

Ups & Downs

Story by **Devon O'Neil**

Ski mountaineer
Pete Swenson
keeps Breck on
the move.





Swenson at the starting line of a race in Crested Butte in 2009

Pete Swenson spent his entire New Hampshire upbringing on skis, earning all-state honors as an alpine and Nordic racer. He skied while attending college in Colorado Springs, then spent five years as a ski bum in Telluride, so committed to the lifestyle that he slept on a friend's floor in Ridgway one winter, paying his rent in beer. Even when Swenson turned pro in mountain biking and raced on the World Cup for seven years, he squeezed in as many ski days as his travel and training allowed, unwilling to concede any more than absolutely necessary.

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Understandably, then, Swenson did not expect to be wholly enlightened when he entered his first ski-up, ski-down *randonnée* race in Crested Butte in the early 2000s. Retired from the rigors of professional cycling and decades removed from his high school ski-racing days, Swenson had no goals or expectations. He completed the race on heavy, inefficient telemark gear and nylon climbing skins and did not come close to winning. But you could say that the experience changed his life, as well as the lives of plenty of others, in the years to come.

“I did that and was like, holy smokes!” Swenson recalls. “It was the perfect combo. You got the workout, but you also got to ski down as fast as you can.”

Since that day, no one in the United States has

played a bigger role than Swenson in promoting and growing “rando” racing, a.k.a. competitive ski mountaineering, or “skimo.” The sport features ultralight gear and rewards a skier’s all-around skills and fitness more than any other discipline; participants climb and descend roughly 5,000 vertical feet in a race, often on technical terrain and hard snow. Rando has taken off particularly fast in Breckenridge, where an established core of devotees zips up and down the slopes every morning and evening.

To be fair, the local fast-and-light movement, like the national one, dates back longer than Swenson’s influence reaches. But one might say he’s steered the sport from infancy to adolescence, spurred in part by a trip to its epicenter: Europe. In 2006, Swenson, who has lived in Breckenridge on and off for the better part of a decade, competed alongside five other Americans at the biannual world championships in Italy. The event marked the first time he’d seen the sport’s highest level up close, and though he flailed at times with his technique (“it was like we were starting at zero,” he attests), the experience inspired him.

The autumn after Swenson returned from Italy, he launched a series called the Colorado Ski Mountaineering Cup (COSMIC). The five-race circuit debuted with an average of forty racers per event; this year, it will feature ten competitions—including one at the inaugural Winter Teva Mountain Games in Vail and spring races at Breckenridge and A-Basin—and likely attract more than a hundred competitors to each event. Swenson, 44, also serves as director of the U.S. Ski Mountaineering Association (USSMA),

Making an Olympic Comeback?

Backcountry ski racing was included in the first Olympic Winter Games, held in Chamonix, France, in 1924, but the sport has been left out ever since. Many Europeans believe it will return to the Olympic docket within a decade. Swenson, however, is tempering his optimism.

“Unfortunately, the governing body for our sport, the International Ski Mountaineering Federation, is not quite where they should be as an organization that’s trying to bring a sport into the Olympics,” he explains. “Right now, it’s a couple people working part-time in Europe. The sport is really healthy in Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and France, but otherwise it’s still on the fringe. I hope the U.S. could be in a position where we could help move it to the Olympics more quickly.”

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PHOTO BY MARNI MATTNER

the sport's national governing body, which has seen its schedule grow from approximately ten events in 2006 to twenty-five today.

"There are probably 1,000 people in the U.S. who have seen the sport and understand it now," he says.

Swenson's credibility comes from his racing success, most notably three national championships and a top-thirty finish at worlds. But don't ask him which years he won, because he doesn't remember. As his younger brother Carl, a three-time Olympic cross-country racer and thirteen-year member of the U.S. Ski Team, said in a phone interview: "I think you were the first one to tell me there was a national championship. I don't think Pete told me. I just remember him saying, 'Oh yeah, it's great; we've got more races now.'"

Swenson's approachability and willingness to share knowledge have attracted everyone from beginners to elite athletes. He goes out of his way to teach the nuances, hosting clinics and posting instructional videos on the USSMA website. When a group in, say, Wisconsin or Montana wants to host a new rando race—or even request uphill access at their local ski area—they call Swenson, and he walks them through the process.

"The first thing I tell them is to find someone, whether it's in mountain management or ski patrol, who owns a pair of skins," Swenson explains. "Because if you just go in and say, 'I want to skin up the ski area,' they can't process it. You'll still go to ski areas now where people have never seen anyone go uphill."

When considering the alpine-touring culture Swenson has helped foster in Breckenridge and Summit County, it's important to remember that we are not far removed from the "Randonnée: French for can't tele" bumper stickers. But the boom in backcountry travel over the past decade has spawned lighter and faster gear. One of the reasons the sport has grown so fast in Breckenridge is that more locals are using that gear on groomed slopes.

"Ultimately, it's a wide ski area with easy access to town, and it's in the culture here," Swenson says. "A lot of the ski patrollers skin to work. Our mayor skins before he goes to work. The CEO of Breck, she skins. Also, the ski area saw how popular it was and they said, 'This is

fine, we'll manage it,' rather than try and limit it."

To capitalize on local interest, the Town of Breckenridge started its own dawn/dusk race series two years ago. At Mountain Outfitters, the local backcountry gear shop, "lightweight touring equipment sales basically staved off the recession for us," attests co-owner Chris Tennal. "And I think Pete had a lot to do with that."

Still, if you ask Swenson's local ski partners, they will tell you that despite all of the effort he puts into competitions, he's more interested in "promoting a lifestyle of ski touring, not any bleed-out-your-eyeballs racing for two hours," says Dominic Muth. Adds Brad LaRochelle: "When you go skiing with him, it's not like, 'Hey, let's go faster.' He just loves being out there climbing mountains and skiing."

Swenson's favorite place to ski is the rugged Gore Range, which is known for long approaches, steep couloirs, and big vertical. In 2010, he flew to Pakistan to attempt the 26,400-foot Broad Peak, the twelfth-tallest mountain in the world, with Benedikt Böhm, a renowned German speed mountaineer. (They stopped short of the summit.) A year later, he proposed to his girlfriend, Jaime, while ski-

ing in the Italian Alps, and they married shortly thereafter.

Swenson's life is fuller now than it was five years ago, thanks largely to a traveling salesman gig that has him peddling everything from socks to camp chairs to Dynafit bindings. In an ideal world, he'd never have to explain the sport to another insurance agent ("the more they try to understand it, the more they don't") or worry about the after-party at each COSMIC race. Instead, "I'd be going around to high schools and prep schools and getting it into athletic programs," he says, "and lobbying mountain managers in New England to make uphill access legal."

Alas, that's all probably still a year or two away at best. In the meantime, Swenson keeps his finger on the pulse of the sport, marking courses, encouraging newcomers, and generally playing out his role as its modern-day godfather. "I know what I could do with a twelve-month budget in terms of growing the sport more quickly," he says. "But on the other hand, if I went and rode my motorcycle around South America for two years, the sport's certainly not going away."

It would miss him, though. **CSM**

Swenson and German mountaineer Benedikt Böhm climbing Pakistan's Broad Peak in 2010



PHOTOS COURTESY PETE SWENSON