

THE SKI GODS

Ripping at the Olympics.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

A guy I know who competed in the Summer Games in 1988, 1992, and 1996 brought back tales not so much of athletic triumph or disappointment (he won a couple of medals, neither of them gold) as of hedonic delight. For the athletes, the Olympics, as he described them, were a festival of internationalism and frenzied liaising—"It's a Small World" meets Plato's Retreat. The impression I got was of an Athletes Village teeming with specimens of youth and fitness, avid men and women of many shapes, sizes, talents, colors, backgrounds, and beliefs, who'd spent their ripest years engaged in fierce, self-denying pursuit of peak physical performance, and who now, mostly after they'd competed, and whether they'd won a medal or not, could throw off their regimens, inhibitions, and sweats, and pair off, with Olympic vigor and agility, in the flimsy quarters provided for them by the host committee. It changed the way I watched the Games. And it made me wish I'd worked a little harder in practice.

I've always been sentimental about the Olympics, especially the Winter Games. Lake Placid, 1980, experienced via Trinitron, forged a lifelong devotion. The U.S. hockey team's miraculous victory over the Soviets was, for a ten-year-old hockey nut, a generational equivalent of the moon landing. Across the street from the rink, Eric Heiden's sweep of the speed-skating golds—accomplished on an outdoor track, in snow flurries, in a golden suit—was a concentrated dose of excellence that came to seem purer in spirit than, say, Lance Armstrong's fraught dominance of the Tour de France. Heiden was a modest Wisconsinite bound for medical school: a true amateur, who in that gold suit became a god.

It happened that my father had on his bedroom bureau a black-and-white photograph of *his* father on that same skating oval, in street shoes, carrying the flag of the Austrian team at the opening cer-

emonies of the 1932 Lake Placid Games. Behind him are the seven other members of the Austrian team, including a figure skater in a fur coat. The idea that Harald Paumgarten, my grandfather, a skier from the Styrian city of Graz, had competed at Lake Placid quickened my interest, especially in the skiing—which, to



me, meant the Alpine racing. Early in the 1980 Games, an Austrian won the downhill; I was encouraged to celebrate. Some families enshrined DiMaggio and Mantle, Bob Cousy or Joe Louis. Ours cited Schneider, Sailer, Schranz, and Klammer. In the slalom and the giant slalom, this was the era of Ingemar Stenmark, the Björn Borg of the hill, and the Mahre twins, Phil and Steve, from Yakima, Washington—too laconic to be likened here to McEnroe and Connors. The Mahres, skittering down courses set with poles made of bamboo, wore stripy padded sweaters. They didn't wear hats,



Left: Norway's Aksel Lund Svindal in the giant



INSET: FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP/GETTY; TOPICAL PRESS/GETTY

slalom at the Vancouver Olympics, where he won a gold medal. Above: A pioneer Alpine skier in Switzerland eighty-five years earlier.

to say nothing of helmets. (Stenmark did wear a hat; it had a tassel.) Their runs, and their hair, were a little wild.

By the time the Games were over, I'd come to regard Olympic skiing as the pinnacle of sport, and ski racers, especially the downhillers, as samurai—an order practicing an ancient and elemental art to which I had some vague, vestigial calling. Maybe this was the way young Huns felt about horsemanship. To my ears, a roll call of champions from the ensuing decades (Pirmin Zurbriggen, Marc Girardelli, Alberto Tomba, Hermann Maier, Bode Miller) would project the kind of majesty and import that a list of Confederate generals might for a Civil War buff.

Ski racing acquired an added allure by being so seldom televised, especially after the demise of ABC's "Wide World of Sports." In recent years, catching a broadcast of the most renowned and difficult downhill—the Hahnenkamm, in Kitzbühel, Austria, and the Lauberhorn, in Wengen, Switzerland—has been a little like glimpsing a wolf in the wild. The networks have ignored ski racing for the most part, choosing instead to show celebrity races at Lake Tahoe or what have come to be called extreme sports. In the mountainous parts of Europe, ski racing—the World Cup—is an obsession, like football in Texas, but its American fans are left to nurse a grievance over the indifference of their compatriots. Here the sport inspires little interest, until an Olympiad comes around and the marketing machine revs up. If the pre-Olympic favorites, like Lindsey Vonn, fail to win as many medals as the hype apparatus expects them to, the broadcasters, almost spitefully, consign the sport to deeper obscurity.

A host of newer disciplines have nudged ski racing aside, in the media firmament and the popular imagination, and therefore in the calculus of what the Olympics might become on TV. Half-pipe, big air, and skiercross, on display most prominently every year at the Win-

ter X Games, are threatening to do to Alpine racing what pro football and basketball did to boxing and horse racing, on a grander scale.

Skiing may be as well chronicled a leisure pastime as any, but it has not attracted much scrutiny from academics. Two and a half years ago, E. John B. Allen, a professor emeritus at Plymouth



The author's grandfather, who competed in the 1932 Games.

