

# Ski-cross gives skiers second chance at Olympic glory

Roller derby on skis with hip-hop music tries to keep Olympics relevant

VANCOUVER (Reuters)—As the Olympics' newest and hippest event, ski-cross promises to deliver some bone-jarring excitement when the sport makes its debut at next year's Winter Games.

Ski-cross, where four skiers race down a mountain shoulder-to-shoulder, carries the kind of street credibility capable of attracting the younger audience that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) covets.

The X-Games generation, however, might cringe at the idea that some of the first Olympic medals handed out could go to skiers in their 30s.

Certainly experience ruled on foggy Cypress Mountain last weekend as Aleisha Cline, a 38-year-old mother-of-two, put down her marker as an Olympic medal contender with victory in a World Cup event.

Chris Del Bosco, a reformed alcoholic and comparatively young at 26, elbowed his way across the finish line first in the men's event to give Canada a sweep of World Cup races that also served as Winter Games test events.

Familiar faces abound in the sport. Daron Rahlves, the 2001 super-G world champion, now 35 and a father of twins, is back racing, as is his former Alpine ski teammate Casey Puckett, 36, whose two children are cheering him on as he bids for a spot on his fifth U.S. Olympic team.

Reigning ski-cross World Cup champion Ophelie David of France is the mother of an eight-year-old, while Magdalena Iljans of Sweden had her two children with her in Vancouver.

"Magda, Ophelie, and myself, we've been doing it [ski-cross] since almost the very beginning," said Cline, a ski-cross pioneer and four-time X-Games champion, who ended a five-year retirement to pursue her Olympic dream. "I could be their mother and I give them lots of advice but I love it."

## Spectacular rise

"I'm not a real technical skier. I speed skied 215 kph, I'm a rider, and I'm good in the air."

"I don't have an Alpine national team background—I have a ski bum background."

Ski-cross's Olympic arrival caps a spectacular rise for a sport that only a few years ago did not exist.

Following the success of boarder-cross, the X-Games developed ski-cross as a made-for-television freestyle event, sending four competitors at a time hurtling down the slopes over man-made jumps and through sharp turns on skis instead of snowboards.

Described as roller derby on skis, ski-cross is expected to bring the same energy to the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, with athletes and officials predicting a spectacular Olympic debut for the

sport. "Ski-cross is going to come out being the belle of the ball after 2010," Peter Judge, the chief executive officer of the Canadian Freestyle Ski Association told Reuters. "There are such different elements to the sport it opens up a new avenue of athletes who see ski racing differently."

"It is a great new addition. It's going to be phenomenal. It has all the elements, raw excitement and action, athletic prowess."

## Hip-hop music

Like freestyle and snowboard, ski-cross races play out to a thumping backdrop of hip-hop music and bellowing course announcers who refer to skiers by nicknames such as The Dominator, The Dark Lord, Big Dog, and Bonsai Warrior.

At its core, however, the sport has more in common with the ultra-competitiveness of Alpine skiing—from which most ski-cross racers come—than the laid-back camaraderie of snowboarding.

Ski-cross has provided a destination for skiing cast-offs and free spirits, who possess razor-sharp competitive instincts but failed to flourish in Alpine racing's regimented structure.

One example is Del Bosco, an immensely talented skier with dual Canadian-American citizenship, who was booted off the



**SKI-CROSS:** Chris DeBosco (centre) races down Cypress Mountain in Vancouver last weekend. JED JACOBSON/GETTY IMAGES

U.S. development ski team at 17 for smoking cannabis and then slipped into a life of drugs and alcohol.

The downward spiral continued

until one night he was found unconscious in a Colorado creek bed with a broken neck following another drunken binge.

"Everybody had sort of given

up on me," said Del Bosco, who recovered from the injury and also spent time in jail for drunk driving. "Reflect on all that, it's an amazing journey that I've had."

