Uphill Blast

Ski-mountaineering races blend uphill marathons with downhill adrenaline

IN THE PITCH BLACK BEFORE DAWN, deep in the middle of the Wasatch Mountains, 150 contestants wait in freezing temperatures. A bagpipe wails out a battle song as the first rays of sunlight creep over Mount Superior. Heavy artillery fire booms across the valley, bringing down avalanches. With a one-minute warning, contestants throw off their excess clothing. Down jackets litter the snow. Silence follows the 30-second warning. Then a gun blast sets the entire scene in motion. Edge-to-edge, dodging wind-milling arms and legs, the racers surge forward, vying for position. At oh-seven-hundred exactly, the annual Black Diamond PowderKeg race in the backcountry behind Alta has begun.

Coming from Europe, Canada, and throughout the United States, the racers will dash up and rocket down four peaks in as little as two hours, covering eight miles and more than 5,500 vertical feet before crossing the finish line. Utah's PowderKeg is one of the premier ski-mountaineering races in the United States, and there's a reason this kind of racing, a relatively new sport in America, has been nicknamed a sufferfest.

"Honestly, the first year I raced the PowderKeg, I was petrified," said Monique Merrill, a self-titled outdoor-adventure junkie. The Breckenridge, Colorado, coffee-shop owner was climbing just the first of the four slopes when she started questioning her motives. "It never fails. I ask myself: Why am I here? Why did I have to do this?" She answers: "Because when I get done, I know I'll feel more alive."

Ski-mountaineering races blend the hard-core endurance of a mountain marathon and the adrenaline-flowing free-for-all of a downhill. Racers typically win—or lose—on the uphills. The fastest competitors climb the steep slopes quicker than a fixed-grip chairlift could get them there. But downhill skiing ability, equipment, and strategy also are key. In the 2007 PowderKeg, the men's front-runner caught an edge on the flats and fell within inches of the finish line, only to have the racer in second place glide by and cinch first. One year, Merrill's racing gear didn't make it on the flight from Colorado, and she had to borrow boots and skis. She's a fierce climber and was besting the pack, passing other racers and making her way over an icy mogul field when she slipped and slid on her stomach all the way to the bottom.

Most races require participants to use climbing skins, which typically are made of mohair or synthetic material, and adhere to the bottom of the ski to enable skiers to glide or climb forward, and stop any backward slipping. Racers also carry a pack, shovel, beacon, and probe, in case of an avalanche. Equipment for ski-mountaineering races is a high-tech version of backcountry Alpine Touring, or randonee, gear, which allows racers to have a "free heel" while climbing and the ability to "lock the heels" on the descent. To make climbing easier, the skis and bindings are super lightweight, most just weighing 5¼ pounds. For reference, this is about one-quarter the weight of an alpine ski/binding setup.

There are commercially available racing boots, although the world champions often go with handmade carbon-fiber models. All equipment is designed with uphill, downhill, and transition speeds in mind. Experienced racers basically run

PHOTOS BY MATT LAW COURTESY OF BLACK DIAMOND

Left: Bruce Engelby of Utah glides toward the finish line of the 2008 Black Diamond PowderKeg race near Alta. In Europe, backcountry races are blood-sport, the winners leaving even the fastest Americans wondering what hit them. **Above:** Ski-mountaineering racers are fierce competitors, but they also love the simple pleasure of being in the backcountry—in Utah that tends to mean fresh powder.

uphill, change from climbing to skiing in about 16 seconds without stopping, and ski full-blast on the downhills through rugged off-piste conditions.

For national ski-mountaineering champion Pete Swenson, the difficulty of the race isn't just the raw exhaustion of running up a hill for 30 minutes—on skis—gasping for what little oxygen is available at more than 10,000 feet. It's that now, after all that, you have to ski down. "The skis are shorter and boots lighter and so you don't have as much support … it's very, very hard not to stop on the way down. Your legs are burning and shaky. You get to the bottom, come to a full stop, throw on your skins as quickly as you can." Then it's up, once more. "What makes it exciting is that you have people all around you doing the same thing," Swenson said.

Swenson is also the organizer of a randonee race series in Colorado. His motto: "You just go out, work really hard, and the reward is when it's done."

SKI-MOUNTAINEERING RACES STARTED in Europe more than a century ago when people began connecting towns by skiing between them for sport, then in later years seeing how fast they could do it. Many of the classic races still follow this town-to-town format, but the main emphasis of modern-day races is shorter, more intense courses that racers start and finish in the same place with a two- to three-hour duration for the fastest racers.

The first American ski-mountaineering race took place at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in 2000. From this single race with 60 entrants, the sport has grown to 10 to 20 races per year with regional and national race series. Europeans have come to the U.S. to race and vice versa, although the sport is still vastly more popular in Europe with multiple races every weekend attracting hundreds of participants and spectators. At the international level, Americans have the drive and skill to compete,

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although competitors often lack in experience, finances, and the subtle nuances that tend to make the difference between first and 50th place. In Europe, ski-mountaineering races are a blood-sport, with France, Switzerland, and Italy traditionally claiming the podium and leaving even the fastest Americans wondering what hit them.

In the last decade, the International Ski Mountaineering Federation (ISMF) has been campaigning to add the sport to the Olympics and narrowly missed getting it into the upcoming Vancouver Games. The ISMF is hopeful as ski mountaineering did have a one-time Olympic début before World War I, but has not been back since then, partially because of the logistical and spectator challenges associated with putting on a race through remote mountain terrain in the winter.

The PowderKeg, held every year in early March, is the only sanctioned ski-mountaineering race in Utah. More than 60 volunteers help put on the race, which has endured every kind of condition: too much snow, too little, icy conditions, storms, and delays. But it's never been canceled.

The fastest competitors can literally climb—or "skin"—up the mountain on their skis quicker than riding some chairlifts. Here, competitors traverse toward Gunsight Notch. In all, PowderKeg racers climb more than 5,000 vertical feet, skiing eight miles up and down four peaks.

Course designers have to make the course tough, not dangerous. Hundreds of small flags along the course show racers where to go. If there is any avalanche danger, 50 people may be exposed to it at once. If a racer falls and slides, the skier could take out other racers below. If the tracks aren't broken, the entire pack bunches up and the race is decided by a desperate last dash to the finish line.

The PowderKeg has varied over the years, but always includes black diamond–level ski descents for the "Race" category and a slightly shorter, easier course for the "Recreational" category. The rec course is about two-thirds of the racecourse and clips off one major climb and two miles of overall length.

Even with the shorter length, the average recreational skier might still be intimidated by the concept. Why would anyone want to climb *up* a ski mountain and then fly down it on skis better weighted for a 5-year-old—several times? Talk to just about any racer—experienced or just starting out—and you realize that, sure, it's about competing, but it's also about the simple pleasure of being in the backcountry. And in Utah, the backcountry tends to mean powder. In a sport where uphill suffering is unavoidable, getting fresh face-shots on the way down goes a long way toward easing the pain.

Merrill, who also happens to be an elite adventure racer and member of one of the top teams (Team Nike) in the U.S., says she pretty much can get talked into trying anything. "I really do like getting out of my comfort zone a bit. It gets me out of my bubble." She wants to encourage other people to try, noting that she didn't grow up skiing (she learned after moving to Breckenridge in her 20s), she wasn't much of an athlete growing up, and she admits to sometimes shaking at the top of a mountain before hurling down. "I literally just tell myself to say no," she says. But then she finds out again: "I just can't say no." WJ

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