



Crucible

Dan Kostrzewski | 360.201.7701 | dank@cruciblecreative.com

## Duty Now for the Future

### Tom Routh Creates The Next Big Thing from the BC Backcountry

Words: Dan Kostrzewski

Birken, BC is a snowboarder's paradise: north-country seclusion, deep coastal snowpack and sled-access back-country. After braving Olympic-scale construction on Highway 1, SUV backups in Whistler, and a final cocktail at the gritty Pemberton Hotel, the tiny hamlet of Birken is still one Native Reservation, five rail crossings and 25 clicks north. A tiny speck on the Coast Mountain map. A few kilometers short of the snowplow turnaround sits the in-residence workshop of Tom Routh, snowboarding's most influential under-the-radar craftsman who has completely changed what we wear when we ride.

Routh's Birken compound stands in striking contrast to its off-grid location. His FYI design studio is stocked with cutting-edge technology: seam-taping, laser-cutting and digital patternmaking equipment. Industrial sewing machines, high-temperature presses and cutting tables fill the square footage. Rolls of next-gen fabric are shelved in bulk, while zippers, buckles and swatches compete with piles of prototype packs, decade-old samples, and current prototypes for storage space. While some of his peers barely require even a basic tool kit for their sketch-and-contract work, Tom's hands-on method demands the horsepower of a fully stocked shop.

Routh and Susanna Bergstrom, his partner in both life and design, have shuffled their his-and-her sleds and dusty dirt bikes into the garage during their recent build-out. Inside the residence, chaos reigns while the mandatory remodel moves forward on Birken time. Two new recruits, six RAM-doubled Macs, and a quiver of backcountry toys have all moved into the house. The gear collection that now overwhelms the ground floor includes pieces from Tom's early days as a Sims rider at Mt Bachelor and as a racer on the World Cup circuit. Framed shots from pro-roster adventure trips to Alaska, Argentina, Spain, Wyoming, Rogers Pass, and Island Lake Lodge line the walls, and snapshots of recent neighborhood heli drops on Mt Currie bookend his personal history of fine lines.

While some recoil at bringing work home, Routh has always maintained close proximity to his interlinked passions of riding and design. At Cirqueworks—the pack company he started at age 23 with Laura Metzler—Routh took up residence in a small room off the shop while honing his radical designs and seeing his operation run dry of cash. When he moved on to Salomon's Design Center, Tom baffled the corporate folk by showing up with a semi-trailer full of sewing machines—and an '85 Volvo packed with personal items. Then, when recruited to launch Arc'teryx into snowsports, he crammed an 8-foot-square cutting table into his cramped Vancouver loft to burn the midnight oil while refining his revolutionary curved-zip shell. After Arc'teryx sold to Salomon, Tom checked out, headed north and opted for the free hand of freelance, settling on a location with a workspace 20 steps from home.

This intense personal investment has defined his work. Each round, the cyclical outcome has been both total exhaustion and pure brilliance. But, ultimately, he chooses to let his products get the glory. His patented Cirqueworks pack design changed how we haul boards up the bootpack and was copied—both with and without permission—by many major brands. His Arc'teryx Descent line—which pioneered innovations such as sublimated branding, laminated radio pockets, rolltop packs, two-textile hybrids and the curved zipper—collected outstanding reviews and became an on-hill sensation that catalyzed a dramatic shift toward clean and technical style.

Now as the snowpack builds in the prime alpine zones, the next creative phase is following the same familiar pattern. FYI—fathered products for Tumi, Medium, and Apple are in the pipeline and Burton AK has signed on the dotted line for the studio's next major design initiative. Again, the work revs forward without fanfare and in flip-flops. Staring out a Birkenhaus window with a Turkish coffee in hand, he drinks in the spectacular peaks out the back door as daily inspiration.

*Talk about your first exposure to snowboarding.*

I had a skateboard shop when I was 13 that I started out of the house and later rented space in a local bike shop. One day, one of my skateboard distributors sent out a mailing list of all their new products and on it they had a snowboard—spelled SNOBOARD. No description, no brand, no idea what it was, no drawing, no anything, just a line-item on a list. I had no clue what it was, so I ordered up a couple of them, sight unseen, and two Burton Per-former Woodies showed up in the mail. Prior to that I'd never seen a snowboard. That was where it started.

