Snowboarders have always been a bit different – and still are. But the gap between skiers and boarders has become much narrower. 'Old school' skiers are now used to seeing crazy boarders, while new trends in skiing – especially freestyle – have made skiing cooler in the eyes of highly trend-conscious snowboarders. But snowboarding still remains a way of life, and more and more boarders now use parks and urban locations, as well as the mountains, to show off their acrobatic skills, which has led to a diversification in the apparel offered. Journalist and accomplished off-piste sportswoman, Malin Auras looks at the wide array of trends now available on the snowboard market.

Big air-artists and city-acrobats

Over the last couple of years, freestyle has become the most attractive style of snowboarding. Whether boarding in parks and pipes, sliding on rails, or jumping over smaller or giant kickers – freestyle is cool. Whilst this area has witnessed enormous growth, race boards have nearly disappeared from the market. They are more difficult to ride and less versatile than freestyle or freeride boards. One reason for this could be that the roots of snowboarding lie in the backcountry, not on boring slopes, and certainly not in racing. However, although freeriding is the soul of snowboarding, the number of riders enjoying themselves in the backcountry will always be limited. Riding off-piste requires a solid knowledge of snow, the dangers posed by avalanches, and the mountains themselves, as well as a much higher level of fitness. Understandably, freestyle – a term that encompasses the diversity and creativity of snowboarding perfectly – attracts most riders, and this fact has not gone unnoticed by the industry or the skiing regions. Resorts are now building new, bigger and better fun parks – not only for snowboarders, but also for the growing number of freeskiers.

Out on the snow, it's not unusual nowadays to see young freestylers on skis and snowboards having fun together in parks and pipes. "Many of my friends are skiers," says Nina Eibel, team rider from the O'Neill Team Germany, "We spend a lot of time together on the mountain and we wear the same style of clothing." Alexander Lengen, PR co-ordinator Europe at Burton, also appreciates this trend, "We think it's great that the old-fashioned sport of skiing is being given a new face. Freeskiers in particular like to wear Burton clothing. The garments also suit their activity — in terms of image, quality, and design."

However, looking at magazines or videos, there is still a gap between the two activities. Dietmar Damith, international sales and marketing at Chiemsee, has experienced this, "We planned to advertise in a German snowboard magazine and chose one of our favourite shots — a freestyle snowboarder in the air with a freeskier in the background. But even though skiing and snowboarding are moving closer together, we realised that the magazine just didn't like the photo, even if it was just a tiny skier in the background." Andre Kuhlmann from O'Neill's European Team adds, "It is quite difficult to find mixed videos, events, or contests."

The Olympic problem

When it comes to competitions, skiing and snowboarding haven't moved much closer together either. The first snowboard organisation was the ISF (International Snowboard Federation), but this was disbanded due to a lack of sponsors and money after the FIS (International Skiing Federation) continued to organise all of the qualifying competitions for the Olympics. As a result of this, the ISF was somehow integrated into the FIS. This was something that the "real boarders" couldn't live with so the FIS opponents founded a new, alternative organisation, the TTR-Tour (Ticket To Ride). While racers, boarder crossers and half pipe riders get along reasonably well with the FIS, the TTR has become the alternative for freestyle snowboarders. "The TTR contests are characterised by a cool and easy going atmosphere and high prize money," explains Nicole Möhlmann, marketing and PR manager, O'Neill Germany, "And the events are clearly oriented towards the interest of the riders, offering, for example, slopestyle contests that make the TTR-Tour very popular." It is no surprise then that sponsors are easily attracted. Big





Chiemsee

industry players such as Burton and O'Neill are title sponsors of events such as the Burton Open Series (Europe, USA, Japan, and New Zealand) and the O'Neill SB JAm.

However, long gone are the days when a major part of the snowboard community actually boycotted the FIS (and the Olympics). "But there are still some really good freestyle pros, who don't want to enter. They simply refuse to follow the rules of the FIS," says Elias Woolverton, chief editor of German magazine 'MBM Snowboarder', "And some of the riders who compete in the Olympics still feel like traitors." Nina Eibel, pro-rider on the O'Neill Team Germany, is an FIS opponent, "The FIS organises hardly any big air contests for women, or slopestyle competitions. Isn't it really strange that the discipline most riders actually practise isn't Olympic?" Eibel's team-mate, Andy Jügelt, is not happy about the situation either. "Even though the TTR Tour is now gaining more media attention, the Olympic Games remains the biggest thing for 'Mr. Average', so snowboarders have to enter the commercial, institutional world of the FIS, if they want to become famous to the masses. This is not a positive situation."