State University, in New Hampshire, published "The Culture and Sport of Skiing from Antiquity to World War II," an idiosyncratic and extensively footnoted survey that contends with some of the darker currents in the sport's emergence, in the years before and after the First World War. His take is a far cry from, say, that of the filmmaker Warren Miller, whose ski movies have long painted the sport as a comic parade of amazing feats, dream locations, and lovable goofos.

Allen, in his introduction, summons the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's idea of "invented tradition," in which élites help create mythologies and rituals that bring people together under a com-

mon set of beliefs and, more to the point, under the authority of those élites. Skiing, as both organized sport and commercial recreation, emerged out of the nationalist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under the stewardship of some of the most avid tradition inventors. In a way, skiing's development mimics that of the Olympics, and also Europe's path to war; they are like three tracks side by side in the snow.

Allen applies Hobsbawm to the example of Norway—skiing's putative birthplace. Archeological finds in the peat bogs of Scandinavia and Central Asia indicate that the practice goes back thousands of years. Skis predate the wheel; we ripped before we rolled. But until the Victorian age skis were used chiefly as a kind of snowshoe, for hunting, fighting, going to church, and delivering the mail. As a result of the Napoleonic Wars, the Norwegians were united with, but very much in the shadow of—if not under the heel of—the Swedes. In order for Norway, rural and diffuse, to exist as a nation, it had to exist in the mind; like most of Europe, it entered into a prolonged period of romantic nationalism. Accompanying a revival of folk art, music, literature, and tradition was a fixation on skiing, as a kind of national pastime and font of

nostalgia. (The Norwegians dusted off the Norse god and goddess of skiers, Ullr and Skade.) A celebrated traverse of Greenland on skis, in 1888, by Fridtjof Nansen, was Norway's ride of Paul Revere. Nansen, a zoologist and oceanographer who once declared, "It is better to go skiing and think of God than to go to church and think of sport," was the embodiment of what the Norwegians called *ski-idret*, or ski-sport, a concept that blended Rousseauian ideals of nature and primitive beauty with a newly fashionable passion for physical fitness. Nansen became a national hero, a catalyst for Norway's achievement of independence, in 1905, and the object of worldwide adulation and emulation.

City people took up skiing as a pastime, and adopted its customs—urban cowboys, on ice.

Nansen and the Scandinavians were practitioners of what we now call Nordic skiing. The toe of the skier's boot was typically affixed to the ski, and the heel was free, as with cross-country or Telemark skis, which is basically what the Scandinavians' skis were. Going downhill was a dicey affair. This technique is what caught on at first, around the turn of the century, in the newly established ski clubs around Europe, among the aristocrats and haut-bourgeois who had travelled to or read about Scandinavia, or had had Scandinavians as guests. (In the United States, Scandinavian immigrants in the upper Midwest were skiing's earliest Johnny Appleseeds.) Most of what are now the venerable resorts in the Alps were then considered too steep and forbidding for the Norwegian style. The earliest races in Norway, in the eighteen-forties, combined moderate ascents and descents, flats and small jumps. (The practice, adopted by Norwegian ski troops in competition in the eighteenth century, of shooting at targets while on the move was phased out. A derivative, biathlon, became an official Olympic sport in 1960.) Allen writes, "There was no special word for a skier who ran a cross-country race or one who jumped, because for centuries the ideal skier was one who could do everything on skis."

Still, the big test, the discipline that, in competition, captivated the world, as time passed, was ski jumping—descending a steep ramp and launching over a slope, gaining points for both distance and style. Real men jumped. So did a few women, such as Paula Lamberg, from Kitzbühel—the "Floating Baroness"—but their participation was discouraged. As an account in 1910 in the *Illustrierte Sportzeitung* noted, after a competition at Kitzbühel, "One prefers to see women with nicely mellifluous movements, which show elegance and grace, like ice skating or lawn tennis. One does not like to see athletic exercises performed by a woman." Speak for yourself, buddy. The medical view was that the landing was too jarring to what one German physician (*natürlich*) called the "female organism."

This sentiment has managed to sur-

vive into our century. The president of the International Ski Federation, or FIS, speculated that jumping could harm a woman's uterus, and subsequently reiterated that it "seems not to be appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view." In Vancouver last month, women were again prohibited from competing in the ski jump, even though FIS sanctioned them to do so in 1998. It's the lone male-only sport in the Winter Games. (The Nordic-combined event, which requires jumping, is male-only, too.) The reason advanced by the International Olympic Committee is that the field of women who jump isn't deep enough, but this argument (to say nothing of the one citing bodily health) disintegrates when you consider the wan competition in women's ice hockey or the shallow talent pool in the newly added skiercross.

The real reason that Olympic and FIS officials don't want women jumping could be that, as Annette Hofmann, a professor of sports studies at the Ludwigsburg University of Education, in Germany, has argued in an academic paper, the women may soon be jumping farther than the men, because the ideal body type for distance is lean and small. Jumping is now the province not of strapping Norsemen but of anorexic males. Prior to the Games, the record holder on the Olympic jump at Whistler, the resort north of Vancouver where many of the skiing events took place, was a woman named Lindsey Van (not Vonn). The participation of women would threaten jumping's virile self-image and dilute the pool of money for prizes and endorsements.

