



Interview

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The second stop of the FWT23 took place on Thursday, February 2nd in Andorra. Nicolas Hale Woods, FWT Founder and CEO, told us about the evolution of this sport and compare with us the latest news about the new status of FWT.

Nicolas Hale-Woods is known as the co-founder of the Freeride World Tour (FWT), the off-piste ski and snowboard World Cup. Originally from Neuchâtel (Switzerland), Nicolas was awarded a degree in economics from the University of Fribourg. During his studies in the mid-1980s he acquired a passion for snowboarding and later he discovered surfing. This led him to form the Swiss Surfing Association with friends in 1992, enabling him to compete in amateur world surfing championships. It was then that he developed the Freeride competitions at Verbier, marking the beginning of his career.

-What is the latest news on Freeride?

-The latest exciting news is that FWT was purchased by the International Ski Federation (FIS) in December 2022. We have been looking for investors for 8 years and we needed strategic partners. We have grown organically for the last 16 years. But last years I was starting to feel that we stabilized and stopped growing. And as we know, if we don't grow, we decline.

Since June 2021 FIS has been headed by the new president, Johan Eliasch, who is a businessman. He is an owner of Head (skis and tennis), for example. He bought this company about 15 years ago and now it does much better. He is also working for several governments' sustainability programs (in the UK and Switzerland, in particular). So, in general, if we had not said yes, we would have regretted it later...

-What exactly do you expect from the FIS in general and its new president in particular?

-Well, his plan is to dynamize FIS by centralizing the riders of all world cup international events where today they are fragmented. Every country has its own world cup. But the problem is that there is no one hub for alpine or freestyle skiing disciplines where you can see all races or learn about ski athletes. He wants to change that. He was interested in FWT because this is one of the disciplines of skiing and this is good in terms of audience and business model.

And why did we say yes? It's because we can continue to operate with the same model which means that we are still making the rules. Moreover, now we have a new network because FIS has a lot of contacts everywhere with many potential sponsors and media.

Finally, we are also pleased because it means the integration of national associations. For example, today Andorran juniors and qualified free riders can also be part of the Andorra ski associations, which are



Nicolas Hale-Woods

FWT Founder and CEO

«People have a passion for Freeride»

more official, are more recognized, and can count on more financial support if they are in the lead.

-Are there many Andorran riders?

-A couple of hundred. This Saturday in Arcalis there will be a junior event with dozens of riders from Andorra...

-FWT is an international sports competition. Which countries do you already work with?

-We have Canada, the USA, Spain, Andorra, France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and New Zealand. We also have riders from Russia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Argentina, Chile, Lebanon, England, Scotland, Ireland, and

Denmark as well as Sweden and Norway, where we also had events.

-Any plans to expand your geography?

-We already had the first competitions in Georgia last February. There are good mountains in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, India, and China ... Our priority is to come back with the main events in Alaska (USA) and France. We will also try to reorganize events in Japan because COVID has damaged skiing in this region. And I hope that we will return to Russia because they have very good mountains as well.

We want to organize 7-8 events instead of 5. And we want to grow the

number of licensed riders and freeride schools because education is super important.

-Do you have any Russian riders this season by the way?

-Yes, we have one here in Andorra (Anna Orlova, snowboard). We don't put her nationality.

We believe that sports should be outside of politics.

-What about the minimal or maximal age of riders?

-In competition, the minimum age is 10 years old and the maximum is 18 years old for juniors and there is no maximum for seniors. We have a rider, he is 40 years old, and it's

his 15th season (Reine Barkered, ski, Sweden). He was a champion in 2014 and last year he was still on the podium.

-You have been involved in this global project since 1995. As a good expert, tell us about the evolution of this sport? How is it developing?

-In free rides, you have to be flexible and pragmatic, because we play with weather and snow. But this is progress that I never imagined in the beginning. I couldn't even imagine it 5 years ago. I mean the technique, the quality of the show, including the speed, the size of the jumps, and the tricks.

You know, 6500 licensed riders competed last year. Curiously, my son has a pretty high level, although I never pushed him. So, I have a dual status - organizer and father. This is an additional motivation to do my job well.



«It's like a game! If you have fun, you do it more. If you do it more, you do it better»

-How could you explain that the new generation manages to level up without much effort?

-There are two things. First of all, it is a sport in which children have fun - whether it is a competition or not. Secondly, social networks today actively promote sports. Kids watch the same video 50 times until they repeat a jump themselves. Kids are built to repeat and now they have a great training tool. It's like a game! If you have fun, you do it more. If you do it more, you do it better.

-Let's come back to Andorra. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Andorra compared to other places where the FWT organizes competitions?

-This year it is the 9th edition of Ordino-Arcalis Andorra FWT. Before that, we had several years of qualified competitions. In total, the history of Freeride in Andorra is almost 15 years.

Andorra has fantastic mountains. Here we used 9 different mounts, which is a record.

-Let's criticize Andorra a little... One of the disadvantages is poor logistics. In all the other places where you hold competitions, there is an airport... Andorra does not have an airport...

-To be honest, for Freeride competitions, this is not very important. We look from the outside: the organization, transport in the mountains, helicopter service - all this corresponds to 5 stars. Hospitality is



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9 from 10. Last year it wasn't great, but we want to come back because we know it can be better.

How has the global crisis affected sports competitions in general?

-In 2017 we had Swatch as a main sponsor. It left, but we survived. This year AUDI steps out. We haven't yet another big sponsor. But next year Peak Performance will come for 4 years. We signed a contract with them 9 months ago. The global crisis has affected us. Our budget was cut

off. But the general feeling is good. We are solid. People have a passion for Freeride. If we do things well, we will keep growing.

-What is the FWT budget?

-All budgets are about 6 000 000 euros (it covers organization activities, security measures, logistics and accommodation, broadcasting, helicopter filming and all content creation in 5 countries).

Here in Andorra, the budget is about 800 000 euros.

-Will free rides ever be in the Olympics contests? Is there any work in this direction at the global level?

-I think it's possible shortly. The question is when—not if.

-How can you push this process?

-It's pushing by itself because the Olympic Committee and FIS see that a lot of young people like free rides, they need to be in contact with this audience.

We have 675,000 followers,

which is more than double thanks to the purchase of FIS and its followers. Alpine ski lovers have seen that Freeride is a real part of skiing.

-It is supposed to be at the next Olympic games, isn't-it?

-It may be a little late for 2026, but on the other hand, the decision can be made quite quickly. We saw the ski slopes in Sochi in 2014, and the decision about this discipline was made in 2011. It was 3 years

before the Olympic games. Now we are also 3 years before the next Olympic games...

By the way, the Olympic Games 2026 will take place in Milan-Cortina d'Ampezzo. They have very good mountains for Freeride. This is a very aesthetic place and accessible to the pedestrian public. It could be a good idea!

If not, the next one will take place in 2030... Anyway, when Freeride will be in the Olympics, I can retire (laughing). ≡

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