



UNDER THE RADAR

SKI MOUNTAINEER KIP GARRE ON SKIING, SAUSAGE AND SACRIFICE

BY DEVON O'NEIL // PHOTOS BY JORDAN MANLEY

Kip Garre has made a career of remaining calm in potentially fatal environments. But last June, he watched in horror as his greatest fear played out on the precipitous south face of Nevado Pisco, an 18,871-foot peak in the Peruvian Cordillera Blanca. Garre was there with Arne Backstrom—one of his closest friends and a fellow Lake Tahoe, California-based ski mountaineer—to film a backcountry ski movie in the high peaks. That day, he watched Backstrom lose control, accelerate quickly and begin tumbling; by the time he came to rest at the base of the cliff-strewn face, Backstrom was dead.

Months later, Garre is behind the wheel of his pickup, heading home from a climbing trip in the Eastern Sierra. Backstrom's death, he says, still haunts him—so much so that he briefly considered giving up skiing, the sport that anchors his life: "I remember seeing Arne [dead] for the first time and being like, 'I don't know if this is worth it,



you know?" Garre says. "It was so overwhelming."

Garre has climbed and skied some of America's most foreboding lines, from the Grand Teton to Liberty Ridge on Mt. Rainier. Most of his exploits go unpublicized, but he's made significant first descents in Alaska (Sultana Ridge on 17,400-foot Mount Foraker with Andrew McLean in May, 2009) and the previously unskied Bajhang District in far-western Nepal (October, 2009). He also skied from 7,500 meters on Pakistan's Gasherbrum II in 2008.

But the tragedy in Peru changed him. After dealing with *federafe hell*—the local cops wanted bribes before they'd allow Garre's party to evacuate Backstrom's body—he made a conscious and immediate return to the mountains east of Yosemite. He did so in part to escape the reality that surrounded him at home, but also to reclaim the peace that he'd lost in the Andes.

"I looked up to Arne so much, even though he was younger than me. His passing will stay with me forever," says Garre, who also dated Arne's sister, renowned freeskiier Ingrid Backstrom, for nearly a decade. "I wasn't to blame," Garre explains, "but you think about how you could've changed what happened. I think that'll always be really clear, and I'll think about it a lot. But I'll hopefully be able to regain my comfort skiing in the big mountains."

Others hope so, too. Andrew McLean says Garre's talent is "off the charts. I think he's the future of the sport." It's a powerful statement, especially given that Garre is 36 years old, sleeps in the back of his truck more than in his bed at home, and makes most of his money painting houses, serving food or driving tourists to the Reno airport. And it's not just McLean who recognizes Garre's gift.

The late Shane McConkey considered him "the best athlete at

Squaw," according to a mutual friend, Tal Fletcher, and successfully lobbied K2 to add Garre to its professional team. Garre also has modest contracts with several other outdoor brands, none of which mind his low profile. "Humility is the ultimate trait an athlete can have," said Topher Gaylord, Mountain Hardwear's president. "And that's Kip to a tee."

Garre knows this support helps enable his travel, which in a recent 12-month span included trips to Alaska (twice), Nepal, Antarctica, India, France and Peru. But he also knows who he is: "I'm a ski bum," he says behind the wheel of his truck, which has over 200,000 miles on the odometer. "And I'm proud of that."

Garre, a New Hampshire native, moved to Squaw Valley in 1997 and worked in a ski shop for six years. And he's no weenie mountaineer: he can stick 720s in the park and Lincoln Loops off 60-foot cliffs. When he decided to get into backcountry skiing, he drove to Mount Shasta with an 80-pound pack, a rope and a two-person tent—alone. He's a 5.10 rock climber, and ever since he began combining his climbing skills with his skiing skills, he's made ski mountaineering his priority.

He enjoys the sport's "intricacies," he says, and its "full contact" runs. His mother always told him, "You can't be afraid of every move you make," a mantra Kip (who was named after a famous Kenyan runner) has adapted to suit his approach to the mountains.

"I try to be confident in the decisions I'm making so I'm not risking my life," he says. "Yeah, in the big picture, you go ski a run in Alaska, and no matter what precautions you take, it could avalanche on you. But I like to do enough research and planning that the risk is so calculated and minimized, it's not what you're thinking about. You're thinking about having fun."

Still, when I ask how often he's afraid, he replies: "All the time."

At 5'8" and 155 pounds, Garre's unimposing frame belies his aerobic capacity. During a trip we shared in Western Nepal, he shot up a 50-degree couloir of runneled ice at 18,000 feet, front-pointing ahead of two pros who'd dropped him on the slog in. (Garre was crippled by a virus during the hike, but never complained.)

McLean recalls a similar experience. "On our final day on Mount Foraker," he says, "we went from 12,000 feet to 17,400. Kip was just like, 'I'll take it from here.' He broke trail the entire last day."

Garre has a polite, soft-spoken demeanor that cloaks his depth. He's always more interested in asking how you're doing—a question that never seems superficial—than detailing his latest feat. He brings gear and clothing to locals in Nepal and India; listens to NPR and thinks the Beatles are "sick"; marvels at the Milky Way; and, during conversations on the trail, defends his nomadic lifestyle against a more traditional existence.

And somehow Garre, who's unmarried and has no children, maintains his ambition. He wants to ski an 8,000-meter peak and spend more time in the Alps, he says. But he knows he won't be a pro skier forever. For a while, he considered trying to build his painting business into a long-term career, but it conflicted with his daily need for adventure (which, incidentally, includes BASE jumping and parachuting out of helicopters). Lately, he's leaning toward pursuing his AMGA and UIAGM guiding certifications.

His friends in Lake Tahoe, who comprise an elite cell of Sierra backcountry pioneers, talk about how rarely Garre shows weakness. His tick list of ski descents is long and impressive, he's been featured in the past two Warren Miller films, and yet, when I ask Garre what he gets from skiing, he doesn't mention any of these distinctions.

"Just having fun, and traveling and meeting people," he replies. "Really, it's about drinking beer and eating sausages with your friends." ■