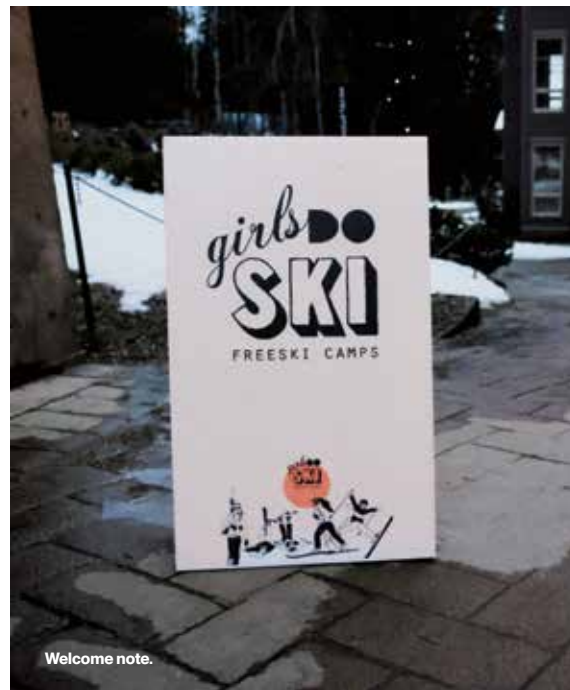


GIRLS DO SKI: AN EVOLUTION

Words by **Jayme Moye** | Photos by **Kendra Hicks**



Welcome note.

When Leah Evans began competing on the Canadian Freeskiing Tour in 2006, she saw few other women. The majority of the competitors were men, and so were the spectators, sponsors, and media.

"Where are all the spaces for females, for women in this sport?" she remembers asking Mike Berard, the editor of *SBC Skier* magazine at the time. "I don't know," he said. "I thought maybe you could show me."

Back then, freeskiing, also called freeriding, was still somewhat fringe. The idea of using a mountain's natural, ungroomed alpine terrain, its cliffs and features, to craft a choose-your-own adventure dream line, and then ski it with

as much style as you could muster, felt very avant-garde. Freeskiing competitions were still in their early stages. They ran counter-culture to both traditional freestyle skiing and ski racing, which Evans had grown up doing at Red Mountain Resort in Rossland, British Columbia.

But none of these things made freeskiing inherently unappealing to women. It was, in fact, Evans' favourite way to ski. She took Berard's challenge to heart. She *could* show him.

Evans started by organizing a freeskiing camp for women at Red Mountain Resort in 2007, balancing it with her university studies. She recruited the female friends she'd met on the competition circuit to serve as instructors and mentors. Her ski sponsor at the time, Rossignol, agreed to provide demo skis.

"I wasn't sure exactly what I was doing," Evans says, looking back. "Just that I had this crazy motivation to do it."

About two-dozen women showed up for that first camp. Encouraged, Evans expanded to offer freeskiing camps at nearby resorts in Fernie and Golden, B.C., and Girls Do Ski was officially born. When Evans moved to Revelstoke, B.C. in 2009—seeking bigger terrain on which to train for freeskiing comps—she brought Girls Do Ski with her. She ran camps out of Revelstoke Mountain Resort and grew the business by tapping into the town's world-class ski-guiding community to also offer women-only backcountry skiing camps.

Fast forward 15 years, and Girls Do Ski has created space for more than 2,000 women through its various camps. The organization is a force of nature in the sport, and widely heralded across the North American ski industry for its tireless work empowering women. As a female journalist covering mountain sports and culture, I'd been following Evans' trajectory for years. Last winter, I finally got the chance to witness Girls Do Ski first-hand.



Leah Evans.

Balancing act.



Wiggle room with Emma Patterson and Nat Segal at Revelstoke Mountain Resort, B.C.



Meeting of the minds.

It's January 27th, 2024, an overcast morning at Revelstoke Mountain Resort. I'm standing outside with 24 other female skiers listening to Evans and her staff share their drop-in rituals.

Evans, wearing a toque over a single side braid, says she visualizes herself skiing the line, then adjusts her jacket sleeves. "My cuffs always have to be over my mitts," she explains. If she's feeling relatively confident, she will silently tell herself, "You've got this." When she's nervous, her mantra is "Commit." And if she's really nervous, it's "Commit! Commit! Commit!"

Megan Harvey, a former ski racer originally from Ontario, tells us she takes a deep breath, then says in her head, "Okay Megan, time to shine!" Rachel Sloan, another former racer who now works as a ski patroller, counts down in her head, "One, two, go!" because counting to three always feels too long.