*What was it like to be at Mt Bachelor early on?*

It was great. Bachelor was an ideal mountain to start riding, considering we were riding prehistoric boards that had no metal edges and no P-tex. The terrain at Bachelor is floaty, skatepark-style terrain that was well-suited to riding powder on those early boards. There was no set style and gear was evolving so fast that every six months your setup became obsolete. Style was up for grabs and everybody was doing their own thing and that's what was cool about it.

*What year did you start riding for Sims?*

I guess '87; I was doing contests in '86, but '87 was when I stepped it up and started riding for Sims and went to the US Open and World's at Breckenridge. Just started competing a lot, traveling a lot and skipping school [laughs].

*Was that before or after you were on the Transworld cover?*

That was before the Transworld cover. We did that photo shoot in '87 at Bachelor. We had great conditions and a whole posse of people at Bachelor at that time. We just had a big freeriding session for a couple days at Bachelor and Transworld pretty much shot their whole magazine in three days from that shoot. I didn't find out I had the cover until I was at the top of the halfpipe at the US Open. I had just made it into the finals and Kevin Kinnear [first TWS editor] came up and told me I had the next cover. That was kind of a stoker moment.

*How'd you decide that you wanted to get into design?*

I always liked to build things. When I still lived in the Pacific Northwest I was competing, but I was still doing a bit of backcountry. Pretty much climbed all the Cascades at different times, and early on it was just brutal. There was no equipment at all to be in the backcountry and no backpack in particular to carry a snowboard.

After schlepping on some of those trips I was pretty keen to find a better backpack. So, when I first arrived in Bozeman, I looked up Dana Gleason [founder of Dana Design] and started talking to him about snowboard packs. I kind of had an idea of what I wanted to do but I couldn't really explain it, so I just drew a sketch of the Beavertail. And eventually that turned into the Shadow Peak, which was the first pack where you could load your board. It was a huge leap forward.

*And that's how you learned to sew?*

Yeah. I spent about a year floundering for the most part, but learning how to sew and pattern. I called it "combat sewing" back then because it was just kind of what I needed to do to get the thing together. After about a year, and a dozen generations of attempted packs, I was finally starting to make headway and got a nice pack together. I started out just trying to make a pack for myself and, finally, I found at the end I had something pretty good I wanted to get out to people somehow because, at the time, it was the only pack that really was purposely built for snowboarding. And it didn't really fit into Dana's line, so I bought a couple of sewing machines and a computer and started Cirqueworks with Laura Metzler. We just started building packs in our apartment at the time.

*You moved Cirqueworks to Portland to give the business a better shot, but it still seemed like it was a tough go. What was the biggest challenge?*

There were a lot of them. The biggest challenge was the manufacturing. It's super hard to be a manufacturer of anything in the United States at this point, but really tough to be a small pack manufacturer especially. It requires a lot of steps and a lot of parts and they're not easy to build. The margins are small, so it's really tough to get to where you are making money. We were getting better all the time, but in the end we just didn't have enough fuel in the tank to make it become sustainable.

*How'd you decide what your next step would be?*

Well, I was pretty exhausted at that point and I wasn't ready to get back into doing something entrepreneurial. So, I ended up going to work for Salomon at their design center in Boulder, which was a huge change because we went from being this little, tiny company that was hands-on vertical with machines and making product, to going to a fancy designer center with stacked computers but no machines and no tools. So that was kind of my first corporate experience and that didn't go so well.

*What was it like when you brought your machines into their design center?*

Well, I made space in the basement for the machines. I told Salomon I was going to show up with my machines and they were OK with it. Then I pulled up with a small semi truck and they kind of panicked.

We never really got any traction there because there were no pattern makers, no sample sewers. I had some machines, but I was so overwhelmed with work I just pretty quickly realized there wasn't any way for me to succeed with the resources I had available to me at the time. That was when the opportunity to launch snowsports with Arc'teryx came up.

*Describe what the first design cycle at Arc'teryx was like.*

It was brutal. It was kind of an 18-month session from the start to the launch of the line. I had never really designed apparel before. It was very much a crash course. I had a lot of pressure to pull the program off and it consumed my life for those 18 months. I set up a sleeping bag under my worktable, so I could work a 16-hour stretch, sleep for an hour and then dive back in. It was seven-days-a-week, working extremely hard right up until the show. It was tough, but it was rewarding too to see it go.

