Point & Chute - Eastern Skiing's Hard Core

Contributed by Jonah Cantor Photos by Chuck Waskuch

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In this slow bushwhack every step is a battle. There are no trails on this ridge above Smuggler's Notch on the North

of Mt. Mansfield, Vermont's highest peak. We've skinned through the thick of it for the past couple of hours on the hunt to find one of the Green Mountains elusive chutes-this one a snaky 1,000' vertical cleft of ice and snow long known by local ice climbers as the Jeff Slide. But with this year's snow-pack, and how it's just blown in, we're here with sticks, not picks. And while it's visible from the road through the Notch, accessing it from the top is, we're learning, not easy.

I look around at our small group. Their faces mirror how I'm feeling-cold, damp and worked from our efforts. But there's also a look of determination: slightly crazed expressions that tell me these guys don't mind getting snagged, snared and snookered by the snowed-over, iced-up, chest-high spruce called krumholtz. And although this is our first time this far out on the ridge in winter, we've all been here before.

Here meaning being tangled up in a mess of trees and snow in the Green Mountains. But here might just as easily be thrashing to the path of a landslide in some remote drainage of New York's Adirondacks, or clambering on hands and knees in New Hampshire's White Mountains to reach a rock-lined 50 chute. Here is the essence of Eastern chute skiing.

While some of the best and steepest lines in the East are above treeline, much of it isn't. Getting to the steep skia places can often be downright ugly, requiring a strong commitment to the place, a dedication to the pursuit, and yes, a healthy dose of improvisation. It's the search for these continuous, powder filled lines; streambeds, slides and glacier scoured slots that requires a thrash factor not typical of lower-angle Eastern glade skiing.

The western boundary of eastern chute skiing is New York's Adirondacks. Consider: The Himalayas were formed 2 million years ago, the Rockies 75 million. But the 'Dacks, a jagged landscape with mountains like Wolf Jaws, Gothics and Big Slide, are estimated to be a billion years old. Situated on the Canadian Shield they experience slides of a thin layer of topsoil that often expose the underlying bedrock leaving a variety of skiable scars that look eerily like cut ski runs. Not surprisingly their snow-holding capacity can be capricious.

At six million acres, the Adirondack State Park is the largest park in the continental US. It comes as no surprise then that possibly one of the biggest challenges when skiing these slides, next to properly assessing for avalanche danger and handling moderate to technical ski mountaineering challenges, is accessing them. Especially in the High Peaks region of the park, near Lake Placid, it's not uncommon to slog seven miles or more to access a slide.

New Hampshire's hulking granite offers a different taste of eastern big mountain exposure. Worn and faded a pale from their own 136 million years of existence, the White Mountains are home of the Presidential Range and Mount Washington, New England's tallest peak (6,288'), and Tuckerman Ravine, a place many consider the staging ground for the development of extreme skiing. Between 1946 and 1952, Brooks Dodge, the son of Appalachian Mountain Club hut master Joe Dodge, established the standards for steep chute skiing in "The Ravine" and neighboring ravines like the Gulf of Slides. Brooks picked his way down numerous un-skied lines such as Cathedral, Sluice, the Icefall and his namesake, Dodge's Drop. Almost all average or exceed 50o, and on his seven-foot wooden skis, Brooks rightly called them "no-fall gullies."

Without a doubt, Tucks is dramatic. Its frighteningly steep slopes have captured the minds of a many suitors, and it continues to bring in the crowds. But there is a life for steep chute skiing beyond the crowds. A good topographic map of the Presidential Range highlights how many ravines and glacial cirques there are to explore for chute outs-like Oakes Gulf below Mt. Monroe, and King Ravine off of Mt. Madison. And like the lines found in the 'Dacks, the obscure descents here require a bit of commitment as well, like arduous approaches over snow-covered boulder fields and across slick wind-ravaged ridges above tree line. While some choose to ski here during the heart of winter, the avalanche danger in the Whites can be considerable. Spring conditions allow steeper descents under safer conditions although sedan-sized chunks of ice occasionally release and hurtle down the slopes. Additionally, spring thaw initiates the development of crevasses.

No avalanche danger in the Greens. In terms of age and location, they occupy middle ground between the Whites the Adirondaks. Some 440 million years old, the Green Mountains have been scoured and reshaped from the last Ice Age; and while the retreating glacier left rounded peaks and deposited glacial erratics, it helped to carve and deepen the notches that in the West would be called passes. It's here, on my home turf where I keep getting tangled in a mess of trees and snow; where I've learned what it takes to get from here to there. Where, "you can't get there from here," is practically a state motto.

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"It's gotta be right around here," I mutter to myself. My buddies share the same sentiment, and we desperately pe the dense, snowed over spruce that surrounds us looking for a likely entrance to the chute. We keep moving, working hard to avoid crossing and re-crossing our own skin tracks. And suddenly, while traversing lower and lower, the thrash through scratching branches, willy-whacks and snags seems to ease up offering what seems like a generous foot or so of blessed space.

Like a pack of dogs, we catch a scent, and the chase begins as the woods give way to shots of knee-deep untracke snow. But the trees converge again forcing us into a keyhole slot one ski-length wide. The only option is a straight-line move that I pray will lead to open space below. Shooting into the gap I catch a glimpse of my future-it's a spacious swath of snow 30' wide that jogs hard left, cut off by a vertical granite wall 200 feet farther down. But this isn't another constriction. I lay in six or seven turns in the new snow before the chute doglegs again. Now scraggly birch trees line an

outcropping of grey-green schist that pinches the chute again, effectively concealing the terrain below. But when I see opportunity for quick traverse that will bang me around the outcrop. Now I'm getting the hang of it. Each new bend surprises us with a different pitch and new terrain to negotiate-it feels like cascading down a spiral staircase as we drop from step to step. Some trees hunch over 90o at their waists; their crippled limbs point towards the next twist in the path. They can't resist the harsh elements and the pull of gravity. Neither can I. And as I bank into the next turn, I sense we are all connected in the steep, narrow, frozen East.

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