

ANDREA WHITE



• Andrea Binning freeskiing in Aspen
PHOTO: Myriam Lang-Williar, Red Bull

A AND THE DRAGON

Mt Hotham's extreme skiing champ **Andrea Binning** has been to hell. Now she's making her way back as **Rachael Oakes-Ash** reports.

Andrea Binning is pumped. Eight months of training at the Red Bull training centre in Austria has made sure of that. Mind you, she has had plenty of time to fine-tune her assets, a near death experience in a slab avalanche in Canada leaving her with a torn MCL and months of rehab.

It's been almost three years since this World Free Ski Champion competed on the circuit. This was to be her season but in December 2006 on her third day back on snow after the avalanche injury she was taken out by another skier on the slopes of Chamonix, breaking her collarbone and wrist and going under the knife for two more operations.

Instead of standing on the podium she was nominated for a Powder Award for best crash for the Canadian avalanche. The same awards she was nominated for best female ski segment the year prior.

It had happened on the last day of filming for *Respect*, a ski movie from the producers of the *Waiting Game* and featuring a host of big mountain free skiers including Bryce Phillips, Seb Michaud, Andrea and her boyfriend Stien Hagan. The area in question was Knight Inlet near Mt Waddington with the crew choppered in from a swanky boat in Vancouver Island.

"It was my first run of the day," explains Andrea. "Two riders had already gone down. I dropped in and on my second turn the whole thing ripped. I was taken over a thousand feet down. It was the scariest thing that happened to me. Everything slowed down, I was doing high-speed cartwheels and was so scared I lost my fear and accepted my fate. I never want to experience it again."

Thankfully for Andrea, and her boyfriend Stien who

watched helplessly from the chopper, she finished up waist deep in snow in what could have been a deadly outcome. A swollen knee meant little to a shocked Andrea, who was high on adrenaline and minus her helmet, skis and goggles but strangely still clutching her ski poles.

Photographer, Mark Gallup, caught the moment the slab cracked on film and *Respect The Movie* has the entire episode (www.respectthemovie.com) should Andrea want to show it to her grandchildren.

"I think sometimes you get lucky," says the pragmatic 31-year-old. "You are never one hundred per cent safe out there. You just have to check and double check and have the safety gear with you. I was in a situation where things were going really bad really quickly but someone was saying, 'it's just not your time.'"

Andrea's success has little to do with luck. Skiing since the age of four when she first stepped on snow at Victoria's Mt Baw Baw, she took to fulltime training after finishing school, working her way up the free ski ranks till she won the World Extreme Skiing Championships in Valdez, Alaska in 2000. She was nominated for a World Sports Award in London the same year and went on to win the World Tour Freeskiing finals in Les Arcs in 2003.

"I am a very competitive person and I have never looked at what I do as self gratification, I see it as a passion. When you're skiing powder and laughing for no reason and your body is buzzing it's an amazing feeling. I have taken a lot of risks to do this; it takes courage to stand out from the crowd. I grew up in a city where I was told to go to university and get a real job. I had to step outside of the norm and there's more chance of failure doing what I do," she says.



Andrea Binning
PHOTO: Ulrich Grill, Red Bull

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“I’m creating my own job, driving my own program. I didn’t know I would end up where I am now but I had really good role models from the beginning; Chris Davenport and the French big mountain skiers, they inspired me to follow the path I am on now.”

Fear doesn’t seem to be an issue for Binning, or not that she lets on. When she first moved to Chamonix in 1999, Stien took her to some seriously fearful terrain.

“I learnt to swallow my fear pretty quickly. He took me to an impressive line and said ‘you can’t fall here’ when I got down the bottom and looked back up I realised he was right, there were 1000 foot cliffs moments from where we had skied.”

The Knight Inlet wasn’t her first scare. While shooting Tony Harrington’s *Obsession* in Alaska the year before she got caught in her own slough and was spat out sans gear a kilometre later. As she says: “you should only ever be spanked by slough once, it was my own fault.”

Filming keeps her sponsors Roxy, Red Bull, Volk and Black Diamond happy as it keeps her in the public eye but if she has her way it’s back to the competitive circuit for 07/08.

“I’ve realised that doing contests is a lot safer than big mountain skiing. In competition it’s controlled, it’s you taking your own risks. When filming there are a lot more risks and a lot more dangers in the big mountains.”

Not that she’s turned into a big girl’s blouse. “I do a lot of visualization, I take a moment to calm myself before I drop in. I know I have the confidence and the skill, I have trained hard, it’s a matter of shutting my eyes, internally visualizing and going for it.”

When Australian and New Zealand Skiing spoke to Binning she was embarking on a film trip to Alaska for a free ski girls on tour style movie with Rage Films before returning to the scene of the crime with two weeks cat skiing in Canada in interior BC.

“I reckon I’ve got four good years left,” says Andrea. A lot can be done in four years. Watch this space. ❄