

The Wallowa Way - Interpretive Skiing in Oregon's First Wilderness

Contributed by Adam Howard

The McCully River is comforting to the King. Barely audible and moving counter to our skin track, it babbles to us through a winter's worth of eastern Oregon snow. The King can feel the flow, he says.

Two decades of river guiding can have that sort of deep impact, even on royalty. Water's sound and motion become tactile. Sooner or later aqua interpretation becomes routine. And eventually that "flow" transcends the seasons-and the water, frozen or not. That's what the King says as our group skins three-and-a-half miles to camp, just inside the boundary of the 360,000-acre Eagle Cap Wilderness and the high peaks of the Wallowas.

"These guys are river guys. That's how they get it," he says from the side of his mouth, looking back at me. He's talking about his men-a diverse crew of river guides with names like "Locksaw" or "Selway" Bill, and "The Jester". His long red beard brushes his left shoulder and his folded-up ponytail wags to his right as he turns to speak mid-stride. "Our ski trips come together like a river trip. The pace is determined by the flow." The flow is determined by the rate at which snow melts, or falls.

And the snow melts slowly here in the Kingdom: McCully Basin on the northern tier of the mountain range scientists call one of the most geologically diverse in the country. Rising nearly 7000 feet from the lowest river valley to its highest peak, the Wallowas have a greater continuous area of alpine and sub-alpine terrain than the more famous Cascades to the west. It's not all skiable vertical, but dramatic all the same. Once a hunting ground of the Nez Perce, these hills were what legendary tribal leader Chief Joseph was fighting for. His people hunted and dwelled on the plain below.

A stand of white bark pine and lodge pole pine and Engelmann spruce meets us at the gate to the lair, a modest compound comprised of two sleep yurts, a cook yurt, a privy and a sauna. It's more like a fiefdom with beer, the King admits, as we dismount at camp.

This is Wilderness with a capital "W" and the King's permit doesn't allow him to reign here in summer, so all yurts and amenities-everything-must hit the donkey trail each spring. Still, "life in the round" as the King refers to it, is lavish as it is temporary-nothing is nailed down. "The summer crowd never even knows we've been here," says the King.

The King, a.k.a the "Yurt Meister," a.k.a. "C.B." or Connelly Brown wasn't always royalty. And his men only refer to him as "The King" in jest. A recovering Jackson Hole river-and-mountain guide, he jousting for nearly a decade in the Tetons for Rendezvous Huts before washing out. Unemployed, he landed at the foot of these mountains in 2002 for the wedding of a friend. The foot of these mountains is Joseph and Enterprise, Oregon, two high plateau cow towns; no ski area, no outdoor shop and one hell of a view. He ran into the right people-other "yurt meisters"-and by the fall, the King had bought Wallowa Alpine Huts from Dave Peterson.

"When I came here, knowing I'd be guiding in the middle of Wilderness...There were never any snowmobiles here," he shakes his head alluding to other hassles in other states. "All these front-country squabbles between user groups never happened here." That's because the Wallowas were among the first federal lands dedicated as Wilderness in 1964.

We lighten our loads and leave the conifers for the sportive afternoon alpine above camp where low-angle glades and meadows let Connelly measure the strength of his 10-odd guests before tomorrow's push into the alpine. And we're a diverse lot, ranging here from Shasta, California and Chicago. Portland, Oregon and Vermont. Big Sky, Montana and Salt Lake City, Utah.

The Wallowas are remote, no matter where we came from. The trip here is as committing as the lines we'll ski over the next several days. All roads drop into the deep river canyons of the Grande Ronde, or the Snake or the Imnaha, before winding slowly to the Blue Mountain Plateau that trims the Wallowas and the other ranges that comprise the greater Blue Mountains.

Our skin track is much more manageable. As we ascend over refrozen corn on the eastern flank of the "Pope's Nose" pockets of wind-buffeted slab linger on the East faces and in the trees. Connelly, 38, sets a moderate pace-less of a march and more of a flow-and we, his subjects, fall in to our self-determined places in line. His men-one for every four guests-are much less "guides" and much more "hosts" willing to simply set track at group pace and roam where the group chooses. It's an interesting concept. Kings don't typically embrace manifest destiny. But our gregarious leader's only decree seems to be making everyone happy.