## Favre announces retirement from Jets

NEW YORK (Reuters)—New York Jets quarterback Brett Favre has retired from the NFL after 18 record-breaking seasons and one Super Bowl championship, the team said on Wednesday.

Favre's decision comes nearly one year after he retired from the Green Bay Packers. The steely 39-year-old, who won the Super Bowl in the 1996-97 season with the Packers, ultimately reconsidered and returned for a one-year stint with the Jets.

Jets chairman and CEO Woody Johnson said Favre informed him of his decision during an "all-encompassing" telephone conversation Wednesday morning.

"We talked about how difficult this was for a guy that had been with one team for so long, to come into a totally different environment, different system, coaches, and players," Johnson told a teleconference.

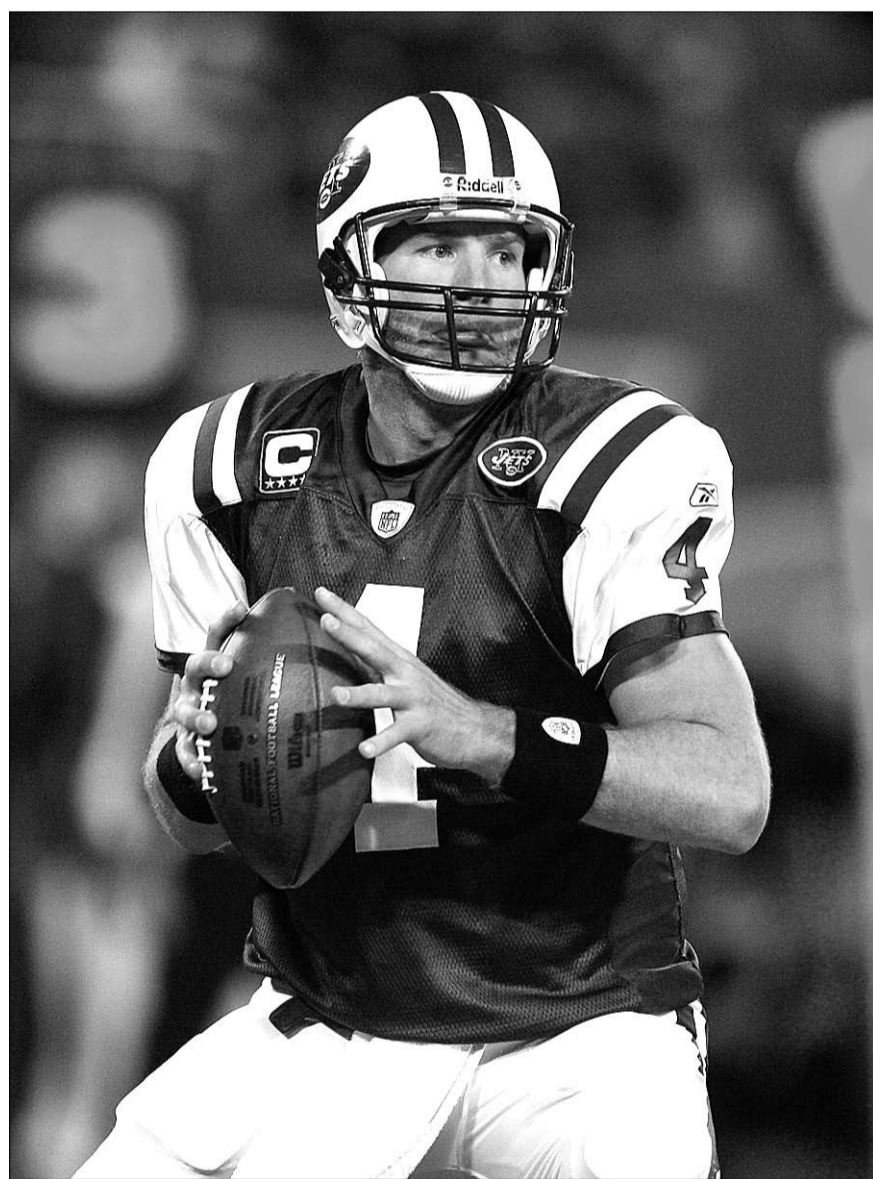
The Jets opened the season with an 8-3 record amid hopes of a possible Super Bowl appearance but they lost four of their last five games to stumble out of a post-season berth.