After losing the Franco-Prussian War, in 1870, France discovered that its birth rate had declined precipitously. The French worried that their race, as they thought of it, faced extinction, and placed the blame for this predicament, as Allen points out, on everything from absinthe to coddling poodles and playing with dolls. The remedy, it was determined, was physical exertion. Skiing became a centerpiece. The French Alpine Club and the military collaborated to promote it as a way to get young boys and men outside, in the clean air, so that they would not only make more French babies but muster an army on skis, to protect France's mountain borders. By the turn of

the century, the Germans, Austrians, Italians, Russians, and Swiss all had ski troops, at varying degrees of readiness. The French brought in the Norwegians to show their men how to ski. Once they'd learned the rudiments—not having grown up on skis, they were a ragged bunch—the Alpine Club held competitions and exhibitions, which were attended by civilians, who, in turn, were inspired and encouraged to take up skiing. The same thing was going on in the other Alpine countries. Military initiatives turned into recreational sport and social amusement.

Meanwhile, Pierre de Coubertin, a French baron, got the idea of reviving the Olympics of ancient Greece. He had spent the eighteen-eighties trying, without success, to import an idealized version of England's physical-education regimen, essentially to get France's poodle boys onto the playing fields of Eton. This effort mutated into a conviction that sport, as practiced by the ancient Greeks (or by his conception of them), would bring out the best in the world's nation-states, maybe chief among them France. (For what it's worth, Coubertin did not think much of skiing; the Norwegians were too dominant, the French were no good, and the other Alpine practitioners, in his view, were mere peasants, ineligible, by dint of their class, for his games.)

The Alpine practitioners weren't all peasants, in fact. By 1900, the Austrians, the Germans, and the Swiss had developed their own approach to Norway's sport, aided by the construction of railways that enabled them to get to Alpine ski villages. This attracted a new class of skier—the lazier, cosmopolitan kind. The tourist, the weekender, the sanitarium habitué. New techniques made turning easier on steeper terrain. You learned them perhaps from the Austrians Mathias Zdarsky, in Lilienfeld, and, later, Hannes Schneider, at the Hotel Post, in St. Anton, and perhaps in the company of aristocrats and magnates. The proponents of *ski-idræt* and all it entailed derided this approach as "hotel-sport," a frivolous pastime for the well-to-do. What virtue was there without hard work or a close connection to skiing's utilitarian roots?

In 1911, Arnold Lunn, an Indian-born Englishman and Alpinist, whose father had started a travel business to

lure upper-class British tourists (Arthur Conan Doyle was an early adopter) to the Swiss Alps, held what is considered to be the first downhill race, the Roberts of Kandahar (named after a British field marshal who fought in Afghanistan). The descent took the winner sixty-one minutes. Eleven years later, at Mürren, Lunn set up the first slalom race: you skied down through a tight series of poles, while being timed by a stopwatch. (Lunn himself didn't race; as a result of a mountaineering accident, his right leg was two inches shorter than his left.) These disciplines were the basis of Alpine racing, and in the twenties and early thirties they swept Europe, and then New England, too, thanks to a prewar wave of Austrian immigrants, including my grandfather, who became a ski instructor in New Hampshire. The advent of the mechanical lift—rope tows, chairlifts, cable cars—just before the war insured Alpine skiing's ascendance.

When the Winter Olympics first came along, in 1924, the Norwegians sent their athletes reluctantly. They had their own annual international winter festival, at Holmenkollen, in Oslo—a showcase for their own sports and for the athletes who excelled at them, who happened to be predominantly Norwegian. They didn't want to see Lunn's

races in the Games, and kept them out. The Old Guard considered the new-fangled Alpine disciplines to be unworthy. Alpine skiing wasn't sport; it was hotel-sport.

At a certain age, I learned that my grandfather, at Lake Placid in 1932, competed not in downhill or slalom but in the Nordic events: he raced cross-country, he jumped, and he did the combined. This was partly because there was no Alpine skiing in the 1932 Olympics, either, thanks to the Norwegians. He finished in the middle of the pack in all his events. The Scandinavians swept all twelve skiing medals.

My grandfather died in 1952, in an avalanche, just off the old Arlberg-Kandahar run in St. Anton, so he's always been a phantom to me. I've learned that, in the spirit of *ski-idraet*, he was a generalist, as a skier. He earned his turns—he climbed up to ski down. He went on ski expeditions to the Himalayas and Alaska. He was an Alpine racer, too. He raced in the first world-championship downhill, in Mürren, in 1931. Still, he was also a city boy from the hotel-sport class.

He travelled to North America in 1929 to compete in the Canadian amateur ski championships, in Montreal, where he won both the slalom and the cross-country. I tracked down the Cana-

dian amateur ski association's roundup of the event ("His charming personality and good sportsmanship endeared him to all of us"), and it refers to him as a representative of Lake Placid, which meant the Lake Placid Club.

