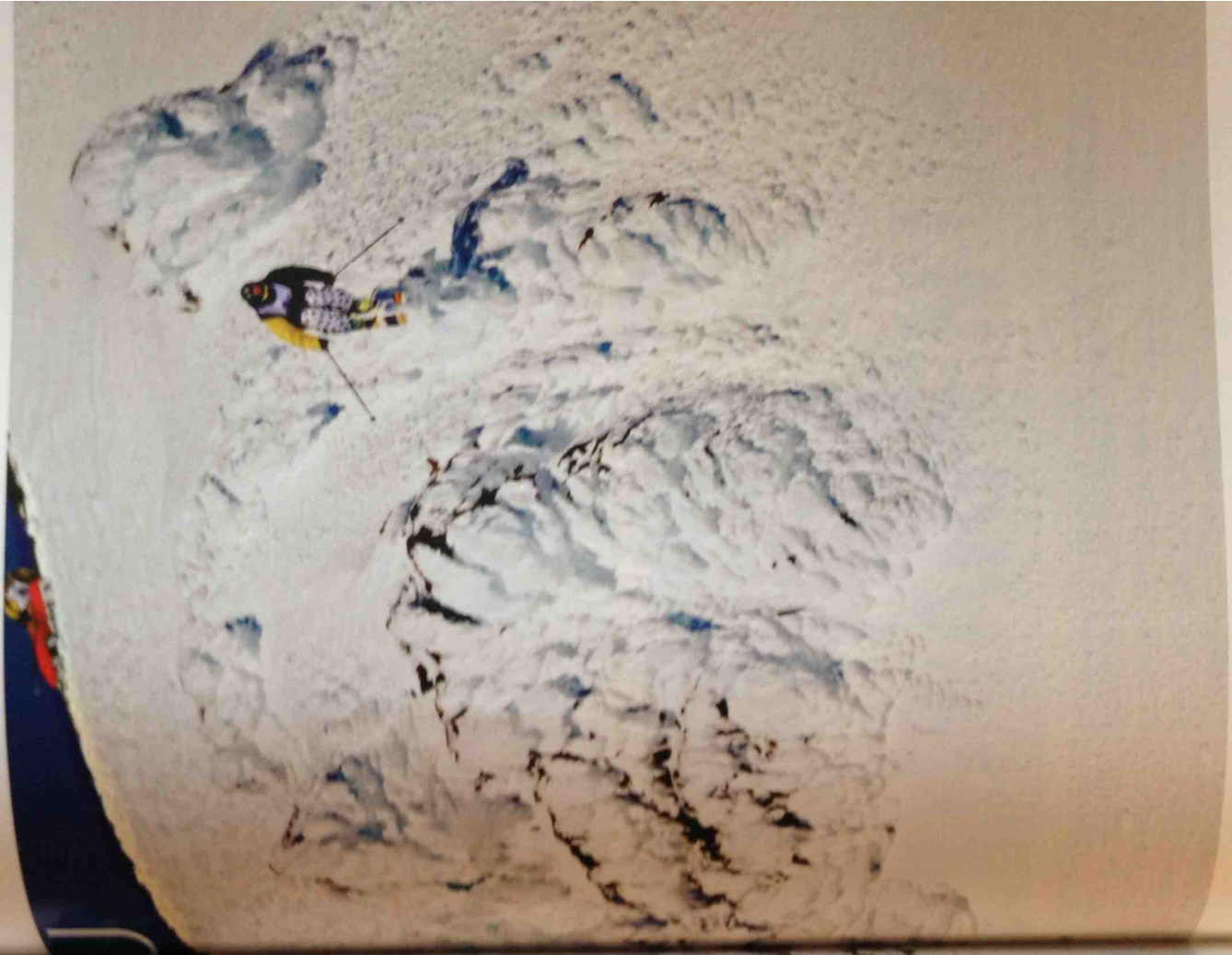


X MIT RUAPEHU MIT REMME

Die Ruapehu ist ein Vulkan in der Nordinsel Neuseelands, der im Jahr 1826 erstmals eruptierte. In der Folgezeit trat er wiederholt in Erscheinung und erreichte im Jahr 1914 sein Maximum. Seitdem ist er inaktiv und bildet eine riesige Caldera, die von einem Rande aus basaltischen Gestein begrenzt ist. Die Caldera ist heute ein Nationalpark und ein beliebtes Ziel für Touristen, die die Gegend erkunden wollen.



