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THE FIRST FREESKIER Scot Schmidt

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ANGEL COLLINSON Past the Wires

THE
FIRST
FREESKIERS

SCOT SCHMIDT AND THE ESSENCE OF SKIING

The legend himself in March of 1992, clad in classic *Steep & Deep* attire, stops to smile for the camera before dropping in at Mike Wiegele Heli-Skiing in Blue River, BC. Photo: Larry Prosor



“Scot Schmidt has such a distinctive style and is an incredible skier to photograph. I always come back with great shots when I work with him—the really cool thing about this 1997 shoot was that Craig Kelly was there as well. We had arranged for a day at Island Lake, and when we got there and found out Scot and Craig would be riding with us, we were more than stoked to have the chance to ski and shoot with two legends of their sports. It was an incredible day that I will never forget.” Location: Island Lake Lodge, BC. Photo: Scott Markewitz



Words: Mike Berard

I am going to race Scot Schmidt. Of course, he doesn't know this yet. The two of us are standing on a ridge in Fernie, BC's Lizard Range, pulled deep inside our hoods and struggling to hear our guide explain a particular fall line over the gusting winds. We are at Island Lake Lodge, a privately owned, 7,000-acre catskiing operation as famous for its massive snowfall as for the media circus that blew it up in the '90s. It was here Greg Stump's iconic 1993 film *P-Tex, Lies and Duct Tape* first brought Schmidt and Craig Kelly, exposing the world to the riches of the Kootenays. The film's cover shot features Schmidt flying through the air in trademark style, hands forward, in a tight crouch, slightly cocked to the side. The tree behind him has since become unimaginatively known as "Scot Schmidt Tree" and is often requested by clients. Over the course of my four days at Island Lake, a dense, wet storm keeps us confined to gladed terrain. It is here that we will dig deep into the plentiful snow for which Fernie is known. And it is here that I will attempt to beat the first professional freeskiier ever down the same kind of steep-and-deep terrain he's been making famous for more than three decades.



"Scot and crew had just descended from the Aiguille du Midi, after a crazy cable-car ride up that blew me away. Glen and I couldn't even see the mountains when we arrived in Chamonix, France, the night before, but we got up the next day, went to the top and skied. This shot was filmed from below, but I really thought that a side shot for the still would be better. It was." Schmidt styles it and dials it on 200 cm+ while filming for Greg Stump's 1988 *Blizzard of Aahhh's*. Photo: Rod Walker

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BORN JULY 21ST, 1961 in Helena, MT, Schmidt got his start skiing at four years old, on the slopes of Belmont Ski Hill, a tiny ski area now known as Great Divide. At the time, the community hill only had rope tows and Poma lifts, but Schmidt remembers the pull of ski racing as being a powerful attractant. “I liked the speed and the dynamics of it,” he says on the phone from his Santa Cruz, CA home, where he has lived during the off season since 1983. Soon Schmidt gravitated to an organized racing program at nearby Bridger Bowl and started to do well. By his early teens, he was establishing himself with a speed and style smoother than most. “I was influenced by Gustav [Thöni], Piero Gros and, of course, Ingemar Stenmark,” Schmidt says. “I loved Ingemar’s style. He had a great combination of hip and knee angulation. I basically learned to ski by studying the books that analyzed their techniques.”

That dedication to finesse paid off when Schmidt started to podium. In 1979, he won the junior downhill and giant slalom categories at the Northern Division Championships. Impressed by his talent, Schmidt’s coach pulled him aside and told him to leave Montana in order to get the kind of support he needed to flourish in the highly competitive FIS circuit. Schmidt took his advice, and set his sights on two places that could help him in his next step: Copper Mountain, CO and Squaw Valley, CA. He ended up choosing the latter, a place that would become synonymous with his name. “If I hadn’t landed in Squaw, my life would have been drastically different,” Schmidt says. But his attempts to race in the FIS system would

be short lived. “I struggled with the cost of racing. I didn’t have the financial support so I worked in a ski shop, making ends meet and training when I could. I had the points and qualified for all the FIS races and the US Ski Team camps, but I just didn’t have the dollars.” The famously expensive race circuit lost a talented skier, but their loss may have been freeskiing’s biggest gain.

SCHMIDIOTS AT SQUAW VALLEY is one of the most famous lines in freeskiing. In 1983, Schmidt dropped off the Palisades onto a five-foot shelf of granite, landed and immediately hit another 20-foot air that launched him into a two-foot-wide chute. This 67-degree, 100-foot line takes about 2-3 seconds to ski, but its inclusion in Warren Miller’s *Ski Time* has made a lasting impression on the ski universe. The line catapulted Schmidt out of racing and into freeskiing, starring in films by the likes of Miller and Greg Stump. “That summer, Warren took me to New Zealand,” Schmidt says. “And then the following winter we went to Europe: Austria, Germany, Italy. When the film crew went home, I told them ‘I’m staying.’ They left me at the train station, and I eventually ended up in Verbier.”