The Lake Placid Club was the reason there was an Olympics in the Adirondacks in 1932 and, for that matter, in 1980. The club was founded, in 1895, by Melvil Dewey, the inventor of the Dewey decimal system and a proponent of simplified spelling ("hoki," rather than "hockey"; "butrd tost" for "buttered toast"), as a place for clean-living downstaters to breathe the mountain air. His son Godfrey, in his determination to transform the club, and the surrounding village, into a world-class year-round resort, the St. Moritz of North America, managed to finagle government and Olympic officials into granting Lake Placid the third Winter Games. Owing to the Depression, Olympic-committee politics, the difficulty of travelling from Europe to North America, and terrible snow conditions (as in Vancouver, snow had to be trucked in), only seventeen teams participated in those Olympics. The Norwegians griped about what they felt were inadequate facilities. Still, the club, and the town, reaped the benefits of international attention. E. B. White, in this magazine, wrote, "Many came to scoff and remained to ski." (He also called the cross-country skiers at Lake Placid "the noblest and most plausible of the winter sportsmen, exhibiting the kind of glorified transportation that has both wings and feet." The jumpers, he wrote, "dropped so fast they froze in the mind. Why ski-jumpers jump at all is a mystery. There is something in them that wants to die.")

The Lake Placid Club was unapologetically exclusionary. It did not allow Jews or blacks. Perhaps appropriately, the following Winter Olympics, in 1936, was held in Nazi Germany, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, as a hibernal companion to the Berlin Games. It was the first Olympics, as it happens, to have Alpine racing. Arnold Lunn had lobbied for years for his innovations to be included in the Games, but he urged skiers to boycott Garmisch, because of the Nazis. Avery Brundage, the long-time and now infamously retrograde



"It came with the job."

head of the United States Olympic Committee, insisted that the Americans and others attend. The Germans won the Alpine-skiing events.

For better or worse, Lake Placid in 1932 was the last rinky-dink Olympics. The Nazi Games, four years later, both summer and winter, formed our modern sense of what Olympics should be. Leni Riefenstahl's film tribute bestowed on the Games the level of mythological pomp and majesty that Coubertin aspired to, and that NBC, in some respects, gives them now. (So did Riefenstahl's performances in the mountain films of Arnold Fanck.) Riefenstahl, in "Olympia," fabricated a site in Greece where the Olympic rings had supposedly been inscribed in a rock wall; in fact, the rings were Coubertin's. The Nazis, meanwhile, came up with the idea for a torch relay: it filmed well. Yes, the Olympic flame's nationwide, multi-day odyssey, so venerated now as an invocation, however vague, of ancient Greece and global fellowship, was Nazi propaganda—an invented tradition that, like the flame itself, we obliviously keep alive.

I arrived in Vancouver during the opening ceremonies. On a TV by the baggage carousel, I caught a few minutes of K. D. Lang, and then took a taxi through the pouring rain, keeping an eye out for the pickup truck containing Wayne Gretzky and the torch. I wound up across the city, in West Vancouver, at the house of a friend, an Olympic cynic who was leaving town the next day for the duration of the Games.

The men's Alpine downhill race, the event that I was most looking forward to seeing at first hand, had initially been scheduled for the following morning at Whistler, but it had been postponed, owing to fog and rain. Instead, that second night, I went to see the women's moguls competition at Cypress Mountain, a small resort not far from Vancouver. As an initiation into the Olympics, the experience was both dispiriting and un-Klammeresque. The mountains were mostly denuded, except where organizers had trucked and helicoptered in snow from higher elevations, and the rain, cloud-thick in the kliegs, had soaked what was there into a granular sludge. Muddy cascades poured over

the rocks. The shadows hid werewolves.

I was there mainly to see two sisters from Montreal, Maxime and Chloé Dufour-Lapointe, aged twenty-one and eighteen, respectively, whom I'd met a month before, in Lake Placid, at the last event of the World Cup moguls tour before the Games. Chloé had skied well and had qualified for the Canadian Olympic team. Maxime came up short. Still, she was there at Cypress, to do a fore-run (a rehearsal, of sorts, to test the cameras and timing devices). So were their parents, an aunt and uncle, Chloé's boyfriend, Étienne (a bricklayer), another mogul-skiing sister (Justine, fifteen), and their private entourage of coaches—Paul Gagne, their physical trainer; Luc Belhumeur, their aerials coach; and Michel Dorion, their turns coach—whom their parents had hired, to supplement the coaching the girls get on the national team.

The girls train year-round, often working out in the off-season with Gagne's client roster of professional-hockey stars. In Lake Placid, Gagne, a compact former Olympic wrestler who looks a little like Iggy Pop, showed me videos he'd taken of the girls' workouts—eccentric, gruelling exertions that occasionally inspired the subjects, flushed and gasping, to curse the cameraman. Belhumeur, a former Olympic aerialist, leads them through convoluted acrobatics on trampolines. Dorion takes them to mogul camps in British Columbia, Argentina, and Switzerland, oversees their diet and sleep schedule, and fills their heads with home-grown sports psychology ("Just focus on one thing always"). A former junior hockey player and coach of the Quebec moguls team, he owns an auto-repair shop and a construction business. He can do what he wants, and what he wants to do is get someone a medal at the Olympics. He says he knows how to win.

