



Elyse Saugstad

**How the pro skier
conquers cliffs—
and a competitive
freeski industry**

By Bill Fink

Wind-driven pellets of snow sting my face, and clouds of powder whoosh across the run below me as skiers and snowboarders disappear in the alpine fog between thin lines of pine trees. “Isn’t this great?” shouts a peppy voice underneath the helmet perched atop a blue parka beside me on the chairlift. “First big snow of the season—can’t wait to get at it!” I nod reluctantly, shielding my face with my glove.

I’m a little nervous to be joining Elyse Saugstad, Alaska-born world-champion freeskiier, for a morning on the slopes at Squaw Valley in California’s Lake Tahoe region. She became famous by winning the Freeride World Tour in 2008, which is to say she skied steeper runs, jumped off bigger cliffs, and did it all with more speed and style than any woman on the planet.

In my half day with Saugstad, I learn about the passion and training it takes to become one of the world’s best skiers, how she developed the attitude to tackle ski slopes that mor-



tals would quiver just looking at, and how she's achieving her professional goals in a male-dominated industry.

A quick "Elyse Saugstad" video search before I met her revealed a vertigo-inducing collection of clips of her skiing off 30-foot cliffs, down 40-foot rock faces into tight icy chutes, and carving high-speed descents of 1,000 feet or more with just a few turns—somehow, amazingly, staying in perfect control. On the lift, I tighten the buckle on my helmet and mentally prepare for Saugstad to lead me into some extreme skiing.

Fortunately, it's late November, and this early in the ski season, Squaw has just a few intermediate slopes open. But Saugstad eyes the cliffs above us with barely disguised hunger. "Snow looks good up there; they may start opening it soon," she says with a smile.

Saugstad followed her 2008 Freeride world championship by starring in ski movies that took her around the world to carve up the most challenging mountain terrain. Her 2018 role in Matchstick Productions' *All In* recently earned her the Best Female Performance trophy in *Powder* magazine's Annual Powder Awards.

"I think that the best female pro skiers are better than 99 percent of the men that ski in the world. But it's funny because there are a lot of men who will watch pro females ski in the movies and just assume that they can ski what women can ski," she says. "Sure, guys have a few advantages in body makeup and overall strength, but it takes more than that to do what we do. It takes skill."

Count Saugstad's husband, Cody Townsend, a fellow award-winning pro freeskiier, among those who are in awe of Saugstad's abilities. "I can only get shown up by my wife so much," Townsend says with mock exasperation in *All In*. "I can't handle it *all* the time." In the film, he recounts his first date with Saugstad: "I met Elyse at a trade show in Vegas, and she calls me, and she wants to go skiing. I was a little reserved. I'd had a couple bad experiences with ski dates. ... We go up [Squaw], and now it's time for me to show off a little bit. I'm Cody Townsend! I go up to this cliff, send this 30-footer, stomp it," he says. "I make a turn out, and I look up, and she's in the middle of the air off the same cliff I just hucked, and she just stomps it! She skis up to me and says, 'That was fun.' It was pretty much instant love at that point."

"Yeah, those Squaw cliffs," Saugstad reminisces happily through the icy wind, gazing upward from the lift. "Squaw has a fun freeride community—it's a great mountain culture. There are all these rocks and cliffs and chutes, people hucking off of everything."

Luckily, I'm joining Saugstad on her first ski day of the



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Saugstad charges down a rocky face in Alaska.

season, and she just plans “to take it easy and get my legs under me.” We hop off the lift, and she peels into her first ski run in months, promptly disappearing down the mountain before I can finish three turns. She cuts through the heavy early-season snow like it’s butter—as effortless as if she is on a conveyor belt.

At the base, a mom with a 10-year-old girl points out Saugstad. “Honey, that’s the lady we watched in the ski video last night!” The kid grins at Saugstad with shy awe.

Saugstad seems just as happy to make the connection. “It’s great to be an inspiration to kids, young girls, to

exemplify what a female can do in sports. I even get dads thanking me, saying it helps to have visible female role models for their daughters to look up to in skiing.”

