





## Truly Steep

Big-budget documentary explores extreme lives—and deaths

IN A SCENE FROM THE SKIING DOCUMENTARY *STEEP*, Utah ski mountaineers Andrew McLean, Dylan Freed, and Matthew Turley work their way up a peak in Iceland, the wind whistling in their microphones. Their breathing is audible but controlled as the trio clears a choke in a chute and gains the toe of the arête above. Without warning, the ridge shatters into the helter-skelter blocks of a slab avalanche. Two-foot-thick sections run downhill, knocking the skiers off their feet. As they scramble and claw to the rock wall at their right, we hear grunts of struggle and the low-frequency rumble of a day gone wrong. The slab funnels into the gully, pulling the last skier toward some unseen abyss. The roaring train wreck of snow exits the frame.



Dylan Freed, Andrew McLean, and Matthew Turley (above).

When skiing is good, it's effortless. Dylan Freed (left) floats down the Peninsula of the Giants in Iceland.

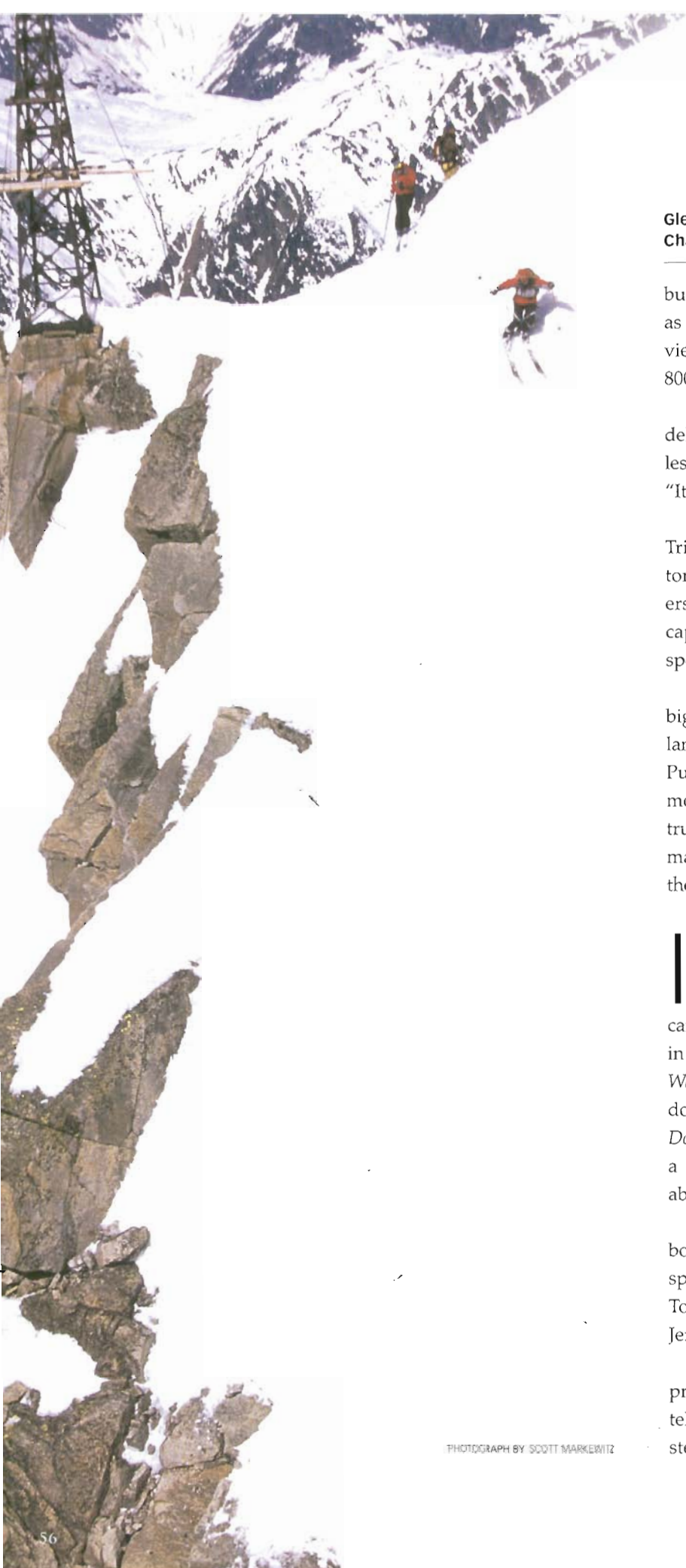
More breathing, heavier now. Then screams. Turley is still in the frame, hollering for his skiing partners. McLean appears, and then they hear Freed's voice. Immense relief sets in, then elation. The normally reserved alpinists hug each other. The scene ends.

If it were a work of fiction, it would have been overwritten. A Hollywood ending to *Cliffhanger II: Extreme Winter*. Except this is reality. Or at least a documentary's best take at reality. As McLean explains to me later, there was more to the moment. What the viewer doesn't know is that McLean and his climbing partners weren't thinking about avalanches—they'd been climbing and skiing in hard-pack conditions for days.

Nor does the viewer know that the arête is not an arête,

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW TURLEY

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**Glen Plake tackles the Rocco chute off the Aiguille du Midi in Chamonix, France, during the filming of *Steep*.**

but rather a vertical deposit of wind-loaded snow disguised as a ridge. You can't tell from the cinematographic field of view that the chute that almost swallowed the alpinists ran 800 vertical feet, or that they were above a 400-foot cliff.

But even without that knowledge, the scene manages to deliver truth. "The unusual thing was that we had our wireless mics on and they were working, for once," says McLean. "It gives you the feeling of being in the avalanche."