"The keg lock disengages at 4 p.m., people," Connelly says as the last of us reach the top of an unassuming knoll above an expanse of alpine meadows. Locksaw pulled a pulk that, amongst fresh fruit and vegetables, carried a five-gallon keg of Terminal Gravity IPA brewed in Enterprise. So if the wind slab won't get our endorphins pumping, the lager at camp surely will.

The variable conditions further spread the field and as we come around for lap two, it's clear how the groups will shake out. Pretty much along party lines. We dance with who we bring, fast or slow and our crew-Becca, Gavin, Jeff and I stick close together. Which is why most of us are here. It's much less about hammering big vertical, and much more about the social ski. Yurt life. Beer. The party starts in the hills and meanders slowly down to camp, where dinner's nearly ready when we arrive. Several of us hit the sauna, some nap, but most everyone sits around getting acquainted in the cook yurt. It plays out like this until nearly 11 p.m., when even the toughest admit that today was taxing enough that it's time to retire now or suffer tomorrow.

After a leisurely breakfast of local bakery granola, eggs benedict, fresh fruit, and cone-dripped coffee, we set out for the President's Col. It's several miles and the ascent is technical enough that some decide to boot over the snow-free ridge rather than attempt the skin track on a slick slot of snow. Nearly devoid of white, the ridge to the south of the Col is red igneous rock, weather worn to sand in spots. We leave footprints as we hike toward a collection of larger TK rocks. But our tracks are nothing compared to the perfect ski terrain of bowls and cirques left here by the last glaciers as recently as 200-to-300 years ago.

As we lunch looking south over the Big Sheep Basin-a hummocky bowl filled with knolls, steep rock slots, and playful meadows. Connelly holds court. With more than a decade of guiding under beard, he's got a unique take on what skiers want. And what they don't.

"It's all about Maslov's Pyramid," he says, his subjects listening intently, half into their lunch-turkey bagel sandwiches, locally made "yum-yum bars", dried fruit, and jerky. "If we can provide for a certain level of need you guys can focus on the rest." And the rest is skiing and eating. And as we digest, resting. There's no hurry here in the McCully Basin because as the Wallowa tribe well knows the corn cycle meter is just tipping into the butter zone on the mild south faces below. The more demanding north shots may take another hour to ripen. If they will at all.

"It's about heliotropics, people," he expounds. "Follow the sun." And again we're reminded that the ski tour here really is like a river trip-it's taking shape at the speed of melting snow. And later, there will be beer.

For some of us it's sufficiently melted on the Big Sheep side, and the group splits into two after lunch. The half dozen Oregonians in the group opt for the more challenging north-facing rock-lined couloirs falling back into McCully. Others decide to boot to the summit of 9400-foot Block Head before a longer descent out of basin (O.B.E as the King calls it:

Out of Basin Experience). But not before looking into the 50' Block slots that run back down to the Pope's Nose. The entrances for which are 10-foot drops, cruxes not normally here during a regular winter. The King laments that it's been a thin year compared to the 400-inch average here.

Not so thin, I think, minutes later as I watch my partner Gavin ("Big Line" as the King calls him) hot-knife Mecca-the southern slab of Block Head-to its glacial moraine terminus deep in the Big Sheep Basin. Even though the gentle line required piecing around a scree field at the top to run continuous, it provides a ready canvas for the few strokes he needs for the 1000-foot descent.

Big Line's low angle, high-speed descent is representative of the diversity of ski terrain here. Apron skiing: It's Everyman rated. And though it's an easy schuss, the backdrop is slash upon slash of 50', 800-vertical-foot couloirs-the prizes of the Wallawas that we hope to hold tomorrow or the next day if the conditions stay right.

Our last night at camp before tomorrow's O.B.E. is spent without Jeff. Camera failure sent him sailing down the icy single track for a backup in the gateway town of Joseph. And even though the keg is still half full the Shasta boys retire early after a punishing day on the north side. Connelly has arranged a special trip for our small Big Sky-based group-Big Line, Becca, Jeff and I-into Aneroid Basin to the West. He'll have to leave his crown with Locksaw because once we leave McCully we enter the permit of Wing Ridge, the other ski outfitter in the Wallawas.