Different brands – different roots

Even though the Olympics continue to be important, they're not the "be-all and end-all" for all of the brands. Taking a closer look at the snowboard apparel market, there are three different groups of manufacturers whose main difference is their roots: original snowboard brands, surf brands and outdoor brands.

For the original snowboard brands such as Burton, the Olympic Games play a relatively small role. These 'original' brands have the highest market share amongst 'real' snowboarders, as they have been producing snowboard-wear from the very beginning. "Especially in park and pipe or for hard core freestylers, you hardly ever see any other brands," explains Elias Woolverton, "The kids know these brands and trust them, regardless of whether Olympic gold medallists wear them or not." Because of this, Burton didn't push its team riders to qualify for Torino. Instead, it has invested its sponsoring budget in TTR events such as the Burton Open Series as these play a more important role in special interest media and for the core target group anyway.

In contrast, the Olympics seem to be the most important event for most of the brands with a surfing background. They are geared towards more general lifestyle apparel and address a broader target group - the 'normal' snowboarder who doesn't care about the snowboard community too much. Dietmar Damith explains, "From a PR and marketing point of view, the Olympic Games are one of the most important events. Any kind of noticeable sponsoring there raises our international brand recognition, and not just in the snowboard market."



Burton global team rider, Frederik Kaibermatten, performing in New Zealand.

Jeff Curtes / Burton Snowboards

Finally, there's the group of brands with their roots in the outdoor industry. Their rather small target group is freeriders. Boarding off-piste, they expose themselves to the harsh environment of the backcountry. They don't care about the Olympics at all, instead, they demand apparel that they can rely on totally in terms of functionality, durability, and perfect protection from the elements. Although freeriders like to wear 'cool', fashionable clothing too, function is more important to them than for other snowboarders and this has enabled technical outdoor brands to enter the snowboard apparel market. However, most of these brands don't differentiate between ski and snowboard-wear. "Thanks to our experience in manufacturing alpine clothing, we produce technical winter sportswear for freeriders no matter whether they are using skis or snowboards," explains Urs Egli, product manager of snow apparel at Mammut. "Everybody who has ever surfed down a virgin Champagne powder run, knows why…"

In addition to these three groups of suppliers, there are quite a number of small, highly individual brands, such as Zimtstern. Being relatively small and close to the core community, they are able to respond quickly to changing trends. Their existence and their dynamism demonstrate how much of a lifestyle snowboarding actually is. "Trends in apparel, in particular, change annually or in even shorter cycles," says Elias Woolverton. "Most trends still come from the US, the country of extremes." At the moment, punk kids in tight jeans and greasy leather jackets are as trendy as ghetto kids with XXXL Baggy pants, open baseball jackets and gold chains and it comes as no surprise that these urban extremes have been adapted by snowboard apparel makers.

From kickers to rails

While fashion takes urban trends onto the mountains, riders take snowboarding from the mountains to the city, from the kickers to the rails. An increasing number of snowboarders are finding ways of practising their sport in the cities, needing neither the snow nor the money for expensive lift passes. This move away from the snow has proved no problem for the clothing manufacturers as snowboard jackets are not only worn on the mountains, but also for urban rail riding or as casual winter jackets. Therefore, the turnover of the clothing manufacturers has remained at a stable

level. However, for winter sport resorts, it is not possible to adapt to a new setting and they are having to work hard to try to bring them back to the snow. "To get the kids back on the snow, some resorts in Switzerland are offering free lift passes for children up to a certain age," comments Nadja Bondarenko-Herger, public relations at Zimtstern.

In addition to freestyle and urban rail riding — the two big trends in the market — some other interesting developments have been made. Mick Wallace, ispo community manager, Boardsports, sees additional market opportunities in safety and female products, high-end limited editions, and more competitive entry level hardware. "By doing so, the industry is not only adapting trends, it is also pushing changes in the market place to get more people on snowboards — and keep them there," he says.

