

# A Life Unfinished: A Story Incomplete

Contributed by Adam Howard

The Life and Death of a Steep Skier. For 30 years French guide Rémy Lécluse lived for fall-and-you-die terrain. [Tweet](#)

In Backcountry's Photo Annual (Volume 18, Issue 89), legendary extreme skier Pierre Tardivel examines the qualities of a meaningful life, reminding us that it's often one's will that sets the great apart from the good. In our tribute to one of these greats, the late French guide and steep skier Rémy Lécluse, Tardivel offers a fitting tribute at the end of the story: "I think the qualities we need in the mountains are the same in the normal life: To be honest, to be courageous, to be able to find the motivation when you fail. You have to find the motivation to go on."

Here at Backcountry we've failed a lot, both in the mountains and in the magazine. In fact, the closing quote you just read was cut off at "courageous," the result of a pre-press mistake. We all had a lot vested in this tribute story, and, well, there were tears. But there were not raised voices. Because, in the office or in the mountains, we've got one another's backs. How much does this mean to us? Well, we almost reprinted the entire magazine to the tune of some \$25K. Had our newsstand copies not already been shipped when we discovered the error—meaning only half the problem would have been solved—we would have done it. In the end, it was Art Director Mike Lorenz who pointed out the irony of what we'd left out. He was right, as he so often is in "the normal life." Just like Tardivel so often is in the mountains. We have to find the motivation to move on.

Editor's Note: We'll be reprinting "The Life and Death of a Steep Skier" in its entirety plus additional material in the January issue. And, to Rémy's family and friends, we sincerely apologize for the mistake. —Howie

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The Life and Death of a Steep Skier

FOR 30 YEARS FRENCH GUIDE RÉMY LÉCLUSE LIVED FOR FALL-AND-YOU-DIE TERRAIN

by Adam Howard  
A MONTH AGO TODAY

It's nearly midnight on October 22 in Chamonix when Glen Plake holds a copy of the day's newspaper in front of his laptop's camera. On my end I can barely make out the headline "Le Miracle." The rest of the cover is typical tabloid: huge font over ants-on-picnic-blanket photo. The ants are climbers and chunks of ice: The blanket a shattered reminder of what was Camp 3 on Nepal's Manaslu, the eighth-highest peak in the world. A month ago today, the avalanche that killed 11, including Plake's partners Gregory Costa and French mountain guide and steep ski pioneer Rémy Lécluse, somehow spared him. Over Skype, Plake's composure is inspiring. Rémy was one of his best friends.

Two hours ago, I was in a business suit, stepping off the red eye from Kathmandu to Geneva. Now, I'm at the top of the Aiguille du Midi (3,842 m), short-roped to an energetic French mountain guide, Rémy Lécluse.

Rémy Lécluse. // Photo: Angela Percival

He's all of 5'7", maybe 140 pounds. Peering blearily from the end of the ice tunnel and down the si tu tombes, tu meus—you fall, you die—North Face, I think, just for a second, that he'd have as much luck arresting me should I fall as he would stopping the tram car that just dropped us off before descending to Chamonix. He's got crampons, at least. I'd shipped my gear ahead, but somehow my sharps didn't make it. Fortunately, there's a rope handrail all the way down to where you can put your skis on. But, I don't know yet what we're going to ski.

I'm still red-eye exhausted but clearheaded enough to pick out the locals from the tourists. They're all connected by rope, but with the locals, smiling, up front: tourists, saucer-eyed, in the rear. "Eh, Howie, you walk right here close to me, OK?" Rémy says, tugging at my harness. We're running late, apparently, and he's hustling back and forth between photographer Jeff Diener, Tait Wardlaw, a former ski racer and Dynastar heavy, journeyman ski industry dude and former PSIA Demo Teamer Tim Petrick (Olin, K2, Dynastar and now, K2, again), and me. I don't really think we need to be roped up, though the consequence is a 2,000-meter fall. I've been guided before and am too tired to object.

A little less tired and I could actually skate in my AT boots down the sugar-coated, glassy track that leads, totally exposed, to the traditional starting point of the runs here: the gentle Vallée Blanche, puckery Glacier Rond and countless others we won't have time to ski on this short visit. Rémy wants to get a handle on our skills for a more ambitious ski tomorrow by doing a common variation of the traditional Vallée Blanche. I'm learning quick that his reputation for, um, detail is deserved.