A few years ago, Saugstad started tagging photos on Instagram with the hashtag #skilikeagirl. “I’m trying to help change the norm of what it means to ski like a girl, and that it is equally as impressive and not a knock to say one skis like a girl,” she says.

I ask Saugstad, who is 40, if it’s hard to keep up with the younger skiers just coming up. “No, experience beats everything in big-mountain skiing. Yeah, I can’t do some



Elyse Saugstad, left, skis alongside her husband, Cody Townsend.

of the stuff that girls who came up with gymnastics training can, but I think I more than make it up with my experience and skills. I think at age 40 I'm a better skier than ever. It just takes me a little longer to recover from bumps and bruises," she adds, laughing.

In *All In*, 28-year-old fellow pro freeskiier Angel Collinson says, "Elyse Saugstad's skiing style: Pure Beast Mode," referencing NFL running back Marshawn Lynch. "She sends massive airs and stomps them, and she's tiny. She charges harder than anybody out there."

Underneath Saugstad's soft down jacket are hard muscles carved from her exhaustive workouts, with arms resembling the steel cables that support chairlifts. She easily leaves me behind on our second ski run, performing some sort of frozen jiu-jitsu on the uneven snowpack to allow her—even skiing at half speed for my benefit—to blast to the bottom of the slope in seconds.

"So, um, how do you do that, Elyse?"

"Start with the basics. You can't just watch a video and huck yourself off a cliff. You need to really develop a good

set of basic skills first, and go big second. Join a class or a team at your local ski resort—and there's so much more now than when I was a kid. Back then it was just racing. Now you have freestyle teams, moguls, the halfpipe. There's really something for everyone."

Learning to ski as a tot in Alaska, Saugstad joined the ski team at her home mountain of Alyeska Resort in Girdwood. By age 16, she was ranked among the top U.S. girls in downhill and super-G racing. As she comments in *All In*, "Growing up [in Alaska] was really special, because the second you step out your door, you're completely immersed in the mountains and the outdoors in general, and you can completely get lost." In the movie, she tells of when she lost track of time skiing some powder runs for fun and accidentally missed her start time for a race.

By college, Saugstad was burned out from the grind of ski racing. "I just wanted to take a break and be a student for a while and didn't even ski at all."

After two years at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, she got that skiing urge again and trans-

Watch *All In* While On Board

All In, Matchstick Productions' 2018 ski movie featuring Elyse Saugstad, is now available on Alaska Beyond Entertainment. Alaska Airlines is a sponsor of the film, which blends high-octane ski scenes, stunning landscapes, thoughtful interviews and lively banter among some of the planet's most fearless skiers. Shot on location in Alaska, British Columbia, Japan, South America, Utah and Washington, *All In* was directed by Scott Gaffney.

Matchstick Productions uses the latest technology to capture amazing footage in

high-action films, often set in beautiful remote locales.

The goal of *All In* isn't to simply show that women athletes can go as big as men; it's to normalize that fact. *All In* features as many men as women displaying jaw-dropping ability when taking on extreme terrain. For more information, visit skimovie.com/portfolio-item/all-in-2018.

Elyse Saugstad soars mid backflip in *All In*.

ferred to the University of Nevada, Reno, partially to be close to the ski resorts at Lake Tahoe. That was when Saugstad “rediscovered the passion for skiing” she had lost on the race circuit, and she spent the majority of her ski time on sidecountry and backcountry runs.

While Saugstad studied for the LSAT to enter law school, she worked at a restaurant by night so she could ski every day. Mid winter in 2006, she tagged along with Townsend, her then-boyfriend, at an event Townsend had to attend for one of his own ski sponsors in Utah. (Townsend was already a professional skier).

While ripping down a hill just for fun, Saugstad was “discovered” by a ski company’s head of marketing. Soon after, she received her first product sponsorship deal. That paid for entry into a few competitions, which

brought her a few more sponsorships. Before she knew it, she had become a full-time professional skier, and those LSAT prep books were left to gather snowflakes.