During the New York premiere of the film last fall, the Tribeca Film Festival audience went silent as the running slab tore at the skiers. At that moment, a room full of city dwellers shared what I first felt when I witnessed a close friend get captured by a slide and pulled toward a cliff: The joys of the sport aren't free.

Ski films usually have nothing to do with truth. They're all big air and untracked powder without the corresponding hard landings or deep burials, the shattered femurs or cold bodies. Purveyors of such ski porn purposely avoid reminders that mountains are dangerous places. *Steep*, however, embraces the truth. And it's able to do that in large part because the filmmakers have connections to the Wasatch Mountains—where the truth hasn't been Disney-fied out of the sport.

IN THE LATE 1990S, Agi Orsi was working on a documentary about skateboarding. This didn't mean a lot to her friend Bill Kerig, who is a skier, not a skater. But when the film came to the Sundance Film Festival, Kerig, who had worked in film as a writer and producer (and is now publisher of the *Wasatch Journal*), joined her for the premiere. The title of the documentary (which was sold to Sony Pictures Classics) was *Dogtown and Z-Boys*. A few years later, Orsi was working on a second documentary for Sony Pictures Classics, this time about surfing: *Riding Giants*.

Kerig, a former professional skier, was so impressed with both films that he wanted to make a similar one about his sport. He wrote a documentary film treatment and then called Tom Yellin, an avid skier who was also president of Peter Jennings Productions (PJP) in New York.

Kerig and Yellin, who had worked together on television projects for more than a decade, envisioned a film that would tell the history of big-mountain skiing—descending wild, steep terrain with speed and grace—using the human-interest

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT MARKIEWITZ

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story of the young free-skier Kye Peterson and his father, the late extreme skier Trevor Peterson, as a throughway. Yellin and Kerig pitched the film to Yellin's boss, ABC News anchor Peter Jennings—a longtime Park City skier. In October of 2004, PJP bought the rights to Kerig's treatment and hired him to write, direct, and produce the film, a role that required him to raise millions to finance it.

Kerig called in another ski buddy, Brian Beck, to help. "Flyin' Brian" Beck is a gelande jumper, a former ski model, a hundred-days-a-year skier, and a member of Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort's exclusive Seven Summits club, which gets him perks including a season pass, unrestricted access to early trams, and access to the 45 or so Utah skiers who can afford such a luxury—the type of people who might want to invest in an anti-ski-porn ski documentary.

One of the people they pitched to on the Snowbird tram was Beck's brother Monty, who was visiting from Bozeman, Montana. Though amused by his younger brother's pluck, Monty said no thanks. But after Brian pressured him into reading the treatment, Monty kicked in the first \$100,000.

**Glen Plake (below) heads for the Glacier Rond in Chamonix, France, which is considered the "death sport capital of the world." The film depicts a rescue (right).**

Stuart Horsfall, a skier from Boulder, Colorado, funded the rest of the project. Peter Pilafian, a Jackson Hole, Wyoming, cinematographer who worked on *Dogtown* and *Riding Giants*, signed on, as did Utah photographer and Snowbird skier Scott Markewitz. The whole crew went to Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, France, and began shooting.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW TURLEY



PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT MARKEWITZ



The film crew shot in Canada, France, and here in Iceland.

“Things were going really well,” says Beck, “until we got back to the States, turned on the news, and watched Peter [Jennings] announce that he had lung cancer.”

Production on the film stopped. Then Jennings died. Without him, his company seemed ready to expire as well. The ski industry rumormongers, which had been abuzz with word that a major film company was making a ski movie, called the project dead.

**D**OCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS don't follow scripts. They follow their guts, and they follow a story. When the filming of *Steep* picked up again after Jennings' death, a lot had changed. Kerig was out as writer and director, and Mark Obenhaus, PJP's top director and a frequent Sun Valley, Idaho, skier, was in. Obenhaus took the film in a different direction. Then, when big-mountain skier Doug Coombs died in April 2006 in a fall off a cliff in La Grave, France, the story changed again. As a former extreme-skiing competitor, film star, Alaskan skiing pioneer, alpinist, and mountain guide, Coombs, more than any other skier in North America, was the face of steep skiing. *Steep* naturally became a tribute to his life and, through him, a tribute to all skiers who have known challenge.

The film, which sold to Sony Pictures Classics (the same company that released *Dogtown* and *Riding Giants*) in 2007, lets you watch Coombs walking with his toddler son through the streets of La Grave just a few weeks before his death. You hear from his wife, Emily, and his friends and contemporaries. But the footage of Coombs that will stick with you most was shot with a complicated aerial camera running on cables.

When skiing is good, it's effortless—so much so that you feel disconnected from your body. As the camera tracked Coombs—an effortless skier—that same calm but energized feeling swept over me. Unlike the commercialized ski films playing in never-ending loops in ski shops and bars, it makes you want to ski.

The Iceland segment, the one that contains the avalanche, arose after Obenhaus, who had been interviewing a virtual who's who of skiers, read a story about Andrew McLean in the *New Yorker*. “The Peter Jennings Productions crew just called out of the blue,” McLean says. “They showed up with five or six people with heavy cameras. They were around Utah for almost two years and really got to know everybody. They just knew so much about the history of the sport; it was easy to talk to them. They understood the subtleties. The final product sums up what I've been doing for the past 20 years of my life.”

Despite knowing that the people behind the film were skiers, I was prepared to witness a Hollywood-style bastardization of the sport that has shaped my life. Instead, I watched as McLean's party almost disappeared in an avalanche, heard the extreme skier Eric Pehota speak of his late friend Trevor Peterson, saw Doug Coombs holding his son's hand, and left the screening proud to be a skier. The joys of skiing don't come free. But they are joys nonetheless.



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