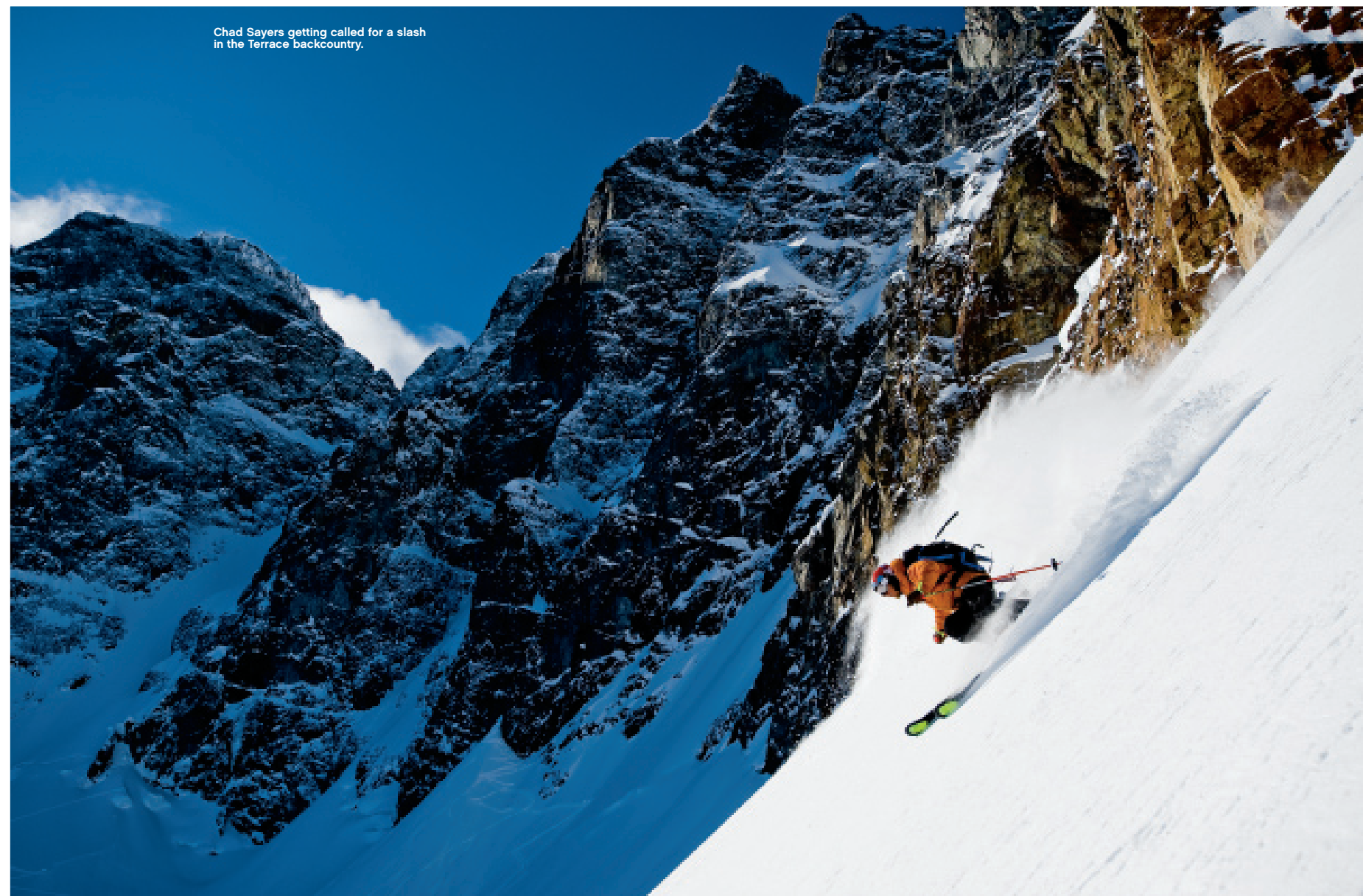




A Tale of Two Cities

A QUEST TO FERRET OUT B.C.'S LAST
SOUL-SKIING STASHES

by Dan Kostrzewski
photos Jordan Manley



Chad Sayers getting called for a slash in the Terrace backcountry.

