



THE RISE OF THE SNOWBOARD GUIDE

PUNCHING THE CLOCK IN THE UNTRACKED UNIVERSE

by Dan Kostrzewski

The moment when the rotors first fire up on a heli trip is like mysticism and gluttony merging into one. It all starts with that sweet rhythmic chant and then continues with the blissful act of shouldering into the backseat of an A-Star. If the stars align against reason and reality, a guide will load your ride into the basket before directing a pilot to the drop via headset or hand signal. Then you'll set down to drop in on bliss, which is why rising skyward to track out some remote range feels just like the perfect dream.

For most shreds, scoring a seat on a heli trip ranks somewhere between fantasy and hallucination. Some get a pass into this world, but even beyond the super-funded and the lucky few who drop in then head home, there exists a class that inhabits this place on a daily basis. With a three-day invite to Snowwater, BC, photographer Lucas Jmieff and I were clearly two of the lucky. But our access is for a purpose: to see what it's like for Scott Newsome, Canada's first ACMG-certified snowboard guide to make this fantasy world his workday reality. ➔





Snowwater lodge.
Jmieff photo.

A FANTASTIC SCENE

Our entry into luxury is easy as we arrive in the dark to a four-course dinner inside Snow-water's timber-frame lodge. The next morning, as rising light makes the Valhalla Range magically appear in the picture window, it was as if angels of extravagance were singing a resounding welcome. And, as we ease in with a gourmet lodge breakfast and strong Kootenay coffee, sliding into this scene feels as comfortable as putting on the hut slippers.

Even with a bright-blue backdrop and an A-Star waiting to take us into the surrounding 150,000 acres of Bonnington Range terrain, the morning pace was relaxed, since with only a 12-guest capacity on the whiteboard that tallies daily vertical, we have almost no competition for lines in this massive zone; we leisurely lace up boots in the hallway drying room and shuffle outside into the crisp -10°C air.

After a heli briefing, a beacon lesson and a reminder of infractions—such as riding below the guide or hitting the pickup hot, which will cost an expensive round at the end of the day—the rotors fire up, and we shoulder four-across into the A-Star's back-seat. With little fanfare but significant expectation, we lift off with our guide, Scott Newsome, riding shotgun.

The fantasy of a heli trip is endless untracked on steep faces with a guide picking the best line on each run. High pressure and good stability mean this daydream is our reality as Newsome rips three fast runs right out of the gate. Instead of a lecture, Newsome leads us into each line, says a few choice words about not straying too far, and drops in first. As we rip from point A to point B, we leave slash after slash floating in the air.

At the third pickup, we lift off toward a different zone. From his window seat, Newsome picks a line, scouts terrain for signs of instability, and traces an exit to a flat spot for a convenient pickup. After relaying his plan to the pilot, he jumps onto the ridge to unload our boards from the basket as we filter out and crouch beside the door. On his signal, the ship lifts off as we huddle against the rotor wash, surrounded by fresh lines.

The crew drops fall line again with no unnecessary shuffle or traverse and burns through another 2,000 vertical feet. At the exit, Newsome throws on the brakes to make sure his group picks through the slide alder to the pickup. The heli shuts down for a rest and we regroup, three guides and their 12 guests having lunch on a shelf in the sun.



Jmieff photo.

Newsome leads a pre-flight safety seminar. Jmieff photo.



GUIDING: A HISTORY

In Canada, the guiding profession dates back to 1899, when imported Swiss guides started leading railway tourists into the glaciated peaks around Rogers Pass. The vocation grew from these alpine roots, and in 1963 the country's leading alpinists formed the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides with Hans Gmoser—also known as the patron saint of heli runs—developing a program that set the bar for membership.

The next professional shift occurred in 1996 when the industry recognized the Canadian Ski Guides Association, an upstart organization founded by Mike Wiegele's Heli Skiing and a handful of smaller operations in response to a shortage of qualified mechanized guides. Four years later, in 2000, the ACMG shifted its guide training and certification program to the school that would become Thompson Rivers University in an effort to standardize its accreditation process.