*What was special about the designs?*

The curved zip, for one. It was a pet peeve of mine where I had literally rubbed my chin raw in the past from the stiffness and the chafing of the zip. So, when I was putting together the line plan for the whole program for Arc'teryx, I had listed out the things that had always bugged me snowboarding over the years, and the stiffness of the zipper in the chin was on that list.

It just makes sense for skiing and snowboarding to get the zip off your chin. It is just a more comfortable, more functional garment for being on the hill. Also, it defined a totally different aesthetic style that looked different from anything else that was going on at the time. It really got people's attention and, as they learned more about the jacket and the company, then that's when they discovered the quality and the technology built into the garments. That's how people discovered the brand.

*That jacket just exploded?*

Yeah, it did really well. Which is great because a huge amount of work went into that jacket and, at the time, people really didn't know what to make of it and we didn't really even know if we could do it for the first 12 months of development. So, it was a risk as well. We put a lot of energy into it and I was determined to make it work. I just pushed it through until it was ready. So it was fairly gratifying to see it become one of the company's best-selling garments after that.

*The hybrids, the curved zips, the super-thin seam tape—all of your innovations—it seems as if almost every high-end company has copied some of those over the last few years. What's it like to see the technologies you pioneered infiltrating the market like that?*

It depends on the situation. Sometimes you have mixed feelings about it. It's one thing when somebody takes your idea and does their interpretation of it, it's another thing when someone goes out and buys a product, rips it apart and does a stitch-for-stitch knock-off of the product. Where you spend a year developing something and they just go and do an exact copy and put their logo where your logo was and call it a day. That really bothers me. That amounts to theft, as far as I'm concerned. On the other hand, it's great to see that progression improve the quality and sophistication of the products that are available.

*Why did you make the move to Birken?*

I got super spun-out on the city. I never have been a city guy. I grew up in the mountains and I only went to the city for work. So I made the decision to go the opposite end of the spectrum. I'd been coming up into the Pemberton Valley quite a bit snowboarding and dirt biking, so I knew what the terrain was like. It was close to the Pacific Northwest, yet you had Alaska-style terrain to tap into, and the snowmobile and helicopter access is crazy.

*And the riding is unbelievable?*

The riding is awesome. When it's good, it's unreal. A lifetime worth of AK-caliber descents within a 50-mile radius. It is a really special place and when I got the map out and looked at all the potential places I could go and compared them to what Pemberton had to offer, there wasn't anything else that even came close. So, I ended up in Birken.

*So what is the advantage for you in being up here?*

Well, it's the progression of the sport for me. I've been snowboarding for over 20 years now—done the freestyle thing, done the racing thing and done a lot of backcountry. But coming to Pemberton and tapping into the snow-mobile touring and the heli-access touring is a natural progression of the sport and a fresh challenge.

For me it's all about getting into the mountains. It's not the same experience to go to a ski hill where you've got the trailside latte stand on the side of the run and you've got music piped from the lift towers, lift lines and 25 acre parking lots. Snowboarding to me is something that's more about getting out with your friends away from all that stuff and just being in the mountains.

I mean, you don't need to make 25 runs in a day. Making three or four runs in the backcountry, but being deep in the mountains on your own is so much more rewarding an experience than any ski area. I've got countless days at the ski area that just blend together into one big blur of riding and that's all good, but the really fine moments in my mind are all out of bounds.

*Does it change things for you on a work level to be more connected with snowboarding?*

I always found it bizarre to be in the city imagining what someone would be doing in the mountains and trying to design the product accordingly. It makes so much more sense to be surrounded by people living that lifestyle—where you're living that lifestyle and you're designing product for that lifestyle. That makes so much more sense from a product-development standpoint. At least for snowsports. Now, designing for Tumi or Apple from the woods, Unabomber-style, maybe it's kind of the opposite. But for snowsports it's been great to be in Pemberton.

*For a while you were flying solo up in Birken, but with Susanna coming in as a second designer it seems like the energy has changed. What has that been like?*

We're two peas in a pod. She's got a lot of snowboarding background—been riding for 12 or 13 years, used to compete boardercross and has done a lot of trips into the Arctic and backcountry in Europe. She sold her retail store in Sweden so she could study design. She's a super-driven designer as well and so we both have this work hard, play hard mentality that would pretty much blow up any other relationship. So I don't think I could be doing what I'm doing right now without her.