By the time the nachos arrived at our roundtable, we were deep in discussion about where to find a fresh line. We had been way up north in Smithers—14 hours from British Columbia's southern border, to be exact—for three days and had already exhausted Hudson Bay Mountain's entire skiable area. Our local guides, former racer and magazine cover girl Claire Challen, and Dev Khurana, a ski patroller, had guided us proudly around their one-chair and two T-bar hill. But they knew from day one it lacked what we'd come north to find.

Chad Sayers, Jordan Manley and I had followed Dev and his hand-knit toque under the boundary rope, across windswept flats and into the glades the first day. The second morning we'd chased Claire's perfect tuck and precise turns down icy blue groomers, to the stalagmites of the abandoned Simpson mine. Then over to the old side of the hill, where she invited us into her family's ski cabin—bought for \$2,000 during the late '70s.

The homestead hinted at Smithers' storied history as an arctic ski bum lair, but back at après, the spirit faded. The remodeled Whiskey Jack's bar—that now looks identical to every other resort watering hole in B.C.—was supposed to be a sign of progress, complete with a new stone fireplace, fancy bathroom fixtures, and friendly table service. The facelift was the first step by the 20/20 Group, which had purchased and renamed Ski Smithers from local ownership in 2005—ostensibly to turn

this community ski hill into B.C.'s next mountain resort. Six months earlier, the local paper had billed Smithers as the "Next Whistler" after a \$75 million master plan was signed with the provincial government, including seven new lifts, 6,400 bed units and, following Intrawest's formula, an integrated base village.

But sameness was not what drew our crew this far from home, and witnessing another B.C. town eager to trade its ski culture for a sanitized "mountain resort" scene left us hungry for the real thing. Rather than accept our fate, we did what any sane ski bum jonesing for powder would. We jumped ship, packed the car and followed rumors of a backwater powder stash three hours west.

With a storm rolling toward the Coast Range and 20/20's bulldozers in the rearview, we set off down Highway 16 to rewrite the Whistlerization of B.C. Our destination: the unknown slopes of Shames Mountain Ski Area 120 miles away in the one-horse hockey town of Terrace. Our mission: to discover if the heart of down-and-dirty B.C. soul-skiing was still beating.

As anyone who has ripped the terrain up north knows, B.C. is deeply rooted in ski culture. North American alpinism was founded on Rogers Pass in 1899 and Scandinavian immigrants imported their breed of skiing along with North America's first ski jump on Mount Revelstoke in 1915. The

first downhill race in Canada took place on Red Mountain in 1896, where the first chairlift in western Canada was also installed in 1947.

Beyond the ski hill, the rugged nature of B.C. led Hans Gmoser to invent the concept of heli runs in the Bugaboos in 1965, building an industry based on untracked bliss in competition with his peers in the surrounding Monashees, Purcells and Selkirks. Cat skiing was also christened in the province at Selkirk Wilderness Skiing in 1975, and an extensive network of alpine huts became destinations for a new breed of skin-track tourists. Ski bums came for the same reasons, building a grassroots culture in the powder triangle of Whitewater, Fernie and Red Mountain in the 1970s with the mantra steep, deep and cheap.

But the profitable corporate resort model was also perfected in B.C., starting when the provincial government created the Resort Municipality of Whistler in 1975—and gifted Crown Land to the new entity to develop Eldon Beck's New Village concept on the site of the Alta Lake garbage dump. Whistler and Blackcomb rose dramatically to prominence, becoming the first North American hill to top more than two million skier days in 1999 and four years later winning the bid to host the 2010 Olympics, a designation that brought international prestige but also spurred seven years of superheated development.

The Olympics hovering on the immediate horizon and tourism being pushed as B.C.'s new resource economy soon led to a general selling

out of the original character that once drew skier's to the province. Backwaters like Golden and Revelstoke have been refitted as world-class destination resorts, and new developments, like the \$450-million Jumbo Glacier Resort, threaten to invade the most pristine corners of the Canadian Rockies.

