

Famous snowboarder pulls out of slopestyle at Sochi Olympics

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Sage Kotsenburg of the United States makes his first run of the semifinals on his way to gold in the Men's Slopestyle in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Nhat V. Meyer/Bay Area News Group/MCT

SOCHI, Russia – Slopestyle is the newest Olympic event. The form of snowboarding was always going to be a flashy addition to the Games.

The sport is an acrobatic attack on a snowy course of rails and jumps. Danger wouldn't just be part of the event. People would watch because of the danger.

But did the 2014 Winter Olympic Games go too far?

On Wednesday, Shaun White abruptly withdrew from slopestyle. White is the most famous snowboarder in the world.

Is The Course Too Risky?

White is still scheduled to compete in another event. He will compete in the halfpipe, where snowboarders do tricks on a ramp shaped like a half-circle. That's no small matter. Many people think White will get a gold medal for his halfpipe tricks. He could become the first American man to win an event at three straight Winter Olympics.

But White's high-profile campaign to capture a medal in two events will not happen this year. This is another troubling development for the Winter Games. These games cost roughly \$51 billion to put on. But concerns over safety, overspending, human rights and construction woes have become a big story. Russia has a lot riding on the games. The country is hosting the Olympics for the first time since it changed its system of government.

White said the decision not to compete in slopestyle was "difficult." He said: "I know how much effort everyone has put into holding the slopestyle event for the first time in Olympic history."

White's decision came after days of evidence showing that event organizers had gone too far. They seemed to have assembled a course that was risky even by the standards of this daring sport.

Torstein Horgmo of Norway was a favorite in the slopestyle contest. But earlier this week, Horgmo fell on a jump during a practice run. He broke his collarbone, ending his Olympics. A Finnish competitor, Marika Enne, crashed on the course's third and final jump. She hit her head and was hauled off in a stretcher. White jammed his wrist in a practice run.

"Snowboarding Is Dangerous"

Olympic officials scrambled to respond. They met with athletes and made small changes to the 2,083-foot-long course.

Authorities had apparently anticipated that some snow would melt in the run-up to the games. When that didn't happen, they attempted to reshape jumps that one athlete compared to leaping from the top of a building. Athletes also reported that rails used for tricks were too sticky and needed to be waxed.

Some slopestyle athletes downplayed the risks of the course.

"Snowboarding is dangerous. Like crossing a street is dangerous," said Canadian Mark McMorris. He is trying to push forward despite suffering a broken rib less than two weeks ago at the X Games.

Sage Kotsenburg, one of White's Olympic teammates, called the modified course "sick." That is a compliment in the world of snowboarding.

"The snow's getting better," he said after a training session. "It's still a little bit icy. I mean, it's a dangerous course. Every course is dangerous. It is a risk we take dropping in every time."

Kotsenburg would go on to win a gold medal at the slopestyle competition. He was the first American to win a gold medal at the Sochi games.

Sport Shadowed By Sadness

Still, the changes apparently were not enough to satisfy White. “The potential risk of injury is a bit too much for me to gamble my other Olympics goals on,” White said.

The U.S. Olympic Committee and the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association (USSA) supported White’s decision.

White made a good athletic decision, said Jeremy Forster. He is the USSA’s snowboarding and free-skiing director.

Slopestyle was moved quickly into the Olympics only three years ago. The speed was unusual for the International Olympic Committee. It often takes many years of competition and arguing to get some sports into the Olympics.

Even slopestyle athletes were taken by surprise by the decision; most had assumed that the event would not make it into the Olympics until at least 2018. Many observers said the decision showed the Olympics’ desire to reinvent itself and attract a younger audience.

The sport has been shadowed by sadness. One of its most well-known competitors was Canadian freestyle skier Sarah Burke. She died in a training accident two years ago. The X Games champion pushed hard to get the sport at the Olympics, and her teammates planned on honoring her in Sochi with a sticker on their helmets.