Yet even with competition in the ranks, a snowboard was still not recognized as an acceptable tool for the job. The first to

crack this barrier was John Buffery, who had been working as an ACMG full ski guide on telemark skis. While guiding a group of Euro riders through marginal conditions in 1990, Buffery realized the utility of a single plank. He began guiding on a handmade split at Mistaya Lodge, a remote touring operation in the Rockies, where he led both tele and split trips for the next seven years.

During the same decade, Ruedi Beglinger, a highly respected Swiss guide and owner of Selkirk Mountain Experience, began riding as a guide at his touring operation. In 1996, he had a board hand-split and was soon guiding 50 days per season on his snowboard.

Buffery continued to lead by example, and in 1999 pro icon Craig Kelly hired "Buff" as his personal splitboard guide. The pair traveled to destinations such as Iran, Japan, the Yukon and throughout the Canadian Rockies, where Buff guided Kelly into his famous Hole in the Wall line. While Buff was proving his job could be done on a split, the guide ranks were still officially shut to snowboarding. ➔

Newsome stays on top of the snowpack and weather reports. Hey, job got its paper work. Jmieff photo.



Even with a 50 pound pack on his back Newsome
is more nimble than the majority of his clients.
Berger photo



THE TUITION IS NOT CHEAP: AT \$7,500 FOR JUST THE THREE-PART ACMG EXAM, BOTTOM-LINE COSTS CAN APPROACH \$25,000 FOR A GUIDE TO EARN THEIR WORKING PAPERS.

THE RARITY OF SHRED GUIDES

When most riders visualize a guided trip, the picture is something similar to an Absinthe segment with a YouTube angle. But this image is not the norm, and most commercial outfits stick to the formula, developed over three decades, that herds guests in orderly lines to farm snow. While the cost of access is always steep, the terrain is often not. And most operations have been slow to stray from the tight-pants style of the old school.

Yet the demographics are shifting in Canada's \$100 million heli and cat industry. And customers who ride are seeking a different experience with a different line. "So many dudes have been guided once before, and they'll never be guided again," Newsome says. "They just couldn't believe the way it is run and the way they are treated: I mean, you're basically treated like cattle. If you've always got to stack your tracks and snow farm all day, what fun is that for the new generation of skiers and boarders? It's not what they're after; it's not what I'm after, that's for sure."

Of the roughly 340 ACMG guides and 100 CSGA guides working in British Columbia's mechanized industry, less than five per cent guide primarily on a snowboard. Larger operations like CMH or TLH might allow guides to switch setups with ideal conditions and snowboard clients, but a dedicated shred guide is a rarity. And to experience that rarity is the reason two brothers had traveled from New York to drop their vacation dollars at Snowwater.

Kitted out in Burton AK, these two quickly earn the nickname the "Doobie Brothers" with their affinity for smoke. Back in the city, they work creative jobs in the family business, designing department stores' Christmas windows. But as we lace up boots in the hallway beneath the whiteboard the next morning, they are just two more rippers in the crew.

An unmatched group will sour an entire day, but the brothers charge hard, so we hit the Fingers on run one to get the glow of morning light. We drop one run rider's left and once again leave only the light displace-

ment of airborne snow where we have been.

Unlike conventional practice, where guides ski with a tight-pants style, Newsome rides like one of us, except with a 40-pound pack and a pair of poles. So instead of being confined to a flat, featureless face, we continue in snake-run gullies off Sunny D while keeping the whole posse in sight, then hit the hard traverse through the trees. As each run flattens, we run it out through tight glades as Newsome's track leads the way to the pickup.

A frozen gas pump back at the lodge slows us down, and we wait an hour for the refuel at a shady pickup. Newsome digs a pit to share some science with the brothers and pitches them on taking one of his avalanche classes. When the chariot returns, we close it out with lunch on high ground and more of the satisfying same. Back at the lodge we sip hot soup and drink cold beer at happy hour, while the whiteboard says we've tallied 30,000 feet of untracked in two days. The brothers are visibly stoked.

EARNING YOUR STRIPES

The view from the front seat may be sweet, but becoming a guide is not an easy road. Even for a skier, being accepted into the ACMG Mountain Guides program is a process. Entry is not easy, and some mountain men wait three or four years to get their shot. The list of prerequisites is long and includes a mandatory Canadian Avalanche Association Professional Level 1 class and an 80-hour first aid course.