Johnson said he did not believe Favre, who threw nine interceptions during New York's five-game collapse, would once again get the itch to play and resurface with the Jets or another club.

"He knows what the New York Jets are all about," said Johnson. "He also knows what his own limitations are better than anybody."

Favre leaves with a host of NFL records, including career touchdown passes (464), yards passing (65,127) and completions (5,720).

The 10-time Pro Bowler opened his career with the Atlanta Falcons



**LEGENDARY ARM:** Brett Favre led the Jets to an 8-3 record before a late season collapse. AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES

in 1991 before moving to the Packers the following season and embarking on one of the NFL's all-time great careers.

## Falling out

After calling it quits a year ago, Favre's decision to return just months later triggered a nasty falling out with the Packers.

The Jets made a risky move to hire Favre and release quarterback Chad Pennington, who found a home in Miami and led the Dolphins to the playoffs following a 1-15 season in 2007.

"We were hoping to get one good year out of Brett Favre," said Johnson. "We picked him based on him giving us the best chance to win last season."

"We were disappointed not to have made the Super Bowl but we did some very good things... For the first 11 games, it looked pretty good."

After the late-season nosedive, the Jets fired head coach Eric Mangini and hired Baltimore Ravens defensive coordinator Rex Ryan to replace him.

"When we acquired Brett, we knew we would get everything he had," said Jets general manager Mike Tannenbaum. "He took the time to mentor younger players and his competitiveness and enthusiasm at practice and during games was contagious."

"I spoke with him this morning and told him that he will be a friend of the Jets for years to come."

## All-Star skills competitions falling short

NBA experimenting with a game of H-O-R-S-E

By KARL YU  
Epoch Times Staff

If you're a Star Wars fan you might be able to relate.

Many feel that the movies in the original trilogy (technically Episodes IV, V, and VI in the sequence) were among the best sci-fi pictures of all time.

Just as many fans were disappointed after watching the prequel trilogy films that came out many years later.

And these days, that's what all-star skills competitions have become: it seems—nowhere as good as previous iterations.

It's about halfway in the 2008-09 NBA season and the all-star game is set to take place this weekend in Phoenix, Arizona.

Besides the chance to see the league's stars, NBA all-star games give fans a chance to see players show off their skills through events such as the three-point shootout, the slam dunk competition, and the rookie challenge.

The NBA has even tried to spruce things up this year by adding the playground favourite shot-mimicking elimination game H-O-R-S-E, or thanks to a last-minute marketing deal with that gecko icon insurance company, a game of G-E-I-C-O.

But is this latest addition to the skills competition more about defibrillation as opposed to actual innovation?

After a two-year hiatus, the slam dunk contest returned in 2000 and then-Toronto Raptor Vince Carter wowed all and won with a repertoire that included windmill and under-the-leg dunks. Analyst Kenny Smith declared, "It's over!" even though it wasn't.

While many consider that contest one of the best in recent memory, subsequent competitions have seen some unique dunks but have failed to live up to the hype.



**SKILLS COMPETITION?** Alex Ovechkin gets some help from Evgeni Malkin in the breakaway challenge at the NHL All-Star Skills Competition. BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

In 2005, Phoenix Suns Amar'e Stoudemire dunked a ball off of a soccer header from teammate Steve Nash, but the reaction from the crowd lacked the electricity that Carter's dunk evoked.

And last year's contest—which included Orlando's Dwight Howard, who won the dunk contest in a Superman shirt, and Boston's Gerald Green blowing out a birthday cupcake candle on the rim—also failed to really drop anyone's jaw.

