

X Games snowmobiler dies

Updated Jan. 31 11:40am: Caleb Moore died this morning. More details are in this story.

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By Jason Blevins, Denver Post

ASPEN — Rose Battersby snapped a picture from the top of the eight-feature X Games slopestyle course Sunday and tweeted, “Feel the fear but do it anyway.”

Later that night, the 19-year-old New Zealand skier was rushed to a Denver hospital with a fractured back she suffered during practice after coming up short on the second of the course’s four massive jumps. That same night, 25-year-old snowmobiler Caleb Moore’s condition worsened as a cardiac injury he suffered in a crash Thursday night during the X Games freestyle competition led to a brain complication. He remains in critical condition in St. Mary’s Hospital in Grand Junction.

The 17th version of the winter circus of snowsport and the 12th at Aspen’s Buttermilk ski area saw many crashes but few serious injuries. But Moore’s injury has skiing’s, snowboarding’s and snowmobiling’s most accomplished athletes under the microscope as they examine the escalating risks of the vaunted contest.

“When is enough enough?” professional snowmobiler Paul Thacker said was a question he and his competitors talked about.

It’s a heavy question for the 36-year-old Thacker, who once held the world record for jumping his snowmobile 301 feet. He returned to the Winter X Games last weekend to compete in adaptive snowmobile racing after a 2010 training accident left him a paraplegic.

"I'm always asked the question, 'Where's the ceiling?' And every year we are like, 'It's not going to get any gnarlier,'" said the Anchorage resident. "They are never going to do a double back. They are never going to do a frontflip. But then it happens.

"It's kind of like you tell me I can't do something and I'll show you how I can. It's how we are wired."

Thacker reflected the somber mood blanketing the freestyle family as their friend fights for his life.

"It's unfortunate that it takes something like this to kind of snap everybody back into reality and show everybody just how gnarly it is, because the guys that are good at it make it look super easy, and it's not," Thacker said. "Every time you throw a leg over, it might be the last time."

Wrestling with the danger is a daily mental game for snowsports athletes, especially X Games competitors who arrive in Aspen ready to set themselves apart.

They train for months, in the gym, on the hill and using airbags, foam pits and trampolines, preparing themselves for the moment where they can shine under the brightest spotlight in their sport. Sometimes that moment can prod athletes to push too far after logging endless hours preparing their bodies to answer that call.

"It's a gradual slope. We build up very slowly and very carefully," said Heath Frisby, who at last year's X Games threw the first frontflip on a snowmobile and this year earned best trick bronze with another first: an underflip on the 75-foot gap jump.

Frisby expressed dismay with best-trick competitor Jackson Strong, a motorcross athlete who trained a mere four hours on a snowmobile before trying – and failing – a pair of audacious backflip tricks. On his first trick, Strong bailed at the apex

of his jump, flailing through the air as he tumbled. His unmanned sled caromed off the course, snagging the wire-lined safety fence and injuring a 13-year-old spectator.

"You can tell he wasn't ready. It's not something we are taking on all of the sudden," said Frisby, who competed Sunday with a Texas flag to honor Moore. "We have rode all our lives. We are not trying to jump in over our heads and do something realistically we have no business doing."

Moore and his younger brother, Colten, once were those newbies from Krum, Texas – training a mere month on a snowmobile before transferring their lifelong ATV-racing skills onto snow in the 2010 X Games. Caleb won bronze that show. Last year Colten took gold.

"They are still green, but they are very capable of being the best riders in the field," said Frisby, who has been competing in the X Games for eight years.

In a statement released Tuesday, ESPN X Games officials stated: "We've worked closely on safety issues with athletes, course designers and other experts for each of the 18 years of X Games. Still, when the world's best compete at the highest level in any sport, risks remain. Caleb is a four-time X Games medalist who fell short on his rotation on a move he has landed several times previously."

Moore family spokeswoman Chelsea Lawson said a website has been set up where fans can help the athletes' family with support.

"People have been asking for an outlet to help with the medical bills," she said of the site giveforward.com/calebmoore.

Last year's X Games was blanketed in grief after the death of freeskiing pioneer Sarah Burke only a week earlier after a seemingly innocuous crash while training in the superpipe in

Park City. She cratered in the pipe, suffering cardiac arrest. She died nine days after the accident.

Assessing and mitigating risk is a big part of the X Games. As athletes explore the very edge of their sports – defying gravity with trickery once considered impossible – they are upping their risk levels.

“As pro athletes doing what we do, I think we all accept and understand that these are inherent risks in the sport, and I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t believe in myself,” said Canadian freeskier Kaya Turski, who has three X Games gold medals in slopestyle. “Still, it is a fine line, and I’ve crossed that line a few times.”

Turski on Sunday spent more than 30 minutes in the starting gate of the slopestyle competition as Ashley Battersby – no relation to Rose – was treated by medics. Ashley suffered a knee injury on the landing of the final jump.

Rose Battersby late Monday night posted on her Facebook page that her spine has been put “back together and I am pleased to say that my toes can wiggle!!!”

Athletes once again raised the bar in skiing, snowboarding and snowmobiling at last weekend’s X Games.

In 2000, Frenchman Candide Thovex won ski best trick with a rare 900-degree spin. This year, Swede skier Henrik Harlaut won big air gold with a 1620-degree spin while backflipping three times. Snowboarder Shaun White not only stuck his signature back-to-back double-backflip 1260s but soared to a record 24 feet above the superpipe. Snowboarder Elena Hight stuck the first double backflip for women in the pipe. Snowmobilers threw first-ever tricks like Joe Parsons’ backward-landing “Gator Hater.”

“We are modern-day explorers,” said Jimmy “Blaze” Fejes, one of the first to backflip a snowmobile. “There are no new

places in the world to see and discover, so you have to try to create new things. That's who everybody is."

Fejes said the X Games snowmobile freestyle course "could not have been any safer." Years of competition have honed ramp positions, landing ramp angles and distances to a science.

The human factor can trump that science. Even the best athletes can hiccup, as Moore did when he underrotated a backflip and flew over his handlebars Thursday night, tumbling with his 450-pound sled. The tiniest bobble or miscalculation can trigger tragedy, especially when spinning and flipping 40 feet above cement-like snow.

"The jumps have never been safer," Fejes said. "Everything was perfect. Caleb has thrown that trick hundreds of times. It was just a very fluke accident."