Most who make it in also have a CAA Level 2 and have worked several seasons as ski patrol, avalanche control or in the apprentice role of tail guide. But the most challenging precondition is a daunting résumé of self-powered trips, tours and ascents in a geographic mix of ranges, an effort that can take three to five years for even a bearded backcountry fanatic to complete. And sled access does not count.

Once in the program, the ACMG assistant ski guide track is more evaluational than educational, its high standards resulting in a 40

per cent failure rate. And tuition is not cheap: at \$7,500 for just the three-part ACMG exam, bottom-line costs can approach \$25,000 for a guide to earn their working papers.

The catch is that—officially—these new stripes only qualify an assistant guide to be mentored by a lead guide while preparing to take the step to full ski guide cert, an exam that is more selective, more costly and more epic.

The ACMG is the internationally recognized gold standard, but the other entry into the profession is through the Canadian Ski Guides Association. Their alternative is structured with a Level 1 course followed by a Level 2 exam, normally taken after two on-the-job seasons of tail guiding. Where the ACMG has long been rooted in mountaineering disciplines and recently added a mechanized module, the CSGA emphasizes heli days over ski tours and requires training as a ski or shred instructor.

The CSGA alternative provided a faster track to gaining actual guiding experience, but in 2004, HeliCat Canada, which speaks for 30 of 36 operators, stopped recognizing any new CSGA certifications. Many smaller or snowcat ops kept CSGA guides on their roster, but HeliCat suddenly clamped down with stricter rules in 2007. This move prompted independent operations such as Baldface and Snowwater to leave the organization in an effort to stick with their established guiding crews. The political issue is still unresolved, but for now CSGA credentials and CSGA guides are stuck in a grey area.

Whether ACMG or CSGA, leading groups as an assistant ski guide or a Level 2 guide is no way to get rich. The wage at this stage averages \$200/day for a three-to-five-month season, a day rate that climbs to the \$400 range for lead guides. As a result, most new guides need to either head south for the summer or land an off-season gig in such fields as fishing or forestry to rise through the ranks in this luxury industry. ➔

Snowboarders have had to make their own way in a skiers world since day one and guiding is no exception. With pioneers like Craig Kelly blazing a trail Newsome was finally able to be an accredited guide. Craig Kelly at the infamous "Hole in the wall." Gallup photo.

THE WORKDAY REALITY

The wage may not include hazard pay or a shaka bonus, but returning clients safe and stoked at the end of each day is a guide's primary job. And the unspoken fact is that the mechanized world is fraught with danger. Simply riding in the heli is a risk, which we learned over a beer the first night when the pilot explained the malfunctions that could tear off the rotors, kill the engine and cause his ship to crash.

Lifting off is not the only issue, and the ironclad disclaimer signed at the start of each trip warns against gruesome injury and tree-well submersion. But the biggest hazard that lurks in the realm is an avalanche. In the past decade, 19 avalanche fatalities have occurred during guided ski days in BC, and while the odds of catastrophe are extremely low, the responsibility of picking each line weighs heavily on the guide's shoulders.

But this decision is far from roshambo roulette. Snowpack stability is a complicated science that takes years to master and is monitored at every operation with meticulous care. And that evening, while the big-screen blares in the warm lodge and the masseuse makes her rounds in the luxurious guest chalets, I'm in the guides' shack getting a glimpse of the nightly work that goes into keeping guests safe.

Like most shacks, this one is a cramped beam and plywood structure stocked with tools of the trade, from rescue sleds and climbing gear to radio chargers and topo maps that detail Snowwater's surrounding 150,000 acres of prime tenure. A snowpack profile hangs on the wall, showing lingering clues to the sketchy early season that saw slides rip to ground, take Newsome for a ride and bury a cat road, leaving the guides rattled from the experience.

But the current week is a different story with the snowpack gaining strength by the day. Newsome checks the next day's weather forecast on the laptop, rates the day's stability with his fellow guides and files a report on the InfoEx, a service that shares snowpack, weather and incident data between Canadian cat and heli operations. When the work is done, the guides wrap it up and nurse beers to decompress.