The first few pitches are pretty standard guide/client stuff: Ski to the left of my tracks. Stop above me. Don't stop below the serac. You've stopped too close to that crevasse. Rémy, do you have any chocolate in there? I came straight from the airport.

Occasionally, we do stop to take some pictures. We're here, after all, to chronicle the revival of Dynastar and their new Cham line, developed in part by Rémy and named for the town below, Chamonix, unarguably the center of the steep culture universe no matter what they say in Jackson, Wyo. The Chams are a departure, for Dynastar, from typical freeride skis. But then, Rémy Lécuse is not a typical skier. Since he skied his first, "first descent" at age 18, Rémy has quietly racked up more than 60 in the Alps, Himalaya, Atlas and Andes. And while he hasn't gotten the media hype of the late '70s pioneers of steep skiing like Sylvain Saudan, Patrick Vallencant, Jean-Marc Boivin or Anselme Baud, and contemporary Pierre Tardevil, he's had more firsts than most of them.

Rémy, Tate, Jeff and the author above the Col de la Flora // Photo: J Rayne

"SHORT BUT COMPLICATED"

Plake first met Rémy 10 years ago at the base of Les Praz, just north of Chamonix at the Flegère tram, which services the other side of the Chamonix valley from the Aiguille du Midi. A mutual friend asked them each to join him to ski the north face of Mount Belvedere. "It's a steep ski," Plake says of the pitch. "Short, but complicated."

"I knew of [Rémy's] name, of course," Plake says, "because you knew people's names in the pre-Internet world, and what was going on [in steep skiing]. Tardivel. And Rémy's name was associated with steep skiing here in Chamonix. That same spring, I think, Rémy was coming to California for a business meeting or something. So, I invited him up to do a ski tour near Bishop, and the relationship kind of went along from there." From that tour, Plake would go on to ski often with Rémy in Chamonix and together they skied a handful of first descents in India and South America.

Rémy was born in 1964 in Paris, but it didn't take him long to head for the hills. At 18, he got his first job as a "mountain leader," which, in France, is an entry-level, certified hiking guide. In 1982, he made his first, "first," a descent of Aiguille Verte (4,121 m), now a trade route steep ski. He was probably on the pair of Dynastar Yeti (85/67/85mm) touring skis that his father bought for him when he was 15. "I kept those skis for 15 years," he says, as we stand waiting for the others to shoot a series of images with a rocky spire backdrop. All the time we're talking he never takes his eyes off them. "These skis were not so good to do the really, really steep stuff. I have skied the Glacier Rond with them and things like that." I shake my head. He makes the Rond sound casual. But, it's where Canadian extreme skier Trevor Petersen died in 1996.

In 1986, Rémy moved from Annecy to Chamonix. By 1987, the same year Plake skied for Greg Stump's film, the groundbreaking "Blizzard of Aahhs" in Chamonix, Rémy had become a certified UIAMG guide.

Fully engaged in steep skiing, he had replaced his Yetis with a used pair of Dynastar Omni Glass Equips, which were, he says, "thick, stiff and light"—traits that drew most of the early great French and Swiss extreme skiers to the brand. Traits, Rémy tells me today, that the brand charged him with helping to bring back to the mainstream skier in the Cham line. Many purists thought those characteristics were lost on the aged, heavy-metal Legend series, a decade old and so in need of a makeover, it put the 50-year-old company on the edge.

"Guy Bara (Dynastar's International Brand Director) brought me down to the factory in Sallanches (30 kilometers from Chamonix) for some brainstorming sessions," Rémy says. "He asked how could we imagine a ski line for both free-rando (traditional touring) and freeride with easier access." And, he adds, how could they do it in good style.

"Some of the alpine skiers here were quite—alpine, I say, because we are living in the Alps, nothing to do with racing—ah, we are quite attached to have a powerful tail. And for me, the problem with tail rocker is they don't have an accelerator," he argues, leaning back and flexing the tails of his Cham 87 High Mountains. "Also, if you've got long rocker in the front, long rocker in the back, the edge you've got on the snow is really short." A problem if you're, say, suddenly faced with blown-off glacier ice on a 50-degree slope. Or, Rémy adds, whacking his ski pole at the breakable crust on which we stand, "Skiing this stuff all the time."

