

Kevin Pearce Op-Ed

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On December 31, 2009, professional snowboarder Kevin Pearce suffered a severe brain injury while attempting a double cork, a trick that would prove essential to medaling at the Vancouver Olympics. Following his accident, a debate ensued over whether or not the halfpipe judging system—and professional snowboarding—needed to be reined in. In this piece I argue that such efforts would be misguided and a dishonor to Pearce.

In 1979 a handful of snowboarding pioneers began riding a natural formation that soon became known as “The Tahoe City Pipe.” This, snowboarding’s first halfpipe, was not inside the boundaries of a resort, but rather within those of a city dump—the land was owned by the Tahoe-Truckee Sanitation Company. One of these early pipe riders, Bob Klein, later commented that “We were on boards with bungees for bindings so we were most interested in dropping in and going up the other wall. It wasn’t really about air.”

Riding the halfpipes of today, however, is about air. These halfpipes, things manicured by heavy machinery, scarcely resemble the natural features and hand-sculpted pipes of the past. The walls of this year’s Olympic halfpipe will stand at twenty-two feet, four feet higher than those used in the previous games. These towering walls—and the increased transition they provide—allow for more speed and amplitude while also providing safer landings. Nonetheless, they carry inherent risks. The increased amplitude modern halfpipes afford do not make riders immune from gravity: crashing from a height of some twenty feet above the pipe will undoubtedly hurt more than simply falling from a few feet. The world was recently reminded of this.

On December 31, 2009, Olympic snowboarding hopeful Kevin Pearce hit his forehead on a halfpipe wall in Park City, Utah while attempting to land a double cork, a trick considered essential for medaling in Vancouver. He remains hospitalized with a severe brain injury. Since his accident, a debate has arisen regarding the safety of halfpipe riders and the limits to which snowboarding should be pushed. In an ABC interview, Christine Brennan, a sports columnist for *USA Today* and an ABC News Consultant, advocated for change. She argued that the U.S. and International Olympic Committees need to “immediately commission a group of medical experts and others to look into this.” She also took aim at the format for judging halfpipe runs, stating that “The very fact that you get more points the higher you go, it is asking these young . . . fearless athletes to do things that probably are not best for them.” Her sentiments have been echoed by others and are the focus of numerous articles and television pieces.

There is one place, however, where the ideas of Ms. Brennan fail to garner support: the snowboarding community. Whether it’s among professional riders or weekend warriors, Ms. Brennan’s ideas—and those of other critics of the current state of snowboarding—have been criticized for a failure to understand the very nature of snowboarding. While riders agree with her that snowboarding can be dangerous, especially at the level of Mr. Pearce and other Olympic contenders, many riders disagree with her about the need to mitigate these dangers.

Every athlete takes calculated risks. As riders expand their bags of tricks, their ability to make informed decisions also improves. No professional rider wants to jeopardize his or her life or career. Yet in the pursuit of progression, injuries do occur. They are simply part of the wager one must make in order to progress personally and professionally. Although a broken wrist on the bunny hill and a brain injury in a halfpipe carry radically different consequences, they are both rooted in a desire to get better, to get better at doing something one loves and willingly chooses to do. All risks come with consequences, and sometimes these consequences are tragic.

As snowboarding continues to evolve, we can work to ensure that safety equipment advances just as quickly. Whether it is air bags and fall cushions accompanying the decks of quarterpipes where competitors may crash or the protection offered by helmets, safety gear continues to evolve. Yet such advances will never eliminate all of the dangers that accompany riding (it should be noted, for example, that Mr. Pearce was wearing a helmet). It is misguided, however, to think that snowboarding needs to be reined in. After Sergei Chalibashvili died from hitting his head on the platform while diving in the 1983 World University Games or Greg Louganis's head bounced off the springboard in the preliminaries of the Seoul Olympics in 1988, no one argued that the rules of diving needed to be revised. It would seem preposterous to demand that reverse 2 ½ pikes be made by divers in the water, rather than in the air. It is mistaken to suggest that the Olympics and other contests need to be altered by removing amplitude from the equation, as Ms. Brennan suggests. This is nothing less than a call to place the bar far below the capabilities of today's riders. Halfpipe riding is precisely what it is because of the air that accompanies it. No one who has ever dropped into a pipe would trade the feeling that comes from launching above the walls for a restrained, single-plank version of on-the-ground ballet skiing. Furthermore, no matter how much Olympic committees and other governing bodies change the judging format for a halfpipe run, the true progression takes place well outside of contests. This progression—and the risks that accompany it—will continue with or without contests. Whether it's the Olympics or the X-Games, contests showcase the current state of snowboarding, but they will never define it.

What happened to Mr. Pearce is unfortunate. Sadly, he joins a long list of riders who have been maimed or killed pursuing what they love. It would be a dishonor to both Mr. Pearce and to snowboarding to alter pipe riding in his name. As riders drop into the halfpipe at Cypress Mountain for their Olympic runs, more than a few will be pushing themselves to go even higher for Mr. Pearce. It is a fitting tribute.