BRUCE MCELROY/GETTY IMAGES



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WORDS BY JOSH BERRY
IMAGES BY STEVE DICKINSON

A sudden break in weather brought out bluebird skies for the Mt Ruapehu Big Xtreme competition held in early September last year, which saw Kiwi skiers and boarders on the podium in both the men's and women's ski and snowboard categories fending off top competition from several high profile international skiers and boarders.

A large contingent of overseas competitors and kiwi hopefuls took to the icy slopes of Whakapapa ski-field's Pinnacles albeit on the Legolands section running off the top of the Grand Pinnacle. This section of The Pinnacles is generally a mellow area but offered the best snow conditions post-storm.

The event, a qualifying round for the Freeride World Tour, saw 56 competitors arrive at National Park to sit out the event's waiting period. With the unknown prospect of what to expect above the clouds, competitors were forced to sit out the waiting period with increasing anxiety and excitement.

The bustling weather system, dubbed the 10-day storm, opened up for two days of sunny conditions bringing relief to the competitors entered into the event. But this didn't exactly provide the nice trails and pockets of powder the competitors were secretly hoping for.

Conditions on the snow proved to be below par with Whakapapa living up to its icy reputation and the event being run in one day instead of the proposed two. This meant that each competitor had two runs each down the venue.

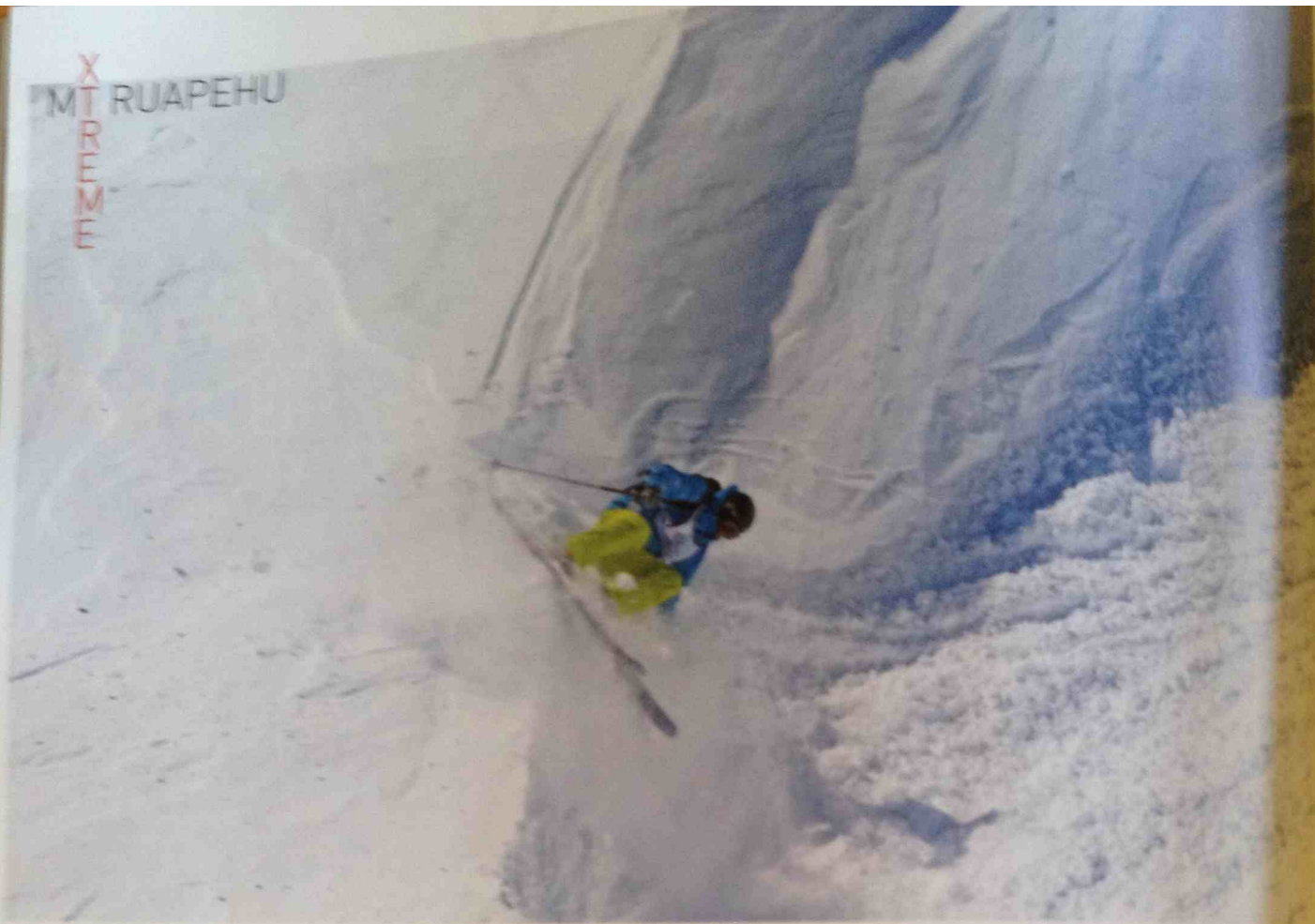
Colin Boyd, overall winner of the men's snowboard category, commented on the conditions as some of the worst he'd ever seen.