Wing Ridge is the only other ski touring outfitter operating in Wilderness in the U.S. But unlike the King's catered, hosted program, the Wing Ridge leases a collection of historic cabins on an 80-acre inholding that isn't subject to federal Wilderness standards. And all Wing Ridge camps-there's one in the Big Sheep basin, on its namesake Wing Ridge, and in Aneroid-are self-guided and self-catered. Though there is an option at Aneroid for a deluxe package that includes porter service-for the arduous seven-mile approach-cook, and guide. Fortunately, the latter is our program.

Though we turn in early our sleep yurt is abuzz. "Q", our commodities broker from Chicago has been trading in Wild Turkey futures. And the spirits market is good. So are his. He's taken on the name "Urban Guy". He showed up with 100-liter pack including enough supplies to hole up in these mountains for the rest of the spring. And though he didn't bring any water, he had a half-gallon of boos. In spite of his mid-western metropolitan mountain savvy he's been able to hang. Though he admits, "urban guy always gets punished."

With Jeff's return in the morning comes more punishment for Q. His ailing mother -whom he'd spoken to on the King's satellite-or Maslov-phone yesterday-wasn't recovering well from liver surgery in Chicago the day before and his wife sent word that he should hurry home. Shaken, Q packs his things and slides out of camp with Marcy, one of the King's hosts who'd skied in special to bring the news.

It's hard to watch a new friend leave like this, but with daylight burning we break from camp in the other direction, falling into the other group's tracks which ascend west toward Bare Col and Hidden Mountain (9400'). It's a quiet slide, and within an hour we're at the Col just in time to connect for a parting goodbye with Locksaw and the gang. By now we're in radio contact with Sean, Joel and Wing Ridge guide Jerry and we plan an intercept on the Aneroid side, where they're a few hours in to a half-day tour with hopes to meet us.

We get a visual with them as we de-skin and agree to meet at the convergence of two tributaries to the East Fork of the Wallowa. The interim is harrowing. We're plagued with a breakable crust for nearly all of the aesthetic 1600 vertical foot pitch to the valley floor.

Within 20 minutes we find Jerry, Sean-a porter and professor at the University of Idaho-and Joel one of C.B.'s hosts and

a hired cook for this leg of the trip. It's good to meet people for the first time in the backcountry. Different than on the street mostly because the street is so unremarkable and the backcountry so...is. Especially this backcountry.

If McCully is winsome, Aneroid Basin is dramatic. Huge near-vertical faces drop 1000 feet-plus into the valley bottom. And behind them, more of the same, connected by keyhole slots, just big enough to set track through without booting. Each hole in the wall seems to access a unique cirque or bowl behind it. Even C.B. is impressed. It's been many guided trips in his McCully kingdom since he's had the opportunity to ski this zone.

We fall in and travel around the humps of what could only be described as Shire-like tiny, rolling, forested Hobbit-hills interspersed with lakes under an arête of Wallowa rock. An hour skin and we're across the large Aneroid Lake and back 100 years.

Wing Ridge leases the privately owned Aneroid Cabins during the winter months. A dozen outbuildings on a privately-held 80-acre in holding deep within the Wallowa Wilderness the cabins were first built in the early 1900s by the Silvertip family. Since then the compound has only had a handful of owners.

"It's really coincidental that the Silvertips built the cabins here," Jerry says as we skin into the compound. "They weren't skiers, but this is skier's terrain."

Sean, C.B, Jeff and I settle into what was the first cabin built on the place, the modest Silvertip. Ten feet wide and perhaps 20 long our abode is nothing if not organic from 100 years of settling, rotting, repairing, adjusting, growing moss, and being the home to countless ranging claimers, hikers, skiers and the odd critter. It's Alice in Wonderland sort of stuff and it's 300 feet to the outhouse, or the kitchen cabin where Joel and Jerry get busy getting dinner prepared.

"I'd love to spend a winter here and ski and write," Sean, a writing instructor at University of Idaho, says. How Walden.

It's 9' at 7 a.m. The mercury-less barometer is rising after an inch of snow fell last night in camp. As we creak out of Silvertip fresh eyes and a coating of white sharpen the edges on the mountains surrounding Aneroid. Maybe it's the snow that's providing added depth of field, but one thing is for certain: The terrain isn't better here. Just bigger.

