

A Serious Game, A Serious Love

Contributed by Todd Krankkala

May 12, 1990: Parking on the summit of Galena Pass in southern Idaho, I boot-kick up the ridge in my downhill boots. After 26 years of resort skiing and a little dabbling in the sidecountry, today is my first day in the backcountry. At the summit, I step into my skis and pause to enjoy the view, amazed by the solitude. I push off into this bluebird day, and as my edges bite into corn, I rejoice in being alone in the mountains—no tracks, no lifts, no crowds. I've found the essence of skiing. My soul sings. I'm bootpacking again the next day.

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Sunset Skinning in Idaho's Smoky Mountains. [Photo] Tyler Cohen

December 24, 1992: Makita—a Malamute/Lab—is my faithful backcountry partner. We are learning this game together as we have no other teacher or partner to rely on. It's clear and cold at 6 a.m. as we race the sun to the summit...and we win! The mountains shimmer pink while the snow around us glows a rich yellow with the rising sun. Inspired, I sing "Silent Night." Together, we drop in, the surface hoar shimmering and singing around us.

May 15, 1993: Near the end of the season in Idaho's Smoky Mountains, two friends and I ski a shaded line near a cliff band. I swerve into the sun, seeking corn. Instead, I punch through the sun-warmed crust and find myself twisting, falling, my binding slow to release. I feel a snap and an immediate sickness churns my stomach. Lying in the snow, I can feel dread well in my throat. I gingerly stand but it hurts to put weight on the foot; twisting it is even worse. I slide on my butt down the mountain, wincing every time my foot hits snow. Reaching the bottom, I struggle along on one ski, falling often. When we finally make it to the truck, I take off my boot. The ankle doubles in size. I tell myself it's just a bad sprain. An hour later, I hobble into the house. My wife raises her eyebrows at me and asks, "What have you done now?" A few days later, I find out the ankle is broken.

April 15, 1995: Last night it snowed 16 inches of late-season powder, but today is another bluebird day. Out with two friends, I drop in first. After a handful of turns, the slope starts moving, breaking apart, coming alive. I veer right hoping to escape the slide path. Realizing I can't out-ski it, I search for another escape. A lodgepole approaches and I grasp for it, but I can't hold on. Don't fall, I think, still on my skis. A smaller pine appears in my path. I hug it with both hands. The force of the snow pins me to the tree, and snow begins to swallow me. I grunt as the breath is forced from my lungs, and I hope the tree doesn't snap. Below the snow, my legs stretch painfully. Finally, the slide passes over and around me continuing downward, snapping trees. I look around, shocked that I am only buried to my waist. I shrug my pack off, grab my shovel and start digging.

Humbled and ashamed, I never tell my wife.

February 25, 2012: Skinning up through the trees, we stop to check the snowpack. The top 16 inches shear easily, and the early-season layer of facets is still there, down much deeper. At the top, we dig another pit and it's just as bad. "What do you think?" we ask each other. "Let's just ski the low-angle terrain," we decide. And that's OK. I've learned to pick my time and place. I know I'm lucky to be here, thankful I've found this sport. I look around, see the last rays of sunlight reflecting in each snowflake, see the pure line of our skintrack, hear the banter of close friends, and anticipate the coming dance down this mountain. Yes, this is what truly keeps me alive. All of it. And I intend to keep it that way. We strip off our skins and, one by one as the daylight begins to fade, we make our way down through the glade, arcing graceful turns toward the truck, toward families waiting at home, and, as always, toward the next backcountry trip.

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