Fernie, and we went there in 1995. I still ski there now.

And now you are a Kiwi?

Yes, I do like to call myself a Kiwi. I love New Zealand. It is truly home for me. I have lived in Wanaka for the past five years, with the winters here, and the rest of the year travelling, training and competing all over the world.

You were selected for the NZ Freeski Team in October as a Freeride skier. What does this mean? From my understanding, it might be the only National Team in the world with Freeride skiers represented?

I was selected for the NZ Freeski team last year. It feels really good to be able to represent a country that I call home. It also means that I get extra support from the NZ Freeski Association. I am really proud to be part of the team. NZ is the only place in the world where they have a National Freeski Team with a selection of disciplines from Park and Pipe, to Skier Cross to Big Mountain. It's really unique to be part of a world-first Freeride Team.

Any shout outs?

Shout outs... where to start...

To my Sponsors Helly Hansen, Smith, Dynastar, Lange, Fernie RCR, Cardrona for hooking me up. To the hardcore ski community in Fernie. To my best riding buddies for making me the skier I am today: Bezubiak, Jeremy, Gwat, Alex, Julien, Stokie. To my training buddy who has kept my head straight, and my music play list extraordinaire, Stefan Ostling. To FSANZ and the NZ Team. To the Cardrona crew and shout out to Kritsy Quin, Snowsports NZ. Mum and dad and to Maria for starting this journey with me.