With the cloud of Whistlerization descending on B.C., we were relieved to not see a single fancy SUV in Shames' parking lot the afternoon we drove in. In fact, there weren't any cars in the lot since the ski area is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. We stretched our skins instead and hiked under the creaking Blue Chair, along the Red T-bar, out the access gate and up to the top of the Dome. Jordan had skied Shames before and led us to Zymacord Bowl, which he vaguely recalled held a variety of backside lines. With ridges fanning out and peaks stacked to the horizons, the vantage from our highpoint was proof enough that the skiing here would be a different story.

The three of us dropped one at a time into North Bowl—adding surface slough and our fresh lines to the four still sitting uncrossed from Sunday. We regained the ridge and then ripped down an empty run with the setting sun backlighting the Valley of Certain Doom and Happy Valley. Few ski hills are immune to B.C.'s development rush and it was hard to comprehend why this zone had been left untouched. But we weren't about to fuss. Driving though town the next day, we realized we'd

"With ridges fanning out and peaks stacked to the horizons, the vantage from our highpoint was proof enough that the skiing at Shames would be a different story."

Good ski towns should compliment the hills they serve, which is why Chad Sayers thinks "Hockeyville" is a dumb name for Terrace.



found a corner of B.C. skiing that had somehow been preserved. **Most ski bums would agree that, when it comes to gauging a resort, ski towns are as important as the hill they serve.** The difference being that good ski towns, like homes, fit within their environment. The fishing stores, spirit bear statues and Canadian Tire shops lining Terrace's Lakelse Avenue couldn't have differed more from 20/20's plans as we toured the old mill town that evening. Nor could the itinerant hippies, mulleted locals and the omnipresent Royal Canadian Mounted Police roaming the sidewalks the next morning.

Throughout the town, flags flew in celebration of Terrace's new designation by CBC as "Hockeyville"—in a contest meant to promote small Canadian communities. The designation would bring the NHL to town for a preseason game next fall, and the influx of cash was expected to make a difference in the town, where the pulp mill is closed and work has been hard to find for more than a decade.

Though down at the heels, Terrace felt like a skier's sanctuary compared to Smithers. The cost of living was low and there was an abundance of lines and stunning backcountry terrain surrounding it. During the past five years, the area had become home for many skiers priced out of fancy ski towns down south, according to longtime avalanche forecaster Rod Gee.

"The real estate prices in those places have been driving people to

come here," Gee said. "It started as a trickle and then those people told their friends back wherever they came from and encouraged them to come up."

The dark clouds coming into Shames that night brought eight inches of fluff and at 10 a.m. the next morning, we were happy to see the chairs on the hill more empty than full. We loaded up with local Luke Holden, who told us that the inbounds options at Shames were simply left or right. We traversed left to Terminator trees, where Luke hucked blind into the gully. Back at the top we tried skier's right through the mossy glades of Deliverance, which ended abruptly when, unable to see the forest through the whiteout, I fell five feet to flat on a cat track. At the T-bar, we found the native lifties blasting metal and smoking in stride.

I shared the next T-bar ride with a refugee from Red Mountain who left Rossland for a less-developed scene, his white beard growing both thicker and whiter by the minute with accumulating snow. At the top, we met up with a Vancouver group led by Lee Lau, up north for an adventure and talking loudly about yesterday's lines. On the next lift ride, Luke lauded Shames' great lines and epic snowfall, saying, "There is this big deal where Terrace is Hockeyville. But we think it should be Shredville."

The fortunes of British Columbia have long been linked to the boom and bust of resource exploitation. But Whistler's rise sparked an imperial desire to promote winter tourism as the next natural resource.

This is the left option at Shames. There is also a right.

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—Luke Holden

TOP: Dean Wagner does some forestry work at Shames.
BOTTOM: With 475 inches a year, just digging out is a massive undertaking.



