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Making a name for herself

Glenwood Springs teen excelling as halfpipe skier

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GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colorado — How does Zyre Austin know her freestyle skiing career is following an upward trajectory?

People are finally pronouncing her name correctly.

“Everyone kind of messes it up at first,” joked the 18-year-old Glenwood Springs ski halfpipe competitor. “People are starting to pronounce it right. People say like ‘Zy-ree’ or ‘Zy-eer’ or ‘Zy-ra’ or ‘Zeer’ — anything.”

For the record, it's pronounced “Zire,” like tire with a z.

As the 25th-ranked women's halfpipe skier in the Association of Freeskiing Professionals world rankings, Austin has earned the extra attention to detail.

Austin is currently immersed in her first full season of halfpipe competition, which has thus far featured a World Cup event at Copper Mountain, a USASA event at Snowmass and a Rev Tour stop at Lake Tahoe's Northstar resort, among others.

Solid results along the way have kept her ranking in a good spot. Following an intense, self-guided training regimen, Austin is striving to further boost her standing.

She logs big miles traveling to competitions and to train. The halfpipe at Copper Mountain and Snowmass are popular practice locations, and she spends all sorts of time on the trampolines at Woodward at Copper, a state-of-the-art indoor training facility that's a hot spot for winter sports athletes.

“Getting up in the morning is a commitment,” Austin said with a smile. “Especially being so far away from everything. It's more annoying than anything, but it's not so bad when I do do good in a competition. It's worth it.”

On the horizon for Austin is another trip to Tahoe this month for The North Face Park and Pipe Open and a number of competitions on Colorado snow, including the late-February Aspen/Snowmass Open, one of her favorite events. It's where she began to realize her potential last season.

“I got fifth in it,” Austin said. “I was really surprised. I was going against girls who have been doing it for a while. I was like, ‘Hmm, I can actually do something with this.’”

So far, that's been the case.

Austin was even accepted to the Dew Tour, but opted to sit this season out so she could further polish her skills and leave a bigger mark on the freeskiing world when she does make her debut.

“I want to do it next year,” she said. “I'd rather win some of the other competitions and then go into a big one, to try to make a bigger name for myself. I haven't been doing it that long.”

But she's picked it up quickly, ascending the rankings in a relative flash.

How does Austin make time for all the travel and competitions? The Yampah Mountain School senior has fulfilled all her high school graduation requirements except for her senior project, which she will tackle in the months to come.

"Yampah has a really good program, especially for athletes," Austin said. "Anyone who wants to do something creative, they really work with you."

Creativity is a pillar of Austin's personality, so it's no surprise she gravitated toward freeskiing.

Austin, whose non-skiing passions include singing and playing the piano, turned her attention to the halfpipe after growing disenchanted with the stuffiness and rigidity of moguls competition. She also gave alpine racing a successful go as a youngster, skiing in Sunlight Mountain Resort's youth program.

"I just wasn't that into moguls," Austin said. "It's really a different vibe of competition than park is. I just really liked the people [in park skiing]. People take it seriously, but it's not like, 'Don't talk to your competition or anything.' The pressure of moguls was just so like ... I didn't like it at all."

So what does she like about the halfpipe?

"I just like flying through the air," Austin said. "It's a really cool feeling, and when you get something that's hard and you know it looked good and felt good, it's such an awesome feeling. You feel yourself moving forward and progressing, especially when people notice you and they clap or something."

"It's just an awesome feeling to know someone's watching you and enjoying it, and you're having a good time and just being outside and seeing the beautiful mountains and the snow and all the fresh air."

No matter the discipline, Austin's always been a natural on the slopes. Just ask her dad, Dan Villemaire.

Villemaire, who at the time worked as a photographer at Aspen Highlands, introduced his daughter to the mountain a couple weeks before her first birthday.

"I always knew she'd be a good skier, no matter what discipline," he said. "She would have been a star in any of them. I thought she was destined to be a [giant slalom] skier. She was beating the boys in Buddy Werner when she was 9."

Austin's come a long one since then, and is on the cusp of elevating her burgeoning career to another level. She just needs a little help.

As her first full season wears on, Austin is still seeking a private coach and sponsors. She hopes to train in New Zealand this summer, but the viability of that wish hinges on her success on the sponsorship front.

"The problem is pretty much that I don't have a coach and it's all really expensive, too," Austin said. "Just the whole coaching and getting to competitions."

But every penny she's poured into it has been a worthwhile investment.

The Winter X Games and the Olympics are both attainable goals for Austin, who knows she can compete with the ski halfpipe world's top talent.

"If I had trained last year like I have this year, I think I would be really close," Austin said, referring specifically to the X Games. "All the girls there have been doing it for a long time. It's not really that frustrating, because I know I'm so close to being at their level. It's more exciting, something that's going to push me to keep going."

And if the X Games or Olympics are in Austin's future, you can bet they'll get her name right.

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