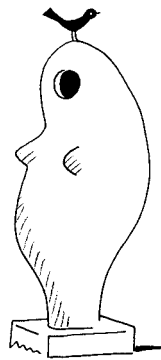
Alpine racers, I understood, worked out half the day, but I'd thought mogul skiing, as an Olympic sport, was a little goofy, and I was shocked to see freestyle—which refers generally to any kind of skiing involving tricks performed on the snow and in the air—treated with such seriousness, and to find out what

these women put themselves through in order to be world-class. Moguls is such a specialized manner of skiing, so thin a refinement, that it looks like a gimmick. But, as the extreme-ski ambassador Glen Plake once said, "If you can't ski bumps, you can't ski shit."

The sport, which involves executing two big acrobatic jumps while descending impossibly fast, on short skis, through a field of tight, well-tracked bumps, is a product of freestyle's early heyday, in the seventies. Like downhill a hundred years ago, freestyle began not as a competitive sport but as a new way to have fun on snow, an unrequited expression of athleticism and style. At first, the freestyle tour, which included aerials (basically, diving on skis) and ski ballet (now defunct; see

Suzy Chaffee), was wild and woolly, as much a means of getting laid as of getting prizes. The idea of physical training, much less of workouts supervised by a professional, was as ludicrous as the thought of wearing a helmet. In 1992, moguls became an Olympic sport, which leached most of the craziness out of it (and helped usher in an age of television-friendly new-sport inclusion). Today's moguls competition is regimented, technical, demanding, and sincere, in spite of the rock and dance music and the exuberant commentary that blare over the course as the competitors come twitching, one by one, down the hill. When you stand close to the course during practice, watching dozens of them leapfrog down segments of their route, the slap-slap-slap of their skis on the bumps sounds like luffing sails.

Quebec has long been a moguls hotbed, perhaps because France has been, too, and perhaps because, as Maxime told me, "you don't need so much hill to practice." Maxime and Chloé's parents—Yves Lapointe is an engineer at an electronics company, Johane Dufour is a housewife—started taking their daughters to Mont Blanc, in the Laurentides, as soon as they could walk. "In the summer, we were doing the sailboat," Maxime said. "In the winter, we were doing skiing." Maxime began competing in moguls when she was eleven. That year, Chloé, eight, pulled her first three-sixty—what we old-timers call a helicopter. By nine,



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she was practicing jumping on skis off ramps into a pool of water.

Even if they reach the top of their sport, there isn't really any money in it. Maxime, who has a sharp chin and an easy charm, would like to be a doctor. Chloé, hazel-eyed and rosy-cheeked, aspires to a job in fashion. They're in the moguls business for the medals. They don't have time for ski trips. They never just go skiing. They have skied real powder snow only once, in Argentina. During their two weeks in Vancouver, they didn't even think of going up to Whistler, either to ski or to watch the Alpine racers.

In moguls competition, skiers take two runs—the first to qualify, the second to compete for the win. The score is determined subjectively by a panel of judges, who factor in the speed and the style of the turns and jumps. The scoring can seem esoteric, but it tends to square with the layman's instinctive impressions. For people used to the objectivity of the stopwatch, the system can seem unsporty, but even grand old ski jumping is determined, in part, by style points.

At Cypress, Luc, Paul, Étienne, Jus-

tine, and several others stood at the finish in the rain, some swaddled in garbage bags, struggling, in the moorish atmosphere, to summon up a feeling of Olympic magic. "We're not at a regional championship," Gagne half shouted. "We're at the fucking *Olympics*." The speakers blared strange selections. "Black Betty," by Ram-Jam, wah-wahed in the wind. Gagne nodded when one skier came down to AC/DC. "*This is good music to ski to*," he said. Chloé, after her preliminary run ("It wasn't that good, but she made her show," Dorion told me), was in ninth. From there it can be hard to podium—"podium" has become a verb—because eight skiers came after her, and the judges tend to reserve some cushion in their scores to accommodate the possibility of better performances by the top seeds, who go last. Belhumeur was already talking about the 2014 Games, in Sochi, Russia: "Sochi will be a Dufour-Lapointe Olympics." He predicted that all three girls will be there, and that one, at least, would win a medal. "Justine is a beast," he said, motioning toward the youngest sister, Canadian-

flag tattoos on her cheeks and braces on her teeth.

Eleven skiers went down the course, and then it was Chloé's turn. She stood in the starting gate, obscured by rain and fog, but you could see, on a JumboTron, that she was smiling. The crowd roared: a Canadian in the gate. She banged her way down to the first ramp and soared into the mist: a spinning back full flip. When she crossed the finish, pumping her arms, her entourage exchanged hugs and high fives.

