

The Grand Scheme: An Alpinist's Return to Skiing

Contributed by Pete Tapley

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My crampons bite into the frozen snow with a repetitive crunch, an almost machine-like with rhythm. I pause to gasp thin air, tired legs quivering as I crane my head back and check my balance before the skis on my back topple me over. My eyes follow the slope above, higher still and The Grand Teton's summit appears deceptively close, but I know better...there are hours of climbing left to go. It's tempting to bail as the snow warms, but I know better—dropping in from the summit will be way too good to pass up.

Besides, I like to suffer. And, at this stage in my life, it's ingrained....

I grew up clinging to icy rope tows in northern Maine, where long, dark winters prevail—cold, humid, gloomy. Fortunately, the spontaneous combustion of glide and carve, speed and gravity lit the melancholy and warmed me with a passion for skiing. The feel of edges setting into ice as an arc begins to form, fighting chatter as arcs intercept fall line. Feeding kinetic energy with gravity fueled my adolescent hunger for engagement.

The summer months became loath to me. I sought higher ground, colder temps, greater terrain, longer seasons. Warren Miller's "Steep and Deep" became my religious canon: near-daily viewings hardwired my brain to the '80s day-glow of hot-pink ropes, the strike of flashy, neon ice axes and gnarly, piercing crampons, as I watched Scott Schmidt and company claw their way to the top of icy peaks in New Zealand. My young mind was blown as they ditched the rope and carved down steep seracs. One midsummer afternoon in front of the tube revealed National Geographic's take on Mount Everest...I had the vision; I knew the way: I would go to the snow, I would ski year-round. I just needed to learn how to get up these mountains—going to college in Vermont had its perks...I teamed up with a fellow student who'd "done some rappelling" and started sketching around the local crags.

Climbing became an obsession. Upward suffering became my "fun." My ski days suffered as well—fewer and farther between—bypassing the winter seasons in favor of frozen waterfalls, I clung tenaciously to spring skiing. (Alpine exposure and cold PBRs waiting in the creek below is an undeniable combo.) Living in Southwest Montana, however, offers a roll of the dice when it comes to spring snow, and often we see nothing but rain and rising temps shortly after the winter snowpack transforms, leaving narrow windows of opportunity for the prime lines. This year, my season consisted of a single run...perhaps a perfect synthesis of glisse alpinism, and brought me full-circle to the Tetons for a one-shot fix on a dream descent.

For more than a decade, I used skiing essentially as an uphill tool to approach remote climbing objectives...only occasionally an end in itself. I spent countless days slowly trudging skins uphill wearing spindly climbing boots that rolled at the ankle any time the terrain would undulate. Miles, hours, days spent devoted to nothing more than hauling heavy loads uphill, trail breaking knee-deep on skinny skis, or dragging aberrant sleds side-hill over wind-hardened slopes attuned me to the art of suffering. Classical conditioning programmed my subconscious belief that time spent in the mountains equals discomfort, and, that with luck, I might consider the effort fun after the fact. The key to having fun became the art of forgetting: forgetting pain, hunger, cold and so forth...the fun was never in the moment like it is with skiing.

The Grand Teton is iconic. Dark rock traced with veins of snow and ice stress the apparent challenges in reaching its summit. There is no easy way up or down. To ski the peak is a revered accomplishment for good reason—not in the least, for the imagination required to even visualize such a line. While no one challenge is particularly great, managing a descent from the summit requires nearly every trick in the book.

Fresh off an unsuccessful climbing trip in the Alaska Range (where I mostly hung around base camp in a funk of daily snow showers), I was hungry for a mission. I needed to stretch my legs and run wild in the hills for a few days. Conditions were right, my partner keen and The Grand only a few hours to the south...with a bit of crowd-sourced beta and only a few minutes of planning over the phone, Chris Ebeling and I were on the road.

Sizing up the remaining elevation, I apply a tolerance for suffering, learned through years of alpine climbing, put my head down and keep the legs churning. Chris and I pause for go-go juice and a quick stash of the ropes before continuing to the summit. Nearing 14k, I'm sucking wind, but feel my smile broaden as the snow warms in perfect time for our summit bid—we're only minutes from slashing corn and I'm buzzing with excitement.

Our time on the summit is short; we're far too jazzed to linger. Crampons off, skis on, heels locked, and we're ready. The snow is brilliant, loose corn with just enough water to keep it friendly. Chris fires away with the Canon; I can't wait any longer—the nervousness of my first turns in a year hanging over massive and fatal exposure mingles with confidence along with the familiarity of glide and control. I drop with a "whoohoooo!" that echoes in the still air. Two turns: fast and solid, and I'm looking down the Ford with cautious suspicion. Chris pulls up beside me, grinning ear-to-ear. I'm off again, cutting the slope hard. Nothing moves and I carry my energy into a hard left turn, picking up speed with edges set. The arc forms, the fall line underfoot, eyes downhill, shoulders square, I lean into the front of my boots and accelerate. It feels good. Skiing is fun, and I'm a kid again, playfully toying with gravity and fate, linking turns that carve deep, secure tracks behind me as I lose elevation quickly. Reality Check: I pop over a runnel in the gut of the couloir and bank hard, left again into chalky windslab that varies to breakable crust. This gets my attention and I grow up fast. "It's still real," I mutter to myself and hockey-stop on the spot.

A moment later, Chris blasts by, looking strong after logging 100-plus days over the past winter. Two turns later, he checks speed and tightens up his turns. The runnel is deep, and the pitch falls away to either side steep, narrow and tricky. I watch closely, apprehensive as the horizon draws nearer and the exposure becomes more and more apparent. It looks like about two grand to the deck. Calculated jump turns bring us closer and closer to the edge. Small runnels grow on either side of the now-massive center groove. Variable frozen snow grabs our edges and tries to hook tips and tails as snowsnakes strike at our heels. Control becomes more and more crucial. The Ford narrows and steepens. I rest with my Whippet firmly anchored and hear the granular slurry run below Chris's turns. It's calm and the sound carries an eerie tone as it slowly fades below. He's out of sight as I drop into the final choke: not too steep, but a spicy mix of punchy, grabby, frozen/not-frozen runnels, ice and dirt separates me from the first rappel. Quads on fire, I nail the jump turns from one stance to the next, let go and carve two quick, tight turns before side slipping the next 10 feet, crossing the main runnel and sticking two more precision hop turns on the edge of nothing before cutting back and stepping into the belay. Intensity, ecstasy....

We rap four times 60 meters of continuous water ice, and wish this section were skiable; we want more...maybe next time. Off rappel at Glencoe Col and the You-Fall, You-Die terrain below suddenly seems like a bunny slope. After the intensity of what we've just skied, it's easy to relax and let 'em run between the massive runnels and debris of the Teepee Glacier.

As the boards run and the shadows start to chatter, I relax and look beyond the immediate for the first time in hours. The Tetons take shape in shadow forming across the valley below, outlining hills blaze with color. The air is warm and it's a beautiful day. With this single run, the freedom from gloom that I felt as a kid bursts out of me. My endorphin-rich blood pumps warm with the combustion of glide, carve, speed and gravity. I'm having fun, and it doesn't even hurt.

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