After our morning knowledge-sharing session, it's time to ski. I'm paired with three other women of similar ability who have the same goal as me—to improve my skills and confidence in off-piste terrain. Our assigned coach is Jess Leahey, a ski instructor and artist. Girls Do Ski offers freeskiing instruction starting at my level, all the way up to the advanced group,

coached by professional freeskiier Nat Segal. Most camps, including this one, are two days long. Participants range in age from their early 20s to their early 60s.

I've had women-only ski lessons before, at Aspen Snowmass, back when I lived in Colorado, and at Whitewater Ski Resort in Nelson, B.C., where I currently reside. During both of those courses, I appreciated the camaraderie that came from working with an instructor who inhabits a female body. They know exactly how hard it is to stand back up after falling in powder when your centre of gravity is down in your hips. I also relished being able to relax, in the natural way that women do when we're not in the male gaze.

At Girls Do Ski, I find the same benefits, and something more. The something more is harder to describe, so I talk to Segal about it over lunch. She agrees there's something unique happening in this program. She shares that, as an athlete, she's learned the most from her female coaches.

"I found that they took the time to understand what was going on in my head, the emotions I was feeling, and how I was interpreting things," she says.

I think back on something Leahey said that morning. She told us that we were allowed to have feelings; that this was a safe space to process whatever emotions we were experiencing as we worked on improving our performance on the mountain. It wasn't just lip service. When one of the women in my group began experiencing anxiety, Leahey framed it as part of this woman's learning process, and had her talk through it. It ended up being helpful for all of us.

I can't remember ever having been encouraged to "feel" before, in any of the sports I did during childhood and beyond. I was taught that feelings were not welcome in sports. They needed to be compartmentalized in order to perform well.

My conversation with Segal gets me thinking. What if, on the mountain, our feelings actually help rather than hinder? What if it's *better* to engage the right side of our brain—the emotional, imaginative, intuitive side—while skiing. It's an incredibly feminine perspective. But it seems like it could work. Because isn't dropping into a big line an act of creativity, of creation?

GIRLS DO SKI



The host with the most.



Happy campers.

I'm not the only one having breakthroughs. At our après-ski gathering at the Sutton Place Hotel on the last day, I learn that Girls Do Ski has such an impact on participants' skiing that many come back again. Five of the six women in the advanced group have attended a prior camp. One of them, Julia Sawyer from Calgary, Alberta, is on her seventh. She tells me she came to her first camp about ten years ago, when she was making the transition from snowboarding to skiing. Sawyer calls it her "ski therapy weekend," meaning Girls Do Ski is more than just a physical pursuit.

"You're not only unlocking the full potential of your skiing skills," she says. "But also your heart and your mind—pushing yourself further and opening up more possibilities."

We stop chatting when Evans goes up to the front of the room to make her closing remarks. She says this is exactly the community she was looking for when she founded Girls Do Ski. She gets a standing ovation.

I catch up with her afterward to talk about how things have changed since 2006. Evans no longer competes; she switched to filming in 2014. But there's no longer a shortage of female role models in the sport. Part of this is due to an industry-wide shift in perception that women are just as rad as men.

"It's undeniable now," she says. "There's just so many great female skiers out there."

To that effect, the Freeride World Tour has been actively investing in women. In 2020, the organization increased the prize money for women to be equal to that of the male competitors. In 2022, it began offering women-only freeriding clinics at all of its events. Evans happily points out that both of the female 2023 Freeride World Tour Champions—skier Justine Dufour-Lapointe and snowboarder Katie Anderson—are from Canada.

But, she says, there's still more work to be done, particularly in terms of making freeskiing instruction more widely available, and more accessible to a broader range of women. Last year, Evans partnered with Sydney Badger, a former camper who

went on to become a Level 3 ski instructor and Somatic Experiencing practitioner, to produce a series of short videos. The videos use Girls Do Ski's distinct coaching methodology, synthesizing mind, body, and spirit, and are available to watch for free as reels on the Girls Do Ski Instagram account, where they've been viewed close to 2 million times.

Earlier this year, Evans rolled out an access fund to enable women to attend Girls Do Ski who couldn't otherwise afford it. The fund was inspired by a former camper named Jennifer Proudfoot, who had such a transformative experience at Girls Do Ski that she donated \$1,000 to "pay it forward."

One thing that Evans says hasn't changed is her mission to elevate women in freeskiing, or as she puts it, "To see more numbers, more faces, and more spaces." She also feels the same crazy motivation she did as a 19-year-old. Only she's a bit more clear on her purpose: "To connect women, then step back and watch amazing things happen."

GIRLS DO SKI



Forward progress.