"This is a 24.5," Gagne said. "24.5!" The score came back: 23.87. "No, no, no. That's bad," he said, before reverting to angry French. Still, Chloé was in first place. She took her position in the leftmost of the three giant white stuffed chairs where the leaders wait, as if at an open-air night club in Saint-Tropez. As the challengers followed, Belhumeur predicted, on several occasions, that they'd crash, and he and Gagne celebrated, not unsheepishly, when his predictions came true, as they invariably did.

"He knows the girls," Gagne said.

Still, one, then another, then another, then another made it through clean, until, at the end, when the American Hannah Kearney tore down the course and took gold, Chloé had been bumped out of the comfy chair. She finished fifth. But it was an excellent result, and her Olympic experience was just beginning. She was planning to stick around in the Athletes Village through the closing ceremonies, in two weeks. She had no plans to ski, for fun or otherwise, but she had plans.

In the mid-nineties, Michel Dorion's son, Vincent, was a young star on the Canadian moguls team. One of his coaches was a retired freestyler from Vancouver Island named Mike Douglas. Douglas, Vincent Dorion, and a handful of other French-Canadian mogul skiers spent their off hours and weekends trying to do on skis what riders on snowboards had been doing for years—eye-popping aerial tricks that owed everything to skateboarding and very little to ski jumping of any kind. Douglas and his charges horned their way into the snowboarders' terrain parks—playgrounds set aside for doing tricks—and before long were turning heads.

At the time, skiing was moribund; snowboarding had seized the public's

imagination, along with the market in equipment sales. Douglas and the Québécois, who were known as the New Canadian Air Force, helped revive skiing, as a business and as a youthful attraction, by pioneering a so-called New School approach to it. Douglas also conceived of a new kind of ski, a twin-tip, on which you could go backward as well as forward, and in 1999 he persuaded Salomon, a French company, to design and manufacture it for him. Twin-tips are now commonplace, and so, to a lesser extent, are skiers capable of doing tricks of greater complexity and amplitude—in the half-pipe, in the park, and even in the backcountry—than those of their counterparts on snowboards. New School skiers are the stars in the ski movies and magazines, and in the fantasies of young, baggy-kneed huckers and jibbers everywhere. They compete in popular big-air and half-pipe competitions, like the X Games, but so far, in spite of intense efforts, they have failed to get their sport into the Olympics. In a way, it's where slalom and downhill were ninety years ago. "Skiing is no exception to the general rule that every sport is more amusing in its earlier than its later phase," Arnold Lunn wrote. "The arteries of a sport, like the arteries of a man, harden with the passage of years."

Douglas, who has been called the Godfather of Freeskiing, may be its Lunn, and you might say that Whistler, where he lives, is this century's Murren. (Freeskiing can mean almost anything, as long as it's dangerous.) The son of a Mountie, Douglas dropped out of college in 1989 to try ski-bumming at Whistler for a year and, like so many there and elsewhere, never left. He got lulled into skiing moguls competitions and, for a time, had on the "blindens," as he put it, that accompany the pursuit of an Olympic medal. He never got one, and instead, thanks to his Air Force exploits, became the kind of ski bum most aspire to be: the kind who skis all the time, all over the world, and is paid by manufacturers and resorts to do so. It ain't *ski-idrot*, but it'll do.

The day after the women's moguls competition, I went up to Whistler, in order to attend the Alpine races. I had dinner with Douglas one night at Sushi Village, a longtime gathering place for Whistler's eminent dirtbags and snow-riding idols—a ski bum's Chasen's. Douglas had worked there as a bartender twenty

years earlier. At a booth near ours, a crew of scruffy dudes were filming themselves, and Douglas, compact and clean-shaven, went over to say hello: he explained to me that they had created the elaborate snowboarding spectacle during the opening ceremonies. "That's the guy, the snowboarder," he said, pointing to one of them. "That was awesome, guys." They complimented him, in return, on a recent short film he'd made, for a FreeskiTV Web show that he produces for Salomon, about his attempt, mostly successful, with a group of friends, to ski—yes, ski—big ocean waves in Hawaii.

I asked Douglas if he'd been to see some of the Olympic events. "I don't have any desire to be on-site at any of them," he said. Impressed as he was by the talent of the athletes, he found the nationalistic motivations disconcerting, and felt that the disciplines themselves were out of touch with the mainstream—his gauge being which tools sell. Generally, he said, people are buying freeskiing skis, not racing skis; and mogul skis, to say nothing of skiercross skis, hardly even exist commercially. "There was a time when the ski racers and bump skiers were the coolest guys on the hill," he said. "Then the snowboarders showed up and stole our thunder." Free-riders had taken some of it back. Anyway, the old freestylers, and the New Schoolers now, he said, weren't jocks. "Jocks like

formulas. You do this and win. Free-style, old and new: it's more like an art."