Photographer Mark Shapiro heard Schmidt was in town and adopted him into the infamous Team Clambin. “He recruited me right away,” Schmidt recalls. “I was instantly on the team, freeskiing with my mentor John Falkiner and also doing brochure and catalogue work with Shapiro for \$200 to \$300 a day.” That winter

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would be a big step up for Schmidt, cementing his role as the first professional freeskiier in the industry, making a living entirely from noncompetitive skiing.

The '80s were a whirlwind of travel and powder for Schmidt, who found himself working harder by the year. His powerful, bold skiing was in demand with every filmmaker in the business, his smooth style cherished by still photographers. But after six years of skiing for the cameras with the sport's best image-makers, he was barely staying afloat financially. “I struggled and fought for years for standardized wages,” he says. “I even tried to start a union at one point. I was frustrated with our talents and our skills being taken advantage of.”

Schmidt believed it was important the professionalism and athleticism of skiing be rewarded. “In the early '80s, skiers could rarely make good money for their talents and courage,” Schmidt says. “Back then, most skiers got compensated with a free trip, jackets and skis.” When Schmidt met an agent who managed professional surfers, he told him about this dilemma. Given Schmidt's level of exposure and talent, the agent was shocked by the disparity between what a pro surfer was making and what a pro skier wasn't. “I tried to promote myself to the industry for years, but none of the manufacturers took me seriously until I had representation,” Schmidt says.

From that point forward, he started demanding—and earning—a fair wage, and set an example for just what it meant to be a profes-

sional freeskiier. “The game has changed,” he says. “What had been a field of few has grown tremendously. There is a lot of competition to make it as a professional skier. I have a lot of respect for those who have made it.”

IN 1991, ALASKA WAS AN UNTAPPED WILDERNESS populated with the largest, burliest mountains in America. The World Extreme Skiing Championships, spearheaded by organizer Mike Cozad, would bring a reluctant Scot Schmidt to the state. “Mike kept hammering us to come up to the Chugach Mountains and help establish this new competition,” Schmidt says. “I didn't know what to expect in AK, but when I got up there I was like, ‘Holy shit, look at this place. There's a helicopter, and there's no rules, and you can go anywhere you want.’ I couldn't wait to get back and start organizing what would be the first ski-film crew to shoot in AK.”

Schmidt returned a week later with two crews: legendary ski cinematographer Tom Day shooting for Schmidt's career-long sponsor The North Face, and director Greg Stump's group of filmmakers. Both are credited with being the first ski filmmakers in what has now become the genre's Mecca. The footage would appear in Stump's *Groove: Requiem in the Key of Ski* and would kick off two decades of annual Alaskan ski segments. Schmidt remembers the time fondly, “We were just flying around picking off the big ones—all first descents, of course. We even skied the Tusk that trip. It was terrifying.”

Schmidt plants and pops off a natural wind drift while shooting for *Blizzard of Aahh's*. Schmidt and Glen Plake hit the lip multiple times, with great success—as photographer Rod Walker put it, “It was like shooting fish in a barrel.” Location: Les Grandes Montets, Chamonix, France. Photo: Rod Walker



"I first met Scot on a Warren Miller shoot in New Zealand—must have been 1984 or '85. We got on immediately and I invited him to join us the following winter in Verbier, Switzerland. He did, staying at John Falkiner's Clambin headquarters. This was taken off the back of the Mont Fort, where Scot showed us the right kind technique for jumping big air." Photo: Mark Shapiro



A long day on the mountain: "It was late during our three weeks in Chamonix for *Blizzard of Aahhh's*, and Murray Ball was trying to hurry us along—we were among the last getting down, but I think Glen insisted that we do a group shot. After this was a long, crazy run into town on a road cutting through farms and past houses, in the dark, sparks flying off our edges—it was late spring and there were gaps in the snow coverage." From left to right: Guide Murray Ball, unknown skier, Scot Schmidt, Mike Hatstrup and Glen Plake. Photo: Bruce Benedict



“MY ROLE IS SIMILAR TO WHAT A GOLF PRO DOES. BUT IT’S NOT INSTRUCTIONAL. I TAKE PEOPLE OUT AND SHOW THEM HOW TO PLAY THE COURSE. WE HUNT POWDER.”—SCOT SCHMIDT

The fact that Schmidt and crew bagged one of skiing’s most iconic and challenging descents on the first-ever film trip to the state is hard to believe, but it stands as just another testament to his influence on the sport.

Scott Gaffney, director at Matchstick Productions and one of the cinematographers who traveled with Schmidt to Alaska that season, speaks to the impact Schmidt has made. “Scot arrived at a time when freeskiers needed a demigod,” Gaffney says. “We all wanted to ski like him, imitating his extreme cross and angulated turns. Several generations later, despite radical progression, everything we see in dynamic big mountain skiing today can probably be traced back to him. He is the root of it all.”