Back at the car, we part ways 'til tomorrow, when we'll do it all again only steeper, we hope. Rémy kindly declines our invitation to dinner. His wife, Carine Oncins, a boot fitter at a local shop has a bad back, he says, and he needs to get home for her. Besides, he's earned his pay for today. I think for a moment about what it must be like to be a guide's wife, or a steep skier's, or both. Always, like her husband, living on an edge.

"Rémy didn't like to spend a lot of time away from home," Carine says in an e-mail exchange with me. "It was difficult but we managed to see each other for dinner, to have one day per week to spend some time together. He was very concerned by the success of our [marriage] and did his best for that."

Carine is Rémy's second wife, and he leaves two children, Elise, 19, and Swan, 15, from his first marriage, and 10-year-old Stella from another relationship. He and Carine met four years ago and would have celebrated their second anniversary on November 27. "He tried to be home every night and he tried to spend a lot of time with me," she adds.

A lot of that time was in the mountains. "We shared the same interest for climbing, mountaineering, ice climbing, skiing," she writes. "And whatever we did, it always ended the same way: a good meal and a good glass of wine." Rémy, she points out, is what the French call "un bon vivant," or what Rémy once described to me over a glass of wine, "a foodie."

Carine writes too that they dreamed, at some point, of cultivating truffles in the south of France. Perhaps, I think, closer to the surf to which Rémy would often make one-day trips. One of his favorite things about Chamonix, he told me, was that it was easy to escape.

Rémy guiding Seb Mayer and Isabelle Santoire below the Aiguille du Midi. // Photo: Angela Percival

## LEADING WITH THE UPHILL SKI

Our objective today is not a first descent, but as we depart the Poma lift beneath the Floria ridge near where Plake and Rémy first skied together, it's clear that we'll be skiing in about eight inches of fresh on the north-facing couloir of Col de la Floria. What's unclear is the visibility. A 20-minute skin leads to a 45-minute booter to the Col where we get the Rémy master's class for skiing. "Eh, Howie. You plant both poles when you turn, eh?" he suggests as we knock down the 45-degree pitch in zero visibility. (Even in total whiteout, Rémy knows every safe spot.)

I realize I've got to stop dropping my inside hand—but doing a double pole plant? Here? Let's have this lesson on the piste, Rémy, I think to myself. Tait and Tim make it look easy. And then there's the master, skis on the snow, a double whooshing pole plant that doesn't stop motion between turns, but perpetuates it. He leads with the uphill ski, flicks his wrists and goes. And it's utterly effective, I start to think as I come to a gloppy stop, my rear end facing the fall line and my fist grasping for snow.

Rémy's style is a throwback to the influential teacher, filmmaker and steep skier Anselme Baud. According to steep ski legend Pierre Tardivel—who, at 49, claims nearly 100 first descents in the Alps and is much better known by the mainstream media than Rémy—our own professor is an early adopter of Baud's style. Like Plato and Socrates of the steeps.

"Rémy has a very special technique, the same as Anselme Baud," Tardivel says via Skype last week from his home in Annecy. He and Rémy skied a first descent, Way of the Tubular, on Mont Aiguille in the Vercors massif near Grenoble in 1992. "In the steep slopes he always puts his two poles together. I can't ski like that. I try to ski, like in slalom, for example. One pole only. Sometimes we had to speak of this technique and, ah, we didn't have the same point of view. He said it was important to ski like that for security and I said the contrary."

And though Plake has his own steep-skiing style, he admires Rémy's interpretation of the Baud turn. "Everybody is confused about steep skiing," Plake, himself a student of technique, says today. "Baud spoke a lot about leading with the uphill ski and arriving to a soft edge. It was quite a contradiction to what Vallençant, who was quite bottom-footed, said." Like the more race-inspired Tardivel, I think.

And, perhaps, like my own stick-chasing-inspired technique, which I'm trying to find the juice to execute just now, above a dogleg in the couloir. "Double pole plant, Howie," I think to myself (in my best French accent), and I actually do it, like I'd initiate a tele turn on skinny skis. Down and down, we work from safe zone to safe zone. Then, all at once, we let it run across the glacial apron to the moraine-strewn valley floor. There's daylight here, and laughter, and we take in Nutella/brochette/grape jelly/brie sandwiches on a foot-long croissant. Rémy hops from one of us to the other, offering chocolate, commendations and contagious energy, flashing his huge, trademark smiling eyes as he chews. This is the other side of Rémy. I'm getting to know the man that lives somewhere between his stoics in the steeps and this smile. And, I think, I like him very much.