"I'm originally from the East Coast of the United States where it's quite icy - when I saw the face it was probably some of the worst ice I'd ever ridden," Boyd said.

However, for day one of competition the ice melted out a bit and by mid morning the first runs of the day were underway on the mellow Legoland

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BOYD: As the day warmed up the conditions softened BLOOM: A long way to the top!

stages.

In previous years the competition had taken place on the 'Policeman's' section of the Pinnacles but due to consent restrictions put in place this year the competition had to take place at Legendland.

This meant that the runs were shorter and mellower as the Legendland section only offers up two trails compared to Policeman's which has around 20.

Although the venue is not considered as gnarly as other trails in the vicinity, this didn't mean the competitors were in for easy-going with the icy runs offering up some gnarly scenarios.

"From the top of the run looking down was a daunting experience," Boyd said.

"We got on top for our second runs, looked down the venue and couldn't see a single track down the face."

To make matters worse, the venue was littered with an ice hazard known as chicken-heads.

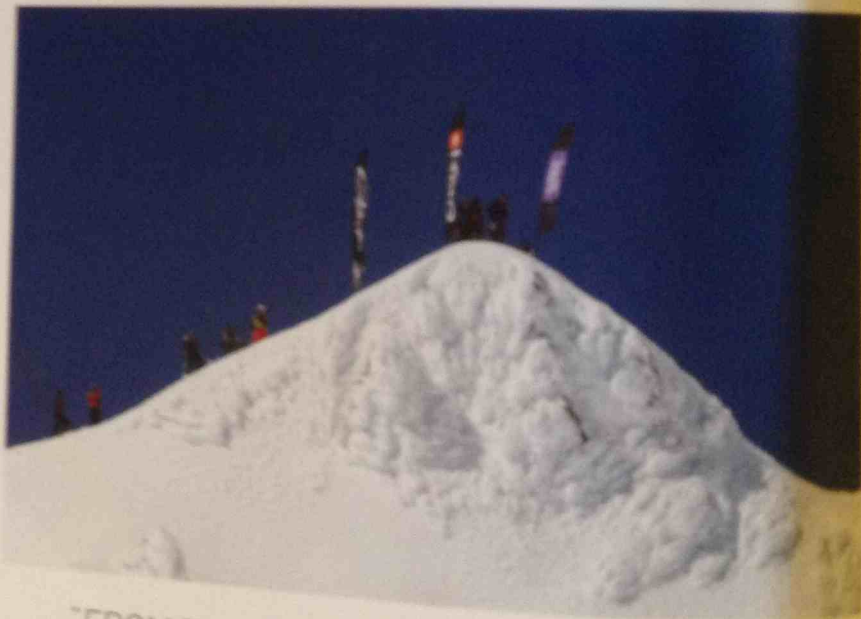
"It was like a reverse cheese grater and if you were to fall, you would punish yourself," Boyd said.

The repercussions for mismanaging a run through these sorts of conditions were heavy, something that Dan Bond in the Men's snowboard event found out the hard way.

"From a spectator's point of view, it was hard to watch," Boyd said.