"The most challenging parts are the days when you have poor stability," Newsome says. "The days when it's sunny, good stability, good group—that shit is easy. It's the days where you have poor stability, a shitty group, natural avalanches and skier-triggered avalanches are happening all around you—those are some very trying days because you still have to be up there and show people a good time."

THE MOST CHALLENGING PRECONDITION IS A DAUNTING RÉSUMÉ OF SELF-POWERED TRIPS, TOURS AND ASCENTS IN A GEOGRAPHIC MIX OF RANGES, AN EFFORT THAT CAN TAKE THREE TO FIVE YEARS FOR EVEN A BEARDED BACKCOUNTRY FANATIC TO COMPLETE. AND SLED ACCESS DOES NOT COUNT.





Safety first. Newsome digs a pit to ensure all guests arrive safe for dinner. Jmieff photo

BECOMING THE ALTERNATIVE

By the turn of the decade, snowboarders had grown into an important backcountry demographic with more riders hitting mechanized ops to seek out a good time. But rather than cater to this crowd, most outfits treated them with an attitude somewhere between tolerance and insolence. And snowboarders could sense the vibe.

At the same time Buffery was breaking down barriers, Jeff Pensiero was starting a snowcat operation outside Nelson as a snowboard-friendly alternative to experiences he'd had paying big money for poor treatment. In 1998, both Buffery and Kelly signed on to be part of the effort, the three making it a mission to focus the operation on snowboard guiding, with Buff serving as lead guide for the next six seasons.

Yet even with ratios and attitudes shifting, the guiding industry had still not warmed to snowboarding. When Newsome first applied to the ACMG in 1999, he was turned down and told he needed to ski. Instead, he enrolled in the CSGA program, an organization that graduated shred legend Don Schwartz in 1994 but had required him to meet the ski requirement. Instead, Newsome passed his exams by impressing the examiners with his downhill skill in split mode and proving the split's utility as a tool for the trade.

With his Level 2 credential, Newsome got his foot in the door at Cat Powder, a family-run snowcat operation near Revelstoke, to gain experience. Demian Whitley, Heath Lockhurst

and Mark Fawcett followed his example in the CSGA track, all three passing their Level 2 and forming the core of Buff's crew at Baldface, an operation with an interest in recruiting and mentoring rather than shunning their kind.

Through his role at Baldface and his work teaching professional CAA courses on a splitboard, Buffery inspired an increasing number of aspiring guides, including the late Craig Kelly, who set his sights on the ACMG. Buffery, through conversations with technical director Dwayne Congdon, helped convince the ACMG to soften its stance on splitboarding. Kelly earned his shot and completed the first two modules, receiving glowing reports from examiners.

Most snowboarders know the sad story: Kelly was killed in a 2003 avalanche at Selkirk Mountain Experience while preparing for his final exam. And while this tragic slide, which left six others dead, created an irreplaceable void at Baldface and in the wider snowboard community, Kelly's profile, dedication and preparation had broken down a barrier that allowed others to follow in his track.

The next season, Scott Newsome was accepted into the ACMG program and, two exams later, in 2005, became the first to pass the ACMG assistant ski guide exam on a split.

"I could have just done what so many other people have done and just go ski and be that guy and just ski for the exam," Newsome says. "That wasn't really the point I was trying to make, and after Craig's death, it was like somebody had to finish what he started." ➔



Great dinners at after great days are just part of the perks. Newsome at the head of the table. Jmieff photo

"THE DAYS WHERE YOU HAVE POOR STABILITY, A SHITTY GROUP, NATURAL AVALANCHES AND SKIER-TRIGGERED AVALANCHES ARE HAPPENING ALL AROUND YOU—THOSE ARE SOME VERY TRYING DAYS BECAUSE YOU STILL HAVE TO BE UP THERE AND SHOW PEOPLE A GOOD TIME."

You thought the thought the corner office with a view was as good as it gets. Check out Newsome's office. Jmieff photo



THE LONG VIEW

The final day wakes to rising light on Dominion and three quick rips to the sled cabin at the lake. We break for lunch on high ground and get perspective on both the distant Darkwoods, which will soon be added to Snowwater's tenure, and aesthetic high-alpine lines across the valley that won't go green until spring. A lunchtime discussion between the guides turns an adjacent zone from red to yellow, which means we hit steep north-facing runs for overhead shots in bottomless snow that hasn't been touched in weeks.

