



Grete Eliassen riding the lift in Aspen

CHRIS O'CONNELL

the DIAMOND PRINCESS

She rips on big-mountain terrain and in the park and pipe. When she's not doing that, she's a full-time student studying sports law. Oh, and she can sing in Mandarin. Who is this wunderkind? Professional freeskier **GRETE ELIASSEN**. Get used to her name because chances are you'll be hearing it a lot.

By Megan Michelson



taking it easy après ski

Glossy posters advertise the latest Circus Circus show, and quarters clink in slot machines at the Reno-Tahoe International Airport. Most travelers come here for cheap hotel rooms, low-stakes gambling, and all-you-can-eat buffets. But I'm here to pick up a 20-year-old professional freeskiier named Grete Eliassen. Waiting in the baggage claim area, I scan the crowds, hoping this stranger will be easy to spot.

Turns out, she's impossible to miss. Wearing skinny-leg jeans, a boy-cut white T-shirt, and green neon Nike skate shoes, Grete (pronounced "Gret-a") has the blond-haired, blue-eyed look of her Norwegian ancestors mixed with the distinct style of iPod-toting, gum-chewing American youth. She's schlepping a large, plaid Dakine ski bag and matching backpack. "Grete?" I ask, even though I'm certain it's her. She says hello and gives me the kind of bear hug you'd give a friend you've known for years.

For a University of Utah junior with two Winter X Games victories, four U.S. Freeskiing Open titles, and a flashy segment in the new Poor Boyz' Productions' ski film *Yeah Dude* under her studded belt, she's surprisingly, well, normal. "Do you like my kicks?" she asks minutes later, talking at mach speed. "I got them in China for six bucks. Oh, and guess what? I'm learning Mandarin."

Okay, maybe she's not exactly normal.

It's late March in Tahoe, and the 75-degree days are quickly melting the year's heavy snowpack. Grete flew in from her home in

Salt Lake City for a photo shoot. On our drive from the Reno airport to Truckee, California, Grete talks nonstop about her obsession with *Grey's Anatomy* ("It's my guilty pleasure"), the nickname her Oakley teammates have given her ("the Cow"), and the 1998 Will Ferrell film *Night at the Roxbury* ("My life totally relates").

Forty-five minutes later, we arrive in Truckee, and we're both starving. When we walk into Wild Cherries, a locals'-favorite coffee shop near downtown, Grete immediately spots someone she knows. "Phil. What's up?!" she says to Canadian filmmaker Phil Belanger, who's in town shooting a ski movie about global warming. She hands out another bear hug.

Grete has shot with four film companies, everywhere from Japan to Sweden to Idaho. But she hasn't yet worked with Phil's company, Pléhouse Productions. "I think a lot of people would love to work with her," Phil tells me later. "She is really hardworking and has incredible talent." In other words, she's coveted. But she doesn't know it. And that only makes her more coveted.

As she chows down her turkey club sandwich and tortilla chips, she tells me about the ski she's designing for her ski sponsor, Armada. It's a twin-tip that hit the market this fall called the ARW Grete Eliassen Pro Model.

"But I call it the Diamond Princess," she says, in reference to the nickname of one of her favorite rappers, Trina. "It's such a pretty ski. It glitters in the light."

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"Grete's helped put women's skiing on the map. There are only a couple other women on her level when it comes to park skiing," says Matt Harvey, editor of *Freeskiier* magazine.

"The Diamond Princess?" I ask, smirking. "I'm going to call you that from now on."

"How about Diamond Princess Junior?" she responds, half seriously. "I don't want to take away from the name of the ski."

In the pro freeskiing circuit, women are a minority, overshadowed and outperformed by a slew of twenty-something, Red Bull-drinking guys with shaggy haircuts and baggy pants. So the mere fact that Grete is a girl in her sport makes her stand out; her talent—she rips on both big-mountain terrain and in the park and pipe—makes her well rounded; and the fact that she's smart and level-headed on top of all that? She might as well be the prom queen of freeskiing.



Grete didn't actually go to her high-school prom. Born outside Minneapolis in 1986, she grew up with older brother, Knut, 22, who's now a professional snowboarder; younger sister, Kirsten, 16; father Aadne, a Norway-based contractor; and mother Kari, a sales director who lives in Arizona. When Grete was five, the family moved to Norway for a year to be closer to her extended relatives, then returned to the States. She started ski racing at age 10 at a little molehill in Lutsen, Minnesota. Three years later they relocated again, settling in Lillehammer, Norway.