"I was up on the top waiting for my run - Dan went massive off the ledge on his second run, did an enormous method and he landed a bit fat - that was really tough to watch."

Despite the conditions on offer throwing up some interesting twists, the high level of professionalism from riders in both disciplines saw Wanaka's Sam Lee take out the top spot in the men's ski event, with Austrians Fabian Lentzsch and Raphael Meisler coming second and third respectively in the men's snowboard event. Kiwis took out the top two spots with Colin Boyd of Wanaka coming first, Jordan Decker (Marlborough) second and Raphael Buller (Switzerland) third. Leading the ladies table was Australian Nat Segal taking



"FROM THE TOP OF THE RUN LOOKING DOWN WAS A **DAUNTING EXPERIENCE**. WE GOT ON TOP FOR OUR SECOND RUNS, LOOKED DOWN THE VENUE AND COULDN'T SEE A SINGLE TRACK DOWN THE FACE TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, THE VENUE WAS LITTERED WITH AN ICE HAZARD KNOWN AS CHICKEN-HEADS."



ABOVE: Avoiding the chicken heads.

MT RUAPEHU

X FREERIDE
out the ski event, with Anna Smoothy (Wanaka) and Erica Prestige (Taupo) picking up second and third place respectively. In the woman's board event, Swiss Ana Marea Zraggen took out first place, and Wanaka's Maria Kuzma and Malin Lindroos of Finland came second and third respectively.

Proposed changes to the Freeride World Tour judging criteria didn't affect this event which saw the judging panels stick with the Overall Impression system, a standard ski and snowboard system for any event run nowadays. The system offers a basic format which allows for judging to be broken down into five criteria's: line, control, fluidity, technique, and jumps/tricks.

Prior to the competition, judges check the competition faces themselves and analyse possible lines and snow conditions while imagining what lines in the face could be very difficult and which ones could be safe.

A new unified judging system will be implemented for the northern hemisphere FWQ and FWT events in the future which could incorporate New Zealand.

Dion Newport, Free Ride World Head Ski Judge commented on the status of the event being as high as overseas free ride events.

"We had a huge international field, and the level of talent from home-grown riders was a standout for this Xtreme event. I am always happy coming back to my home field to judge, and it's great to

have an event of this status in the North Island," Newport said.

Initially the event had a four-star rating, but with a few of the sponsors pulling out in the build-up to the competition, the event's status had to be relegated to a three-star. Consent issues with the Department of Conservation and local iwi also attributed to the events downgrade.

Despite this, the future of the event is still looking promising. And if the late run of decent snow and the solid base that Mount Ruapehu had last season is anything to go by, there is plenty to look forward to for the event next year.

"The event does get really big skiers, big names come in as well - guys who wouldn't normally think about competing," Newport said.

"It was really well done and the competitors were taken care of really well with barbeques every day, free drinks, and beer specials for post-competition festivities."

From the competitors' point of view, Boyd mentioned the event didn't feel as big as it had in the past.

"Ruapehu defiantly has the terrain, and in years past with the support of some of the bigger sponsors, they've defiantly made the athletes feel like they're taking part in a serious event," Boyd said.

Despite this, the event saw huge growth this year with the snowboard category almost doubling from last year.

"It's attracting more riders from overseas because people can see that if they come to New Zealand they can pick up points for the tour (FWT), so it's getting more competitive," Boyd said.

Freya Taylor, Marketing Co-ordinator for Ruapehu Alpine Lifts commented on the future improvement of the event as looking bright.

"All our major sponsors returned again this year plus a few more joined us," Taylor said.

"The Mt Ruapehu Xtreme is a favourite event of Mt Ruapehu so we actively seek new and improved ideas and local competitors. This year we trailed a live webcast which allowed people to watch the event live around the world."

"It was very exciting and inspiring to see such talented competitors challenge one of Mt Ruapehu's most gnarly runs."

Dave Mazey, General Manager of Mt Ruapehu Alpine Lifts said that he has been blown away by the standard of competition and proud of the Kiwi performance.

"This year the competition has attracted some well-known international talent, as well as some of the top names in Kiwi freestyle skiing and boarding," Mazey said.

"I'm very impressed with the level of skiing and boarding showcased at Mt Ruapehu, Whakapapa Ski Area."

The next Mt Ruapehu Big Xtreme is scheduled to take place during spring 2013.