He loves filming, he said. He enjoys skiing for the camera. He likes to watch himself. I told him I disliked skiing alone, not only because company is nice but because, I suspected, skiing is, in some respects, an act of vanity. You want to be seen doing it. You make a mark in the snow and ask others to take note. Leslie Anthony, a ski writer and a friend of Douglas's in Whistler, told me that he could think of no other sport whose practitioners so loudly identify themselves. "Why do people insist on telling everyone that they are skiers?" he said—over the phone, since he, too, had fled British Columbia for the duration of the Games. "Buttons, bumper stickers, T-shirts, hats. All this debris that says, 'I'm a skier and you need to know this?'"

The next morning, I ran into Douglas on the Whistler gondola. I was on my way up to watch the women's downhill. He and a small film crew were heading out to shoot a segment for his Web show. Today's concept was a parody of the Olympics—a shadow Games, in keeping with their sensibilities. Making fun of the pomp and severity of race day and yet hewing to another tradition, that of the wiseguy ski film. Skiing as insubordination, rebellion. Douglas and his crew pulled up alongside a part of the downhill course that the public could ski



"This requires both ears."

up to. They hiked up a bit for a better vantage of a gruesome turn where Lindsey Vonn and the rest of the downhillers would soon be flashing past. Douglas, with his cell-phone camera, lined up alongside the professional photographers. "Did you get the shot? Did you get the shot?" he asked them repeatedly, until they got annoyed. Then they set up another shot: they built a little jump, and Douglas hiked up into the woods above it. The idea was for him, in the foreground, in his baggy gear, to pop off it and do a stylish smear turn in the powder below, while, in the background, a real racer, in her unfashionably skintight suit, skied by, hanging on for dear life. They made a few tries, but it was hard to time. The women were going more than sixty miles per hour.

I switched my attention to the race. Being on the course, instead of at the finish, you saw very little. Someone was on the phone to a friend at the bottom, and was relaying each racer's result to those of us standing there starved for data: names, times, placements. There had apparently been spectacular crashes. For a while, the American Julia Mancuso was in the lead. Then came Vonn. She took a tighter line than the others, across and down the icy pitch. She was in view for all of five seconds, but her size and posture projected speed, fearlessness, and that nearly psychopathic calm that the best skiers have on the most menacing courses. It gave me a chill. It was no surprise when the call came up that she'd taken the lead, for what turned out to be her only gold. Douglas, meanwhile, had got his shot, and his team went higher up on the mountain, to get footage of him jumping off cliffs.

When you go to the Olympics, you miss most of the Olympics. In Vancouver and Whistler, the dispersion of events and the suffocating security made it hard to attend more than one competition in a day. But the anxiety of missing things, both compounded and alleviated by a profusion of TVs showing the events, gave way to resignation: you soak up what you can, and go again in four years. The atmosphere was the thing: spectators from all over the wintry world mingling, merrily, in the plazas and bars. It was impossible to know what went on in the Athletes Villages, in Van-

couver and Whistler. The athletes talked about Ping-Pong and TV. One Norwegian cited, as an excuse for his performance, an overdose on porn. By the middle of the second week, there were news reports that the authorities were trucking in an emergency supply of condoms; they had provided a hundred thousand of them, for roughly seven thousand athletes and officials. But apparently that wasn't enough.

The day of the women's super combined (one downhill run, one slalom), a guy I know who grew up skiing Whistler suggested that we go for a little tour. The mountains surrounding the resort have some of the finest, most accessible back-country skiing in North America. The day was calm and clear. Vonn and Mancuso would get along fine without me. (As it turned out, though, they didn't.)

I went up with Scott Grieve, the owner of a chocolate store in the village, and Mitchell Scott, the editor and publisher of a glossy magazine called *Kootenay Mountain Culture*, about the ski country of the British Columbian interior. We rode the lifts to the top of a peak called Blackcomb, but the T-bar we had intended to take up to the Blackcomb Glacier, our point of entry to the Spearhead Range, was closed. There had been an avalanche earlier in the day above the glacier, what a patrolman who'd seen it described as a "natural" (no one set it off) and an "anomaly" (it was a surprise). The wind had blown hard early that morning and loaded up the lee slopes. No one could be sure if or when another might go. We opted for a less ambitious hike outside the Blackcomb boundary, in an area called Disease Ridge, just past a cirque called Bodybag Bowl.

The skiing, apparently, had been excellent this season; the mountain had got more than thirty feet of snow. But all the media reports about the slush and mud at Cypress and the warmth in Vancouver, plus concern over Olympic crowds and security, had scared visitors away. The slopes were uncrowded; an old-



timer remarked that it felt like the seventies. There had been rumors of armed commandos hiding in the woods, to guard, presumably, against Bond-villain terrorists, but no one I talked to had seen any. Helicopter-skiing clients in the area had to go through metal detectors each day. One helicopter-skiing operation had sued the Vancouver Operating Committee over the loss of business.

Disease Ridge was commando-free. Below Bodybag Bowl, there were clumps of snowboarders and skiers hanging around homemade jumps, or kickers, taking turns hiking up and launching air. We affixed climbing skins to the bottoms of our skis, which prevent the skis from sliding downhill as you walk up, and zig-zagged up the ridgeline for about an hour, the Spearhead Traverse sparkling in the distance. I hadn't done this in a while, and it felt great, except for my rented touring boots. From what I'd read, Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian traverser of Greenland, sounded like a haughty and humorless scold, but I imagined that he'd have approved, at least a little, of this use of an afternoon.

