

Bloody Couloir, Sitting Down

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By Taylor VanRoekel. As told by Jeremy McGhee

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Editor's Note: For the full scoop on Jeremy's story, check out his profile in last November's Issue.

It all started with a couple of my best friends in Mammoth. Actually, a couple that I got together. They climbed and skied [Bloody Couloir] a few times, and they would come back with these pictures and stories of their adventures. I wanted to go with them. I wanted to do it. It's a classic ski descent, and it's pretty well known, especially on the West Coast. It sort of towers above everything. The run is on Bloody Mountain. The couloir itself is special because it holds snow almost year round. So people do it in the summer, after the mountain closes and the backcountry is still good. It's kinda a right of passage. And it's huge. It towers above everything else.

Gathering the crew to do Bloody Couloir was easy. This was a project that people just jumped on. Life is a funny thing, and it's interesting how things happen. But the people that ended up jumping on it ended up being perfect for the job. Perfect. There couldn't have been better people involved. A couple of the best climbers in the Mammoth area, that just happened to be good snowboarders, too, jumped on it. Charlie Barrett and Matt Waugh. Really, really good guys.

We trained on Mammoth Mountain. They were so helpful, and the ski patrol allowed us free reign of all their equipment—ropes, carabiners, pickets, mini-traxion—I mean, we're talking thousands of dollars worth of gear that they just let us use all the time and train with.

So we trained on the mountain. We found a secret spot that we could go up to and train there every day and work through the system. And we called experts. We called guys that were experts in adaptive climbing.

When it came time to climb up the couloir, we fixed a jumar to a rope with some duct tape so that it was kinda like a pull-up bar. And the rope would run through the carabiner on the sled and then run through a couple other carabiners that would run it perfectly down the side of sled into a mini-traxion. The bottom of the rope would have to be weighted so that the mini-traxion would work. Because both my hands were occupied, I wasn't able to feed the rope through the mini-traxion. I had to focus on pull-ups. I wanted to only do pull-ups. So we had to have one of the guys on the bottom of the rope weighting it. And because he was next to me, he became my Sherpa. Because it was so trying for me, I needed a lot from him. His name is Mark Herman.

We all had codenames. So Mark, his codename was “Dutch-Baby.” Charlie’s was “Carlos Spicy Weiner.” Matt was “Matty-Fresh.” And I was “Girthy McGhee” from all the pull-ups I was doing all day, everyday. So, there were people listening in on our radio conversations, watching with binoculars. They were like, “What? Who’s girthy?” It was pretty funny.

There were two teams—there was us in the couloir, and a team that hiked up the ridge with all of the equipment, including my sit-ski. And that’s a crazy thing. We had to figure out how to get the sit-ski to the top. But one day, a handful of us met at a thrift store in Mammoth. And we’re checking out all these old-school external frame packs for the guy who was carrying the sit-ski. So we set out some choices for Gabe Taylor—a professional snowboarder. His nickname ended up being “The Mule.” He comes in and goes, “No, no, no,” to each of these packs. And finally he sees this baby carrier. So we go outside the thrift store, he throws my sit ski in the baby carrier, and it automatically works. Without any modifications. He said it basically felt like a big, full backpack. I think it was 50 bucks, and I talked them down to 40. And that’s how he carried it up the ridge. What did he go through? Hiking this crazy peak with this big old metal contraption on his back? He’s “The Mule.” He had stashed one of his boards up at the top so that he didn’t have to carry it with the sit ski.

I just did pull ups, and we had a belay on for safety—and for a little bit of assistance up difficult sections. Actual climbing time was six-and-a-half hours, which I’m stoked on because that’s how long it takes a normal person to hike up. I was stoked on that. That’s not counting break time and stops. Basically it took all day. And we had about 20 to 30 minutes up top to take photos, sign the register, eat something. We had to get going, because time was of the essence.

That moment—of dropping in—was the fixation of all my thoughts. I didn’t think I was ready to ski something like that. I knew it was steep. I knew it was gnarly. I knew it was a no-fall zone with rocks below. So, the weeks leading up to it, this was a thing that I’d think about and get nervous and have nightmares, and I’d get nauseous. Everyone talks about how hard the climbing was, and it was. It was so gnarly. My body was shutting down, literally. But I was fixated on skiing it. That was emotionally the hardest part for me. Because I was so scared. We agreed to have me ski it on belay. So it was really just one turn at a time.

We came to the decision that Charlie would be at the top of the anchor point and let out enough slack for me to do one turn at a time. Which is hard, too, because then you’re doing that first turn every turn. So it’s that scary initiation every time. That initiation of turns was particularly difficult in my sit ski, because mine has sides on the bucket, so I couldn’t angulate enough. I had never skied anything that steep before. So I didn’t know that I couldn’t angulate as much as I needed to. I’d go to initiate that turn and lean into it, and I would go almost over into the hill headfirst. Almost every single turn. Every turn was so scary and would take a long time, because I’d have to get the ski to inch around while I leaned out of my bucket. If I had cut the sides off my bucket, it would have been much easier. That would have changed everything, and I would have been able to angulate enough.

I actually got pretty frustrated with myself up there. I had to stop and remind myself, “Hey man, you’re skiing Bloody Couloir right now. Don’t get frustrated at yourself. Even though it’s a struggle, just enjoy yourself.” It did get to a point where we took the ropes off, and I was able to rip it. We got past the no-fall zone. It was still really steep—steeper than anything I had skied before, with huge rock walls on either side. I was able to link up turns and ski it, and it felt great.

Moving forward, there are plenty of peaks I wanna ski. I don't necessarily have to do it under my own power. I'm totally OK with taking a snowmobile, or having my friends tow me. I want to do Bloody again. I want to do it with better conditions. We did it late in the year, during a bad snow year. Now that we've done it once, I know that we can do it better. I want another chance at skiing it. I wanna be able to go up there and ski it better. My friends do it every year, so why can't I do it every year?

I try to live my life as if I'm not in a chair. I try and do everything as if I'm not in the chair. If I weren't in a chair, I'd be backcountry skiing. That's who I am. I wanna ski in the backcountry all over the place.

For more on Jeremy McGhee and the Drop In Project, visit dropinproject.com.