"When my family moved again, I thought it was the worst thing in the world," she says. "But now I know it was the best thing for me. Especially for my skiing."

By age 15 Grete had qualified for the Norwegian ski team, and while at a ski camp in Whistler, British Columbia, she picked up a sponsorship with Oakley. She moved three hours north of her home to attend an elite ski academy called Oppdal High School in central Norway, winning the Super G junior world championships at age 16 and spending the next few years dominating the Europa and FIS circuits. "I started to get tired of racing then," Grete says. "So I quit and decided to focus all my time on 'twin-tip,' or freeride as we call it."

In 2004, her first year of competing in freeride, Grete won the slopestyle contest at Vail's U.S. Freeskiing Open—the Super Bowl of her sport. A year later she graduated from the ski academy and decided to move to Salt Lake City to attend the University of Utah.

It's all been a blur since then. "When she came onto the scene, she really pushed other girls to step up their game," says Matt Harvey, editor of *Freeskiier* magazine. "She's helped put women's skiing on the map. There are only a couple other women on her level when it comes to park skiing. Her wins at the X Games are proof of that."

Need more proof? Just ask Michelle Parker, 20, a close friend of Grete's who was one of the first women to compete in the halfpipe at the Winter X Games. "I never used to ski with girls until I met

Then Grete stepped up to the microphone. To everyone's shock and amusement she sang a popular Chinese love ballad—in nearly flawless Mandarin.

Grete," Michelle says. "When she says she's going to learn a trick, she learns it. In competition she gets her game face on. She's a natural competitor."

This year before the U.S. Open, Grete stayed with Michelle and skier Elena Height in Breckenridge to train before the competition. They skied hard every day from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., practicing their slopestyle and halfpipe tricks. "We'd come home totally exhausted, but Grete always motivated us to do our daily 300 sit-ups afterward," Michelle says.

Days later Grete placed first in the halfpipe competition. Skiing isn't her only sport: she also plays golf and tennis, and she water-skis, wakeboards, and skateboards. "Well, I try to skateboard," she says. "I like to go into the bowl and pop and drop in and do my little tricks. But skiing is my passion. It's like nothing else."

She plans on competing for at least the next five years, until her body and mind are ready to move on. When I ask her if she's a competitive person, she shrugs. "I'm not going to be mad at you if you beat me," she says, "but of course I'm going to try my best."

Last February, Grete went to China with a team of Oakley-sponsored skiers and snowboarders to shoot with the Poor Boyz crew. One night in Jilan City, at a hotel across the street from a coal plant, the group ate dim sum washed down with cheap red wine before venturing into the hotel's disco-decorated karaoke

bar. One by one the athletes performed cheesy American hits like Britney Spears's "Stronger."

Then Grete stepped up to the microphone. To everyone's shock and amusement she sang a popular Chinese love ballad—in nearly flawless Mandarin. The locals clapped and whistled. Her teammates stared. "What?" she said when the song was over. "I thought everyone knew the Teresa Teng song."

If you scan through Grete's iPod, you won't find much traditional Chinese music. Instead you'll see Lil' Kim, Remy Ma, Snoop Dogg, Beyoncé, and hundreds of hip-hop tracks you've probably never heard of. On her MySpace page, there's a photo of Grete wearing a skin-tight red dress, clunky gold jewelry, and large black sunglasses while posing mockingly on a glitzy gold beach-cruising bicycle. In another photo she's wearing a knee-length white skirt with sneakers and holding a tennis racket.

"It's so ironic. I'm full-on that girl from the Midwest who's obsessed with New York rappers," she says. "But I love hip-hop! I'm into that. I love driving around, playing music really loud."

She's also obsessed with one other thing: school. She's studying business management, taking classes full-time during the summer and fall so she can spend her winter skiing. After college she wants to go into sports law. At 20 she's a rare breed among her ski-bumming peers, many of whom chose the

sport over their education. She says she's that way because of how she was raised. "Because I grew up in two countries, I'm a little more aware of what's going on in the world," she says. "I know there are people over there in Norway, in France, wherever, and they think just the same as us. I have a broader perspective."

