



RIDE ON  
THE  
**WILD  
SIDE**

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SOMETHING BIGGER.  
A LOT BIGGER. AND  
EVEN THE SPORT'S  
CRAZIEST RISK-TAKERS  
THINK HE'S NUTS.

BY DEVON O'NEIL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY M. SHARKEY



## RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE

**MIKE BUCK COULDN'T BELIEVE** what he was seeing. Jay Quinlan looked like a tiny speck in the snow sprinkled atop a charcoal-color cliff in Alaska's Chugach Mountain Range—and he was getting ready to gun his 500-pound snowmobile right over the edge. Seriously bad idea. But there was Quinlan, already off his sled and peering into the ravine, a narrow slit between two 80-foot rock walls outside Valdez, the backcountry dreamland where he was raised. Buck, his high school shop teacher and mentor, had known him since Quinlan was 12, when he sailed off a 30-foot

Quinlan's job as a helipilot keeps him away from wife Julene and daughter Danna nearly 20 days per month.

room for error. And that snowball impression is exactly where Quinlan landed, his sled thrashing on impact like an alligator at mealtime, before he rode away down the creek bed, too smoothly for Buck to believe what he'd just witnessed.

Anyone who's seen Quinlan ride has a similar story, sometimes four or five. They are accounts of a man who pioneered freestyle snowmobiling. He took what he saw in the early days of extreme skiing and used it as inspiration to seek out, on his snowmobile, the most perilous mountain lines. He backflipped over a dumpster on *Letterman* in 2005, won Gravity Games gold in 2000 and has held a coveted Red Bull sponsorship—one of the most desired in action sports—since 2002. But for all he's done to bring his show mainstream, riding everywhere from Milwaukee to Austria, Quinlan, 29, is now fixated on something more anonymous: navigating his ride through virgin backcountry for only two spectators—sun and sky.

In 2003, Quinlan spent four days

## BIO BLAST

**Name** Jay Quinlan

**Age** 29

**Sport** Snowmobiling

**Hometown** Valdez, Alaska

**Big Wins** 2000 Gravity Games, 2003 Red Bull Fuel + Fury and 2006 Red Bull Erzberg Challenge

**FAME CLAIM** Stars in the *Slednecks* video series; in 2005, backflipped his sled on *Letterman*

Quinlan's determination can be traced directly to his upbringing in blue-collar Valdez. Located at the southern end of the Alaskan oil pipeline, the arctic enclave of 4,000 is surrounded by some of the most jagged and glaciated mountains in North America. His mom, Bonnie, and stepdad, Rich, owned a snowmobile and ATV shop in town. With temperatures well below freezing from October to March, Valdez is one of the few places in Alaska where you can ride your snowmobile on the street, as most of its roadways are covered by a thick layer of ice during the long winters. Quinlan started riding with his parents as a 3-year-old and had a sled before he had a car; by fifth grade, he was riding the 10 miles to and from school. In high

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cornice behind the school and ignited his passion for freestyle snowmobiling. Still, Buck didn't think this was wise. Everything needed to be perfect: wind, trajectory, body position, landing.

Quinlan eyed a spot at the bottom of the drop, eight stories down, knowing there was no room for error. He scooped up a handful of wet, maritime snow and rounded it into a ball. After a moment's calculation, he hurled it into the gorge and watched it punch an indentation in the snowy strip below. "That's where I'm going," he said. Then Buck watched in awe as Quinlan tromped back to his sled, pinned the throttle to a piercing whine and launched himself into the snowy abyss.

He was right, on both counts: There was no

teaching himself to arc a backflip. He built an icy ramp in an isolated field off a dirt road near Breckenridge, Colo., where he had moved in 2001. The ramp featured a near-vertical takeoff angle, far steeper than the smooth rubber ramps used now, that each time catapulted his sled 25 to 30 feet straight up in the air. Over the course of the self-tutorial, Quinlan had to ditch his sled at the apex of his jump eight times, each instance sending him plunging back to earth with a sickening thud. The safety tactic served only to curb the carnage, which included two completely wrecked snowmobiles and a laundry list of injuries (he's since also broken his collarbone, shattered a tibia and splintered his heel).

school, he'd skip lunch to huck cliffs behind the football field, a technique he picked up from his other adolescent love, skiing.

In the early 1990s, Valdez was the heli-ski capital of the world and hosted the annual World Extreme Skiing Championships. As a teen, Quinlan hung out with the pros who came through town, guys like Kent Kreidler, Seth Morrison and future world champion Dean Cummings. He'd swing by Cummings' hotel room at night and sit for hours, peppering him with questions about which angles to take and how to maintain body control as he skied down mountain passes with jagged edges. "You could tell he wanted to be part of something bigger than the norm," Cummings recalls. "It was cool to see."



## RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE

Quinlan was a gifted skier—good enough to finish in the top 30 as a 19-year-old at the 1997 U.S. Extreme Freeskiing Championships—but he was more interested in imitating those feats on his snowmobile. The scrawny teen started attempting cliff jumps in the Chugach backcountry, sticking landings to the awe of his snowmobiling friends, who elected for the more conventional hill climbing or racing. Word spread.

“He’d take lines that no other snowmobiler even considered before,” says filmmaker Jason Moriarty, who quickly made Quinlan the headliner of his popular *Slednecks* series. “But to Jay, it was the perfect run.”

As the years passed, Quinlan’s exploits grew larger and more ambitious. There was the time he dropped off a mind-boggling 110-foot cliff near Anchorage. There was his infamous 2000 jump over a ski lift at the Donner Ski Range in California, where the daredevil overshot the landing by 50 feet, crashed and, according to his doctor, took 10 years off his knees. And that backflip he risked life and limb to learn in '03? Nailed it the same year at

the Red Bull Fuel + Fury contest, becoming the first rider to stick the trick in competition.

Still, the double cliff drop he pulled in Lake Tahoe in 2004 remains king. Heath Frisby, Quinlan’s best friend and a two-time Winter X freestyle bronze medalist, didn’t like the feeling he had in his gut before that one, so he did something rare: He cautioned Quinlan. “I was like, ‘You’re crazy. This thing is going to kill you.’ He just smiled at me and said, ‘That’s the difference between me and you. You’re a boy, and I’m a man.’” Quinlan killed it. It was like taking off from one rooftop, landing on another 30 feet below, then jumping another 80 feet to the street and riding away without looking back. Says backcountry videographer Clayton Stassart, “That is still the most impressive line I’ve ever seen.”



Quinlan's risk-taking has its costs, like his \$700-a-month health-insurance bill.

Thanks to Quinlan’s high-flying, “oh, s—”-inducing antics, freestyle snowmobiling steadily became accepted as a legitimate action sport. Until a few years ago, snowmobiling’s most daring discipline was a nuisance in the eyes of the industry, deemed too reckless to promote. Pushed to the margins of sponsorship, freeriders paid up to \$12,000

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for a sled while their racing peers received theirs for free. Plus, recreational snowmobiles, like the ones purchased from his mom and stepfather’s shop in Valdez, are designed to cling to the ground. It was years before manufacturers would even return a freestyler’s calls about customizing a ride. Eventually, though, fan interest, generated by videos of wild backcountry exploits, convinced companies to start sponsoring the risky riders. Ski-Doo, the top snow-machine manufacturer, was the last to cave; two years ago, Quinlan was the first rider the company signed. Now, Quinlan rides an 11-foot-long, tricked-out beast that’s modified to handle extraordinary air and the bone-pounding landings that go with it.

But as the popularity of ramp contests

grew, Quinlan’s interest in repeating the same trick over and over dwindled. Also, in January of this year, he and his wife, Julene, had a daughter. Priorities changed, and a year after the sport debuted at Winter X in 2007, he’d stopped riding ramps entirely. He moved back home to Alaska with Julene and baby Danna. The return to his stomping grounds led him back to his backcountry-riding roots, a switch that cost him a lucrative Arctiva sponsorship. But for Quinlan, the decision came naturally.

“I’ve always enjoyed dropping cliffs, that feeling you get when you’re on the edge,” he says. “The best days are going out and riding, getting lost and finding my way out.”

While it sounds sublime, Quinlan’s decision to abandon ramps caused some to question his commitment to the freestyle discipline he helped create. He accepts that, knowing that he’s embarking on something bigger: taking his sled through untamed terrain, where

his only competitor is Mother Nature.

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Besides, Quinlan’s never been one to pay too much attention to what other people say. He shrugs off recognition from peers. But among the risk-seeking elite, including the extreme-ski pioneers who knew him as a kid, he’s revered. “Jay has been one of those guys who puts it all out there and gives it a shot when no one else will,” says Kreitler, a freeskiing icon who helped pioneer the big-mountain scene in Alaska. “The guy is gnarly,” adds Cody Borchers, a Canadian pro who’s regarded as one of the most innovative and fearless backcountry riders. “You maybe wanna gain a little respect, so you push yourself further when you ride with him.” And Cummings, who at 42 is still one of the planet’s most daring skiers, puts it this way: “Jay’s like me. He gets competitive with the mountain.”

Quinlan laughs off comments like these. He’s a guy who would stop to bury roadkill on the side of the highway, who vacuums his carpet twice a day—not someone who strives for the Superman title. Which, of course, is precisely why it follows him. 🌐