In 1995, the B.C. legislature passed the Mountain Resort Associations Act (MRA), which incentivized development of downhill areas in Whistler's image with cheap Crown Land and full government backing. Two years later, the government began granting new backcountry tenures, resulting in a dramatic expansion of heli and cat operations, with mechanized ops more than doubling in number and hitting 100,000 skier days by 2008. Throughout the next decade, the Liberal Party also pushed hard for mini-Whistlers, with developers polishing community hills into real estate opportunities at places such as Fernie, Kicking Horse, Silver Star, Red Mountain and Revelstoke.

With towns ripe for a remake becoming scarce, the MRA was expanded in 2007 to create mountain resorts in unsettled areas, a potential tool to bypass local opposition to Jumbo Glacier Resort. Three years earlier, a strong local backlash had stalled the Jumbo proposal, a massive \$450-million resort footprint pushed by Vancouver developer and Kicking Horse base lodge designer Oberto Oberti, backed by the ruling Liberals, and targeted for grizzly habitat on melting glaciers in a high-alpine wilderness near Invermere.

But then the bottom dropped out of the economy and the landscape changed. Revelstoke's massive expansion ran out of money

and, this summer, 20/20 scaled back its Hudson Bay Mountain plans. The company had sold just 15 of 54 lots and sent out this release concerning the future of the resort: "...our research supports that the broader range of defined price point for a defined product is required to overcome uncertainty associated with building on the mountain. We will also offer a limited number of cabins for delivery in conjunction with servicing the site which is planned for 2010."

Just a couple hours southwest, the salesmanship at Shames Mountain was a little less complicated. The ski hill has been locally owned since it opened in 1990, when it was buried under 78 feet of snowfall.

(The annual average is 475 inches, making just digging out a massive undertaking.) Due to the luck and curse of snowfall, as well as rising fuel costs and a stagnant economy, the enterprise has lost money all 19 of its seasons. On our last night in Terrace, I discovered that Shames was for sale—for less than the price of a Whistler townhouse. But without power running to the hill and no potential for view lots, the offers are not pouring in. Next season, the board will try a different strategy, one of the stockholders told me: asking pass holders to voluntarily pay more to keep the area open.

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Like most B.C. skiers I spoke to, writer Leslie Anthony lamented how the province's small ski towns had been transformed since he reported on them during the early '90s for *POWDER*. "If you overdevelop shit and try to make these big, splashy magnets for certain types of tourists," he says, "you are by default or definition excluding a bunch of other tourists who would come for the charm and undeveloped nature of these places."

He also held you could find soul anywhere if you looked deep enough.

So we hit Highway 16 to give Smithers one last chance. We were happy we did when we found the "Ski Bums"—a band of tree planters—playing by a palette bonfire when we arrived. We joined the crew, who were busy doing keg stands behind a worn rental house nine miles south of town. The next day, we kept the good times rolling, lapping bumps and groomers with a very pregnant local skier, Vesna Young—who was shredding on her husband Jake's handmade 120mm-waist Carpathian Skis. Later that day, we hid from the subzero chill in the warming hut atop the Skyline triple. Teenagers eating lunch from Tupperware containers and an old-timer thawing his toes by the woodstove were proof enough that 20/20 hadn't snuffed out Smither's old guard quite yet.

Back on the hill, we bumped into Brian Hall skiing off the triple chair. Hall was planning a backcountry ski area in the Hankin/Evelyn drainage south of town. He told us that he already had government funding to cut 30 runs, employ out-of-work foresters and create a sustainable resource with low overhead and no plan to profit.

It was reassuring to uncover an alternative to the master plan before we took our last run down the Rotary Trail to town. But the next morning, as we drove from the Stork Nest Inn for our long trip home, it was unclear what vision would shape the area's future. The storefronts on Main Street were still shut at 9 a.m. and 8,500-foot Hudson Bay Mountain loomed postcard-perfect over the town. For now it seemed like nothing was really happening here, and with the economy still finding its way out of a hole, I realized that might be the new story of the north. Which to most skiers sounds just fine. ❁