With the money she's made from entering freestyle competitions, Grete bought a 2002 dark green Trailblazer and put a down payment on a townhouse in Holladay, Utah, where she throws dinner parties and serves as a landlord to her three roommates ("I'm over the college party scene," she says). In the summer of 2006, in addition to going to school full-time, she decided to get a job just for fun, working in the shop at Salt Lake City's Central Valley Golf Course.

"There's a pretty big transition from being a professional skier to being a full-time student," says Michelle. "And two summers ago, Grete worked at a golf course. She wins X Games and then goes out and gets a job. Who does that?"

Who? The same girl who decides to donate the \$25,000 cash prize she wins to charity. Last April, Whistler held a contest for female amateur and pro skiers and snowboarders called If Ullr Was a Girl. Contestants created online profiles, and fans voted for their favorites. The finalists competed in several contests, from ski challenges to a talent show.

Grete was selected as a finalist. In her online profile, she encouraged people to vote for her because, she wrote, "I'll donate all the money I win to help children in Africa." (She also said that if she could invite three people, dead or alive, to a house party, she'd pick Jesus, Oprah, and Grandpa Wayne.) She cleaned up in the slopestyle event and solidly landed two massive drops in her first-ever big-mountain competition. Then came the cultural talent show. "Most people made art. One girl danced, and another girl did a rap," Grete says. "I sang the Teresa Teng song in Chinese."

Naturally, she won. She's splitting the \$25,000 cash prize among three charities: the Women's Sports Foundation, which encourages young girls to be active; the Stand Strong Foundation, which raises money for spinal cord injury research; and the last one, which she hasn't selected yet, she promises will benefit children in Africa or China. "I can choose: I can buy a brand-new car, or I can give the money away and drive the car I have," she says. "I can sacrifice other things in my life. It's worth it for me to be able to give this away. I hope other people would do the same thing."



For two years *FreeSkier* begged Grete to participate in its "Women of Freeskiing" feature package, which sometimes included photos of athletes in bikinis, lounging by a hot tub. For two years Grete refused.

"I remember this one issue came out, and there were all these girls I looked up to basically naked. I was like, What are they doing? I thought it was so weird," she says. "I still don't know why women have to bring sexuality into it. I understand everyone is beautiful, but I don't think it's smart to get young girls hooked on a sport because pretty girls do it. I'm not comfortable posing like that. I don't even know how to do that stuff. And I don't want to. I'd rather go off a jump. Or read a book or something."

But last summer the editor, Matt Harvey, called again. He said he wanted to change the direction of the photo shoot. This time



Grete taking some downtime with her guitar.

he'd host a discussion among women in the sport, including ski superstars Sarah Burke, Wendy Fisher, Jessica Sobolowski, and Ingrid Backstrom. Because the magazine decided to include content on women's skiing in each issue from then on out, it would be the last year they put out its bestselling "Women of Freeskiing" edition. Grete agreed to participate.

"Whether we were objectifying women is up for debate, but Grete had strong feelings about not having sexy shots taken of her, and I respect that," says Matt. "This past season we changed things around and focused on the state of women's freeskiing. It was an open discussion about contests, sponsors, and—perhaps ironically—the objectification of women by the media. Grete has strong opinions, and she backs them up with action. She does not hide her thoughts when she feels strongly about something, and that's why people gravitate to her."

At the photo shoot I attend with Grete over those few days in Tahoe, she's a natural in front of the camera: part goofy college kid, part supermodel. She plays chess between shots, freestyle-raps with the stylists, and doesn't even flinch when the makeup artist applies thick foundation, which she'd never wear on her own.

After two days of constant wardrobe changes, it's time for her to hop a flight to Switzerland for the Orage European Freeski Open (where, I find out later, Grete takes first in the halfpipe and third in the slopestyle). This time I'm sending her off on an airport shuttle—which we're already late for. I call the driver of the shuttle van to make sure he'll wait for her.

"We don't wait for anyone," he barks.

The guy on the phone sounds young, and I take a chance to guess that there might be one person he'd be willing to wait for.

"I'm escorting a pro skier, Grete Eliassen. She's on her way to Europe for a competition, and she really can't miss this shuttle. We'll be there in five minutes, okay?"

There's a pause. The ski-bum-slash-airport-shuttle-driver is clearly thinking this through.

"Okay, fine," he relents. "I'll wait."

The Diamond Princess wins again. **WA**



Grete at the Winter X Games in Aspen

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