The run down, in slightly wind-packed powder on the shady, leeward side of the ridge, didn't take long. Earned turns are dear.

The next morning was the men's super giant slalom, an Alpine race only relatively recently (1988) added to the Olympics. The super G combines the headlong speed of the downhill with some of the technical requirements of the giant slalom. That night, Nathaniel Vinton, a reporter for the *Daily News* and a World Cup obsessive, urged me to come along with him to the captains' meeting, at which all the teams' coaches discuss the course and other race business with officials from FIS. It was basically a giant tent full of white men with strong jawlines and hideous sportswear. (Most of the women's coaches are men, too.) On the dais, presiding over the meeting, was Gunther Hujara, FIS's chief race director for men's Alpine skiing, a German with the accent and officious manner you'd expect of a man in that position.

"We now have very dry conditions," he said, peering over his glasses. "The surface of the snow is drying out very quickly. We took off the whole surface of the course, fence to fence. We have rein-

jected it, boot-packed it, ski-packed it. There might be some sections where it is a little slick." After the snow discussion, Hujara said, "O.K., we do the draw"—to determine the next day's starting order. Another official drew numbers out of a pair of buckets.

Official: "Racer Sixteen."

Hujara: "Kostelic."

Official: "Starts Twenty-three."

Hujara: "Twenty-three."

And so on, name by name, through the list of the top thirty seeds, until gradually a race had taken shape.

The next morning, two and a half hours prior to race time, the competitors gathered, in and around the starting hut at the top, for a course inspection. In downhill, they must train on the run they will eventually ski in competition, but in the super G, which is nearly as fast and arguably trickier, they merely get to side-slip the run once, before the race. Vinton and I had got permission to tag along as they looked it over. That meant we were standing just below the hut, on rented skis, peering down a sheer dark pitch, its surface scoured clean. A little slick? It was a carapace of ice. Television fails miserably to convey how steep or bullet-hard a World Cup or Olympic race can be, at least when you consider descending without turning, at seventy miles per hour. But this is the way the racers like it. The upper part had been injected with water, to firm it up. The lower half had warmed in the sun the previous afternoon and refrozen in the night. Down below, in the morning gloom, dozens of volunteer course workers, christened the Weasel Workers, after a hairy part of the course called the Weasel, used rakes to push and pull to the side of the trail what little surface snow was left.

At nine sharp, Hujara's voice came over a race official's radio, signalling that the inspection had begun, and the racers, with team warmups and cloaks over their racing suits, began chattering downhill sidewise to the first turn, to see what the next turn looked like from there, and to figure out where they'd want to be to prepare for it. They typically memorize every turn and bump, pausing during their inspection to close their eyes and rehearse the run in their minds, swivelling their hips and dropping their shoulders to adjust to imagined contours and curves, in a kind of Alpine Tai Chi.



"We'd like to take a majority position in your poetry."

Bode Miller was at the front of the line. He shot off at nine and was almost immediately out of sight. Vinton told me that Miller spends less time on inspection than any other racer; he is almost invariably the first to reach the bottom. Miller, the most successful American Alpine skier ever, as well as perhaps the most vexing, is a "feel" skier, which means that he allows his athleticism and his innate feel for the snow to do the work. So far in these Games, it had served him well; he had won a bronze medal in the downhill.

A few days later, Miller won a gold in the super combined. The day before the downhill, in a snowstorm that cancelled the training runs, some members of the U.S. team had gone out powder skiing, higher on the mountain. The Europeans, and the French-Canadian women mogulists, don't usually do this. After the downhill, I asked Andrew Weibrecht, a stocky racer from Lake Placid who had placed twenty-first, if he planned to do any more freeskiing, and he said, "Naw, my legs are cashed. I overdid it yesterday." It was pleasing to hear that a downhiller would exhaust himself skiing powder snow on the day before the biggest

race of his career. It was also pleasing to hear that Bode Miller, according to someone I know who'd skied powder with him, is lousy at it. It was like being told you could beat Michael Jordan at H-O-R-S-E.

Other racers are very mechanical in their planning, during inspection. One of those was the veteran Swiss Didier Cuche, who as of last week led the World Cup downhill rankings, and another was Aksel Lund Svindal, the top Norwegian, who wore his team's unsightly tie-dye-patterned warmups—an affront, it would seem, to Ullr, Skade, and the rest of the old Norse divinities. I wound up trailing them, off and on, as they made their way from conundrum to conundrum. At several junctures, they did slow-motion snowplows to a spot, studied it, and then climbed up thirty or forty feet to have another look. They were the last racers off the course.

It was interesting, therefore, that when the competition ended Svindal had won gold, and Miller silver. Weibrecht, his legs rejuvenated, and the gods, Norse or otherwise, on his side, shocked everyone by winning the bronze. A week later, there was a parade for him in Lake Placid. ♦