A matter of trust

To keep people on snowboards means that the clothing industry has to produce snowboard-wear that makes users feel comfortable — in terms of style and performance. When the sport first emerged, snowboard-wear wasn't technical at all. It was all about being cool and fashionable, and most of all looking as different as possible from their parents. This has changed considerably during the past few years: style still matters, but more and more manufacturers are trying to unite fashion and function. For the winter season 2006/2007, snowboard-wear will become more technical than ever, although it is still the outdoor brands, producing apparel for freeriders, that focus on function the most – using the latest materials to create high performance, ultra-lightweight products. "The expectations of technical clothing from ambitious riders will become even more demanding in future," forecasts Garry Bryant, European brand manager at Arc'teryx, "and more manufacturers will include safety features."

For the next winter season, lightweight insulation, technical hybrid garments and comfortable softshell jackets are a theme including products such as the new, lighter and better versions of Gore-Tex XCR. Mammut will release two insulated jackets 'Duda' and 'Dida', using its proprietary MTI 12, a synthetic filling, which is already being used and has proved popular in the Ajungilak sleeping bag range. It is a blend of microfibres, spiral hollow fibres and seven-hole hollow fibres which provide small packabilty and high insulation properties. Mammut will also introduce its first hybrid outfit in its snow range. It is made from a three-layer laminate with a membrane and Schoeller Original Soft Shell fabric with NanoSphere finish (which won the European Outdoor Award).



The new snowsports Scorpion jacket from Arc'teryx.

Arc'teryx

Softshell specialist Arc'teryx enters next season with a new snowsports outfit — the 'Scorpion Jacket' and 'Scorpion Pant' — made from of a combination of Gore-Tex Soft Shell Low Loft and Gore-Tex Soft Shell High Loft. This fabric has a lofty fleece inside for comfort and a soft-hand exterior, which reduces noise. The jacket, which features a new silhouette for Arc'teryx, includes features such as Recco reflectors, adjustable laminated powder skirts, waterproof zips and a quick dry chin guard. The Scorpion pants come with a new cut, somewhat like a twisted jean that gives fantastic knee articulation without excess seams and fabric, plus other technical features such as a laminated Kevlar reinforced hem, laminated powder cuffs, and unique thigh pockets.

Most brands in the market offer ranges with different performance levels to serve the needs of different target groups. Zimtstern, for example, produces technical three-layer garments for serious freeriders in its four-star range, apparel for ambitious freestylers in its three-star range and stylish products for beginners in its two-star range. Chiemsee also offers two different levels of function with its "Alpine Favourites" and "Vision < 0° C".

A question of fashion

In terms of fashion, the big design stories for winter 2006/2007 are contrasts, old school, bobtail caps and outfits in muted colours combined with crazy, colourful accessories. Inspired by old mountaineer outfits and workwear, Chiemsee uses rustic materials, fur trimmings, chunky knits and effect cord in its "Alpine Favourites" range. In its functional and fully-featured line "Vision < 0°C", it uses the latest high-end materials in a selection of warm brown and green colours, mixed with strong, cold colours like blue and silver. Design details are contrasting watertight zips, matt/shiny contrasts, and silicon prints. Zimtstern incorporates natural colours in its outfits, combining them with colourful accessories. "These little details are becoming increasingly important," states Nadja Bondarenko-Herger. Using a polyester fabric with Teflon finish, the outfits in Zimtstern's top end range combine a grown-up look with a cool and easy-going cut.

As has always been the case, snowboard apparel looks far more creative and fancy than skiwear. But in difficult times for retailers, it may be a tough job for manufacturers to sell the non-mainstream styles to the shops. Dietmar Damith has had experience of this phenomenon, "On the one hand, retailers tend to go the safe way. On the other hand, we have received very positive feedback from our team riders and the Chiemsee staff when wearing fancy prototypes on the snow. The kids out there ask our riders where they can buy these outfits, but often they can't. Being afraid of fancy, freaky details, many retailers refuse to buy them. I wish retailers were more courageous – and I bet they wouldn't regret it if they were!"

On the whole, snowboarders have always been one step ahead of the skiers: They were the first to wear helmets outside competitions, they were the first to use protection, and they were the first to wear baggy outfits and crazy accessories. And they still bring more fun and diversity to snowsports. There is no doubt that there is still a lot of dynamism and energy in snowboarding, which poses a challenge for all those involved.