By 9 a.m. we're on top of Tenderfoot Pass at the headwaters of the Imnaha River, which flows south out of the Wallowas. This saddle is unique because though we're not very high, we can see the Blue Plateau to the North and South toward the town of Halfway. From here it's decision time, and since we're only a quarter way into the day, it's time to move if we're going to ski any meaningful vertical.

We traverse into the bottom of Jewitt Cirque, first skiing several hundred feet of cream. What was one inch in camp is three inches here. Our spirits are lifted when we consider we're almost 1500 feet below the summit of Aneroid Mountain, today's ultimate goal.

After dropping and ascending another few shelves we're into Castle Basin, one ridge over from Aneroid. We lunch and lap the 500 vertical-foot wall beneath pillars of Wa-rock before gaining the ridge again and wrapping around Castle, where we're looking down on Jewitt again from a new vantage point. From here it's a 20-minute boot along the wind-hammered ridge toward our objective, two menacing-looking couloirs that neither Jerry nor C.B. think have ever been skied, though that seems impossible, and they are guides. And what's the harm in letting us think we're getting a first descent.

The guides drop the most aesthetic line in the cirque, far lookers left. Connelly leads the charge with his signature style. Some might call it old school, but it's working-knee's tight together, shins pressed hard into his soft AT boots. Big Line, Sean, Joel and I scramble to the false summit and the entrance of the two unnamed chutes. After eyeing both options, Joel and Sean chose to ski the wider 40' shot skier's right, and will watch as Big Line and I pick our way down the centerline, a 45-50' 800 vertical-foot slash that runs out into the Cirque below where Jeff, Becca, C.B. and Jerry are waiting.

We know, or think we know, one thing: The top layer of cream from last night will probably come out at some point during our descent. Ideally, right off the top.

It's an inter-mountain climate snowpack here. The Wallawas get abundant maritime moisture that tends to resemble lighter drier continental snow according to Connelly. And temperatures are moderated, without extreme diurnal swings, which strengthens the pack. "It's the best of both worlds," he says. "Similar to the Selkirks minus the glaciers."

I drop into an elevator shaft to the left hoping to clean at least the first bit out, and stop where the couloir widens, as Gavin slides in from the right in an effort to do the same. A pro patroller at Big Sky, B.L. does this kind of work all the time. But he doesn't have any bombs today.

B.L. gets releases here and there as he skis below me to a safe spot at an elbow and waits. No big moves yet. My first attempt at a telemark turn reminds me just how late in the day it is, and I decide to eat my free heel pride and parallel to my partner's waiting spot. It's a good choice.

"This is one of the toughest lines I've skied in the backcountry," B.L. says as I catch my breath. I agree. He ski cuts toward another safe spot, which gives him direct access to the rest of the line. It would be nice to get this thing to rip here, and not partway down the no-choke last 600 feet. No such luck. And no more safe spots. So he starts skiing it, and sure enough about 300 feet down, a huge slough knocks him off his feet. He self arrests quickly as the top layer exits into the bowl below. And he's up just as fast following the snow to the moraine at the end of the line.

My descent is much less interesting, though for me, no less exciting. As we wait for Sean and Joel to ski the other route, we agree that lines like that are better skied on morning legs.

At dinner, C.B. and Jerry discuss the day, and how both outfits could work together more. In the Fall C.B. invited all the guides from both companies to a special guides avalanche seminar with hopes of growing a bond that could at the very least lead to the sharing of snow and weather data. It's paid off, as evidenced by this co-op trip. C.B. talks about his dream of a Wallowa Haute Route, that come next year with the addition of his Norway Basin yurt camp, will be one bivouac away from a reality, connecting several of the existing Wing Ridge and Wallowa Huts camps.

It's still a pipe dream and the reality is no more likely than our "first descent" today. But C.B. and Jerry press us to name the couloir just the same.

"Hail Mary," I say without thinking.

There's an immediate pause in the conversation. The King doesn't like the biblical overtones.

"What's God got to do with it?" he asks.

Sean butts in: "He wasn't praying to you up there."

Editor's Note: Wallowa Alpine Huts opens another yurt camp in the Norway Basin for the 07-08 season: According to the King, the terrain and touring options are endless.

Source:

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