With the kind of unlimited visibility and good stability like we are again experiencing, the first six runs go quick. By early afternoon the Brothers have hit their limit, so Newsome entices his two paying clients to throw down the AmEx for one more run. Back on top we reconvene with the other groups as the guides peer over the backside, dig a pit and, after conferring, give a green-light consensus for Newsome to drop the chute into the steepest line of the trip.

As the A-Star sits perched high on a ridge from a safe vantage point and Lucas trains his long lens on the drop, Newsome gingerly points the entry and straightlines the exit, accelerating nearly out of sight and racking up more than 2,000 vertical as he runs it out at speed through the West Trees below. And for the guests and guides watching and waiting from above, his line shows us all how it should be done.

The mountain professions may move at a glacial pace, but change is on the horizon. A second splitboarder, Greg Johnson, passed his assistant ski guide exam last season, and a third, Johann Slam, was admitted into the ACMG program this winter. The CSGA is seeing a fifth of its students enrolling on snowboards, avalanche forecasters such as Tom Chalmers (also an SBC contributor) have broken new ground at the CAA, and CAA Professional Avalanche classes are seeing more and more riders passing the prerequisites to the profession.

With the success of progressive operations such as Baldface and Snowwater, demand for guides who ride is outpacing supply with operations such as Retallack, Powder Mountain and Stellar Heli taking a snowboard-friendly stance. But for the dedicated shreds who want to break in on a board rather than simply switching to skis, it will still take a greater commitment to become a guide on a splitboard.

"The industry has their standards set, and there aren't too many people out there, like myself, that want to put themselves through that program. That's the thing: it's not the industry; it's the qualifications or the quality that they want to see," Newsome says. "They told me what they wanted to see, and I just worked on those skills. It's like anything: If you want to be a doctor, you have to conform to the industry standards. You have to conform to what the industry expects."

AN ALTERNATE ENDING

The exit from our daydream is fast and smooth as we are shuttled to the business office to pay our hefty bar tab. Newsome is also out. After collecting his tips, he prepares to head the four hours home to Revelstoke. The paradox of the profession is that the money is made in heli and cat rotations, but on their day off most guides would rather go tour. Before he leaves, Newsome invites me to Rogers Pass for an off-the-clock daytrip with no mechanized assist.

Two days later we meet at the Tim Hortons on the Trans-Canada and drive to Rogers Pass while Newsome mounts up a fresh Prior in the front seat. His face is familiar in the info centre. Even after a week of high pressure, he knows where to go. Newsome has spent a decade tracking out these spectacular peaks with people like Greg Hill and Frank Derosier, and he has a sixth sense for where to find a sweet line.

We park past the info centre, and he takes off, skinning fast through the trees to work off stress as I strain to keep him in sight. After a break with views of Mount MacDonald and an impromptu lesson on route-finding in complex terrain, Newsome breaks trail up a rising drainage and brings us on rhythm to a vast alpine zone beneath the Swiss Peaks with not one soul in sight. And unlike his work scene, where he is quietly guarded and serious with responsibility, the off-duty guide is relaxed and energized in this thin air.

On the skin up, while I'm quietly focused on inhaling enough oxygen, Newsome details his business plan to develop a splitboard guiding business that will bring him back to these roots with snowboard clients. With an independent, hybrid model that fuses avalanche education, trips through lodges like Snowwater and guiding into the ranges of the Selkirks, Rockies and Coast Range, this is how he hopes to lastingly grow his passion into a year-round, family-wage profession.

"I want people to come back and be return clients of mine," Newsome says. "Just build a wicked clientele of snowboarders, people who want to come and ride with me."

We traverse a windy glacier below the Swiss Peaks and top out at the Truda Col at 9,900 feet. Back at the base of Boulder Mountain is the comfort of family with his wife, Kerry, and his sons, Sebastian and Kaeson, but up here he seems just at home. Always the guide, he takes my photo with my PowerShot before we snap together splits and drop in for one full-speed, six-grand return. Just before exiting out the Hermit Valley, we pause at the top of a narrow chute. Finding it fresh and knowing this local exit will go, he smiles and snakes in first, leaving me to follow a roost of fresh in his wake. ■