Back at Island Lake Lodge, Schmidt is relaxing in the Bear Lodge. He has been coming here since the early ’90s, when a film trip to Siberia was shut down due to miserable conditions, forcing Stump to find a new locale to shoot in short order. “It was late March and we were trying to find a place with good snow,” he says, and Craig [Kelly] recommended Island Lake. We’re all thinking, ‘What’s Island Lake?’ A week later, we were there.” The crew was not disappointed. Classic Kootenay conditions greeted them, and they were soon buried in the deep and light snow for which the region had yet to become famous. Schmidt was blown away by Island Lake’s potential and would soon find an opportunity to become a partner in the burgeoning operation. “The owner Dan Macdonald pulled us aside and told us they were trying to buy the land,” Schmidt says. “He wanted to bring me and Craig in on the deal.” Oil and gas giant Shell Canada owned the small slice of the huge Canadian Rockies terrain, and it only took one

visit to convince Schmidt to buy in. “I told him to give me a call if that happens. This place is freaking unbelievable.”

A couple years later, Macdonald called and said they had 30 days to raise \$3 million to purchase the Island Lake parcel. Schmidt, Kelly, professional snowboarder Jake Blattner and iconic Fernie photographer Mark Gallup all jumped on board with a group of outside investors. “The original plan was to get the place on the map through the media,” Schmidt says. “Apparently, we did too good of a job. The place soon got booked up solid and there was no need for us to promote it any further.” The resulting media attention reinvented Island Lake Lodge as one of the premiere spots to put down tracks in North America.

In 2012, after 25 years of skiing for the camera, Schmidt began searching for a new path. “I wanted to get back into the essence of skiing. I mean, when you’re working with a film crew, you’re doing two or three runs a day. Now I’m doing 20.” Since then, he’s started running both private and corporate ski tours, giving anyone who can keep the pace a chance to ski alongside Scot Schmidt. The pursuit of powder eventually led to a position as the ambassador for the Yellowstone Club, an ultra-exclusive Montana ski club sitting opposite the twin ski resorts of Big Sky and Moonlight Basin. “My role is similar to what a golf pro does. But it’s not instructional,” he says. “I take people out and show them how to play the course. We hunt powder.”

It’s been a new experience for Schmidt, who—between all the private trips and the Yellowstone Club’s immaculate runs—doesn’t feel his skiing had changed much over the years. “I feel like I’m

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skiing better than ever now. I like steep, clean lines which keeps me searching for smooth, fresh terrain.”

It seems the more things change, the more they stay the same.

WE STAND ABOVE the final run of the day at Island Lake Lodge. The line below is named Beer Run, a wide-open, straight shot to the lodge, where guests can soak up ale and après snacks after a big day of blower powder. I wait at the back, knowing my place as a mere writer in a group of legends. What Schmidt doesn’t know is that I’m also waiting to follow him down the alluring fall line. Over the past four days, I’ve watched in awe as he laced together large arcs across virgin snow. From easy powder runs to steep-and-deep chutes, the terrain we’ve skied has not revealed a chink in Schmidt’s armor. He is as smooth and fast as the films show him to be, and I know keeping up with him will be a challenge. Still, I have been given the chance a whole generation of skiers before me would die for, and I’m going to relish it. I make sure my shit is together, and then I wait. When the guide gives us the go-ahead, members of the group drop in one by one. At one point Schmidt looks back at me, possibly curious why I’m holding back, or maybe

just annoyed at the close quarters I’ve created to ensure I get a fair start. Just as I begin to think he’ll ask me what the hell I’m doing, he pushes off. I follow.

He straightlines to get speed before leaning into a big left turn, that famous hip dropped low to the snow, legs angulated perfectly, half racer, half flowing water. I attempt the same, getting low and inhaling a little frozen vapor released in the crux of his arc. He’s into his second turn and I am doing just fine. Three, four, five turns and I’m right there with him, using the trees as gates and the spaces between them as opportunities to rejoice in the impossibility of what is happening. *I am racing Scot Schmidt.* This is a man who pioneered a new way to ski, not only as a career but also as a style in itself: free, fluid, burly. I am grateful. I am in disbelief. I am glorious. It’s at this point Schmidt looks back over his shoulder and sees me on his tail. He faces forward, opens up his turn and drops me in an instant. I straighten out my own turns, attempting to capture the moment I’d just had, but it is too late. He’s gone. A flash of powder and grace I won’t see until the lodge.

Suddenly, I am back with the rest of the world, faithfully following Schmidt toward whatever he decides is next. ¶



Schmidt catching air on the backside of Mt. Baldy, CA in March of 1993. "We happened to time out a great day of skiing in the backcountry—even though we almost died on the way up in a helicopter flown by a pilot who had never landed on snow. We almost died again when one of the ski area's managers picked us up in his Suburban on a sketchy dirt road filled with hazards that included the driver and the largest assortment of guns and ammo I will ever see in my lifetime—I hope." Photo: Larry Prosor