

Another Gold Medal for a Modest Trailblazer

By MATT HIGGINS

LOS ANGELES — Elissa Steamer did not intend to be a trailblazer, and it is not a role she is completely comfortable with yet. But when she began skateboarding 23 years ago, there were few women around to skate with.

So she skated with the boys around Fort Myers, Fla., where she grew up. In striving to keep up with them, she became the most accomplished professional women's street skater.

"I'm not the first girl to skateboard," Steamer said before she won a gold medal in the skateboard street women's final at the X Games on Friday. "There were women who came before me. I guess they did not eat, sleep, and breathe skateboarding like I did."

With women's skateboarding in its fifth year at the X Games, Steamer is no longer alone. And at 33 she remains at the top of her sport. Her victory Friday gave her a gold medal in the women's street final in four of the five years the event has been held at the X Games. Last year she won silver.

"When I first saw skate videos, there was only one girl in them," said Amy Caron, who took bronze. "To be on the podium with her and competing on her level is awesome."

Steamer was exhausted after rolling through the street course that was set up on a parking deck across from the Staples Center. She stuck a kickflip over a gap, and scored an 87.83 to beat 20-year-old Marisa Del Santo, the gold medalist in 2007.

"Everybody is so good now," Steamer said. "You have to go all out."

She appeared more relieved than happy after the competition, when she sat down and lit a cigarette. "It's not really that fun," she said. "I felt like I was going to puke the whole time."

Asked what the problem was, she said, "I think it was my old

age."

Steamer has competed long enough that she used to participate in the men's class because there were virtually no other professional women at events during the late 1990s.

As the ranks of women's skateboarding continue to grow, so does the sport's recognition. Friday was Girls' Day at the X Games, a celebration of women participating in action sports, featuring skateboard clinics and demonstrations at the Home Depot Center in Carson, Calif.

"It used to be that girls would go to the skate park to watch their boyfriends skate," said Don Bostick, president and founder of World Cup Skateboarding, a sanctioning body for the sport. "Now it's O.K. to go there and skate with your boyfriend or by yourself. It's O.K. to skate and be a girl."

"It's pretty cool to see the whole evolution," said Liza Grzeskowiak, editor of Check it Out, a women's skateboarding magazine. "And the guys are giving them props. It's way more supportive. It's way more respectful."

Still, opportunities — and compensation — for women have lagged. At the X Games, women street skaters receive a total prize purse of \$65,000; their male counterparts receive \$122,000. But just three years ago the prize purse for women at the X Games was \$2,000.

"The prize purses are way higher than they have ever been," said Mimi Knoop, a professional vert skater.

Knoop is vice president for the Action Sports Alliance, a nonprofit association of professional women's skateboarders founded in 2005.

The Alliance has negotiated with ESPN to raise the prize purse at the X Games and has taken a more active role in increasing the size of the women's field. Their goal is to be the official

organizer for women's skateboarding so they can also increase the number of competitions.

Although Steamer is not involved with the Alliance, Knoop said she is a pioneer in the sport.

With her high level of skating, Steamer was the first woman to earn endorsements previously available only to men. She was featured in popular skateboarding videos, a first for a woman. All of which allowed her to earn a six-figure income from sponsorships alone.

"I think Elissa has paved the way for those girls in street and set the bar ability-wise for all those girls that are coming up," Knoop said.

But that does not mean Steamer wants to carry the banner for women skateboarders. She believes men should be paid more because the tricks they pull are more difficult.

"She just kind of marches to her own drummer," Knoop said.

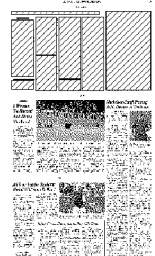
NOTES

In the men's skateboard street finals, the reality-TV star **RYAN SHECKLER** won his second gold medal. The 18-year-old Sheckler is the star of MTV's "Life of Ryan." ... The skateboarder **DANNY WAY**, who slammed face-first into the Mega Ramp during the Big Air final at the Staples Center on Thursday night, did not sustain any broken bones. Way, 34, completed the competition and won a silver medal on his fifth and final run. Way said his left shoulder and elbows were swollen and that he had torn tendons and ligaments in his right foot. He was treated at an area hospital and was released Thursday night.

ONLINE: VIDEO

More coverage of the women's street skating competition is available at:

nytimes.com/sports





TONY DONALDSON/ICON SPORTS MEDIA

Elissa Steamer has won the women's street final in four of the five years the event has been held at the X Games.