After achieving her goal of winning the Freeride World Tour in 2008, Saugstad began to focus on a career in ski movies. She was a finalist in the Teton Gravity Research's prestigious Co-Lab video competition in 2012, the only woman among the 40 contestants submitting self-produced videos. Her top-five finish helped put her on the map in the ski-movie world.

Despite enjoying what many would consider to be a dream job of getting paid to travel the world to ski, Saugstad has found it frustrating to see some sponsors offering “way more” money to her husband and other men for the same work. “Despite all the female skiers out there, the industry is such an old boys’ club, especially in Europe where the headquarters are for most of the ski companies,” she says. “But things are changing. Look at *All In*—there are an equal amount of women to men in the film, which breaks the old mold of just having a token female in a ski movie.”

Saugstad finds her fellow female skiers supportive. “I don’t see women as competitors in these films—more like peers helping to build the sport, create more opportunities for all of us,” she says. “Well, maybe out on the slopes we try to one-up each other, but it’s all in good fun. And it inspires me to see these other women doing great things on the mountain.”

Saugstad also spends as much time as she can on the



Saugstad, left, leads an avalanche-safety-awareness-and-preparedness clinic at Squaw Valley.



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Elyse's Accolades

- Overall Champion, Freeride World Tour, 2008
- Selected in top five, *Powder* magazine's Powder Poll, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018
- Best Female Performance, *Powder's* Annual Powder Awards, 2013, 2018
- Included in Top 50 Female Athletes in Action Sports, ESPN, 2014
- Best Female Freeride Segment, IF3 International Freesports Films Festival, 2014, 2018
- Female Skier of the Year, *Freeskier* magazine, 2018

slopes with her husband—she and Townsend are a true power couple in the ski scene. “It’s fun and challenging having a pro-skier husband,” she says. “We totally understand each other’s situation and realize why we have to spend extended time apart, but it still can be hard with all the travel and industry obligations.”

Saugstad and Townsend don’t have any kids yet, but they certainly have the genetics to produce future ski champions. However, Saugstad says she’d actually prefer her children to take up competitive surfing. (When she’s not skiing, Saugstad is an avid surfer, going on quick trips to Mexico and Hawai‘i to ride the waves.) I ask if that’s because Saugstad thinks surfing might be safer. “No, actually, it’s a selfish reason,” she says, laughing. “When I watch my kids compete, I’d rather be sitting on a warm beach than standing at the bottom of an icy mountain.”

Still, the high-flying couple plans to put any future children onto a ski team and to share a passion for skiing and the mountains—just as Saugstad’s and Townsend’s parents did for them—and see where their kids want to take it.

And where is Saugstad’s ski



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career taking her next? “Working, working, working,” she says, as we start another lap on Squaw’s Gold Coast Express lift. It’s not all powder days and blue skies for pro skiers. “People don’t realize all the effort that goes on behind the scenes to put together the movies, to land the sponsorships, to market yourself,” she says. “All the phone calls, the planning, the promoting, the grind of travel, the hassle when weather won’t cooperate. And that’s just the business side of things—I still have to find the time to train.”

Never short of energy or ambition, Saugstad also does speaking engagements. And, in part because she survived a 2012 backcountry avalanche in Washington state that killed three, she co-founded and instructs Skiers Advocating and Fostering Education for Avalanche and Snow Safety (SAFE AS) Clinics, which promote avalanche safety, preparedness and awareness. She’s also involved with the High Fives Foundation, which supports outdoor action sports athletes who have experienced life-altering injuries.

Around noon, Saugstad and I head inside to grab a snack at the Wildflour Baking Company. She points to a display case featuring ski photos and jerseys, and says that being memorialized here is honestly one of her greatest achievements. Inside the case is Saugstad’s championship jersey from the Freeride competition at Squaw that was part of her 2008 championship season, as well as a photo of her airborne, launching off a cliff. The photo is marked with Saugstad’s tagline: “Elyse—Ski like a girl!” ❧

Bill Fink writes from the San Francisco Bay Area and regularly skis around Lake Tahoe.