Rémy in his element: Steep skiing in Chamonix. // Photo: Courtesy of Arc'teryx

## TALE OF THE TAPE

At the Hotel du Buet bar, after a long bobsled run from the higher terrain, Rémy sits down with me for an interview. We'll get on a bus back to Chamonix shortly, but now there's just enough time for a classic, local Savoyard plate of meat and cheese and a half pint of Kronenbourg 1664. OK, a pint.

Considering how much time Rémy spends with clients, I'm struck by his passion for solo travel. But, I guess, if you're always guiding—always on the clock, always doing the talk—being by one's self is its own reward. Several years ago, Rémy went alone to Peru where he clicked off three first descents on 6,000-meter peaks. "When you're steep skiing, you're skiing solo, eh? When you're going down, you're going down solo, so I think you can accept to be solo going up," he laughs. "I'm not expecting any help from anybody when I'm steep skiing." Like Vallençant said, "Si tu tombes, tu meurs." In "you-fall-you-die" terrain, partners can't help you anyway.

I recount to Rémy my recent trip to Sri Lanka and Nepal with the U.S. State Department knowing that Rémy has been to South Asia many times (most recently with Carine and Gregory Costa and his father, Gerard). He's conversant in everything from Sri Lankan surfing to civil war, ecology to economics, politics and sociology (which, if you know Plake, explains their affinity for one another). He likens the Third World to the First in a striking way. "Most of the westerners are going to the tourist places: Khumbu, Annapurna," he argues, through a mouthful of brochette. "So, they never discover the reality of life in Nepal. The reality is that in some valleys, the people want to go down to Kathmandu to get a job just to feed themselves." As a result of Sir Edmund Hillary's schools in certain regions, Rémy argues, there are both great disparities from valley to valley and a great deal of corruption, which, in part, led to the Maoist uprising and resulting civil war. The two sides began reconciling in 2006.

"It's like in France," he continues. "[In feudal times] the guy in charge of the King's money, they give a part to the King and a part to themselves. As long as their part of the money wasn't too big, it was fine. In Nepal, it's still like this."

But despite (or perhaps because) Nepal has 200 years of catching up to do, Rémy then tells me about what will be his fifth trip there in late August to climb and ski Manaslu with Plake and, perhaps, a few other clients. "I think, in the Himalayas, I much prefer to climb some summits without oxygen. For me, oxygen is cheating. We know that for the last 40 years, you can climb the highest mountains in the world without oxygen. But it's just only a few persons who are able to do this. So, you may be one of them or you may not be, and if you're not, you go do something else." Rémy breaks into laughter. "You ski somewhere else. For me, it's pretty simple."

Rémy descends near Flégère, Chamonix. // Photo Angela Percival

SEPTEMBER 23, 12:46 P.M.

"You heard about Rémy?" the text reads from Petrick. "Plake okay but beat up. 14 confirmed dead on Manaslu. Awful." It's Sunday afternoon and I'm watching my five-year-old play soccer. I'd heard about the slide on NPR this morning, but they hadn't mentioned the specific mountain, only "giant avalanche," "Nepal" and "eighth highest" and I turned it off. The kids were in the car and I didn't want to explain. You don't get news like this and not know somebody. And not know they have a wife or maybe some kids back home. Not in this business.

"My guess is that Rémy is gone," Petrick says in our text chain the next day. And when I get word that the Nepalese called off the initial search that afternoon I know he's right. (The official death toll would turn out to be 11, not 14.) But, it doesn't seem right. This is not the way a steep skier should go.

Beyond guiding, and steep skiing, Rémy was the French version of a motivational speaker. Tardivel, himself with strong Dynastar ties, watched him speak to the line workers in Sallanches on several occasions.

"Rémy, he enjoyed speaking to [organizations]," Tardivel says, struggling to find the proper English. "You know, when you speak in front of 100 people to explain what we are doing [steep skiing], people appreciate it because they just find a link between [their lives] and what the sportif men do. Because, it's in the normal life you also need these qualities [that Rémy had]. Courage...ah...I think the qualities we need in the mountains are the same in the normal life: To be honest, to be courageous, to be able to find the motivation when you fail. You have to find the motivation to go on."

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