But the NBA isn't the only league suffering from a dry spell in its all-star showcase.

While the NHL all-star game had an exciting finish—a 12-11 shootout win for the East—the skills competition left something to be desired, especially the breakaway competition, which many view as the NHL's answer to the NBA's dunk contest.

Although Washington Capitals winger Alexander Ovechkin really seemed intent on putting on a show for the crowd in Montreal during the breakaways—an event he ultimately won—his winning breakaway was more notable

because supposed enemy Evgeni Malkin helped him don some props. The breakaway itself didn't even result in a goal.

TSN's hockey analysts Pierre McGuire and Darren Dreger weren't fans of this year's skill showcase.

"I didn't like it very much," said McGuire during the post-game SportsCentre broadcast, when asked about the skills competition.

"They have to get some energy in the building. I've been coming to this building in Montreal for a long time and I've never seen it as flat as it was tonight."

"For me, from a hockey standpoint, there wasn't much that was entertaining in there with the exception of the hardest shot, it's a legitimate hockey play," said Dreger.

One of the biggest complaints of the newer Star Wars trilogy was that there were too many special effects and too little substance in the storylines. By the same token, there are too many props and less skill in skills competitions in today's all-star games.

## Baseball's status as 'romantic game' in trouble

Drugs in baseball a national problem, says former commissioner

NEW YORK (Reuters)—The long-term status of Major League Baseball could be jeopardized by the spate of steroids revelations plaguing the game, former MLB Commissioner Fay Vincent said on Wednesday.

Monday's admission of doping by Yankees slugger Alex Rodriguez made front-page news and on Wednesday Miguel Tejada of the Astros pleaded guilty to lying to Congress about his knowledge of other baseball players using steroids.

"I think it's death by a thousand

cuts," Vincent told Reuters in a telephone interview from his Florida home.

"The more of this that goes on, the less romantic I become about the players. I become cynical. I don't like cheats."

Vincent, who preceded reigning chief Bud Selig as commissioner, said baseball occupied a special place in the sports landscape that made its fans feel betrayed when players misbehave.

"I think baseball fans have a very romantic view of their game. They think of it as a respite from

all the ugliness in the normal world, and now we are finding out there's a lot of ugliness in baseball," said Vincent, 70, who dealt with the Pete Rose gambling case and other drug problems during his regime.

Vincent said Rodriguez "is obviously going to get pilloried" and that baseball fans reacted more personally to lapses in integrity than in other team sports.

"There's a certain childish quality to the baseball fan. It's very much a family activity. Almost all of us come to baseball through a

mother or a father," he said.

## Romantic aspect

"Baseball...has a certain romantic aspect to it. Football is all violence, it's all smashing. It's a sport of giants. Baseball is a kids' game and football is a monsters' game."

"We don't want people cheating. We want them to be a combination of Greg Maddux and Lou Gehrig, Willie Mays. Young people dashing around...and blowing bubble gum bubbles."

Vincent, who resigned in 1992 after three years as commissioner over lack of support from owners unhappy with how he settled a

1990 labour dispute with players, said steroids were just coming into the game in his time.

"Our ignorance about steroids was total," he said.

"I was still dealing with throwing [pitcher] Steve Howe out for seven cocaine violations and having the union say they wanted him reinstated, and they got him reinstated through a stupid arbitrator."

"There were tiny little whiffs of smoke about steroids in my day. We were stupid about it. We thought that steroids was a football problem, about bulking up."

Vincent said he was at fault for

not identifying the problem sooner but said the issue goes way beyond baseball.

"This is a national and an international athletic problem in that chemists can give track stars and bicyclists, and baseball players drugs that can improve their performance."

"The economic motivation and temptation to use those drugs is enormous."

"The chemists are too good, they can find drugs that don't show up in the tests."

"It's a national problem, a problem for Congress. It's a problem for parents of kids in high school."