*Any frustrations about being up here?*

We're pretty well living in the bush where there's no cell phones, no garbage pickup, no TV, no radio, no FedEx. It's a hard place to run a business. Things you take for granted in the city that take minutes, take hours, days or months out here to get done. We're trying to strike a balance between those two things because, as hard as we've been working, it has been very difficult. Little things like shipping and receiving packages six times a week when you're 25 minutes away from the nearest shipping and receiving point just becomes something you don't have time for.

*You've done an iPod holder for Apple, concepts for Gore-Tex, clothes for Medium and Tumi. Does working with clients outside snowboarding give you energy?*

Absolutely. I've been doing some other interesting work for the last couple of years. I've been working with Apple for the last two years and Medium and Tumi more recently. It was just amazing to work with the Apple industrial design team. That was an experience in itself. It was really inspiring.

To me there are two passions: one is snowboarding, one is design and the two don't have to be connected all the time. It's great to have done some work both inside and outside the snowsports industry. Those two things don't need to be connected because I really enjoy the design process and not just designing something for myself.

*What stokes you out about your current Burton AK projects?*

I'm actually kind of surprised, because after trying to bridge the divide between outdoor and snowsports culture for so long, I was pretty frustrated with the lack of comprehension. It's really fun because culturally, Burton and Arc'teryx are so different from each other. The people at Burton are snowsports people and connect with our lifestyle. It's been really fun to start working with a company that takes a fun approach toward design and technology. Technology doesn't have to be serious in their mind. They'll go a long way to make significant innovations just to have fun. That's very cool, I think.

*Do you see your current studio setup and your relationship with Burton as the design ideal?*

It's the best of both worlds. Burton is supporting the activity and the concept of a mountain studio so well—from the top down—that it is almost like being able to drive your own line without the headaches of sales and manufacturing. We've adopted AK and partnered with Burton as our sole snowsports client. So we've been able to drive the vision for AK, where that product category goes and how it evolves, and really stay focused on all the creative aspects without getting bogged down in the sales and manufacturing logistics. Even having your own label would have distinct disadvantages compared to the situation we have.

*It seems like you learned design through hands-on technical experience rather than going to design school. How do think that makes your approach different from most of the designers out there?*

I think a lot of times school can teach you what you can't do and therefore you won't try because you've been told you can't. Like everyone still says you can't sublimate nylon, but you can, you just have to do enough experimentation to find out how.

*Do you think the snowsports industry as a whole promotes or discourages creativity?*

Well, both. On the one hand, the snowsports industry has a lot of fun with design and does some pretty crazy stuff from time to time. On the other hand, the snowsports industry is totally stuck and mired in the fashion of snowsports culture and doesn't seem to be able to let go of oversized camo cargo pants and stuff like that. The thing I find ironic about snowboarding in general—especially having grown up with the sport and seen it from the beginning when there wasn't anything cool and there wasn't anything in or out, or a style that was right or wrong—is that now everyone strives to conform to whatever is considered cool, even if goes against the actual function and performance of their gear and the sport. It's been like that for a long time and I find that very ironic.

So, on the one hand, the industry has fun with the design and does some very cool things that outdoor companies would never do. On the other hand, the snowsports industry seems to rehash this regurgitated style of what

is supposed to be cool. I'm all about style, but I'm not into fashion. I'm not into style that doesn't function, that doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense to use products that don't enhance the sport and allow you to ride at your highest level. Whether that's hardgoods or softgoods or whatever, it does not make sense to ride stuff that's not function-forward with style. But function-forward always.

*Does the standard cycle of one-season product cycles, illustrator-only design and offshore production limit the potential of design?*

Absolutely. If the designer doesn't know how to build the garment, it's hard for them to design a good garment. Just like an architect that doesn't know how to build a house isn't going to be a very good architect. There are not many designers out there who are product users and also build the stuff they make. That's kind of frustrating because with the factory team offshore nobody's learning anything about the products they sell because they are cut off from the factory. You learn while you're trying to design the garment physically and to build the garment physically, you don't learn by drawing a picture of it on a piece of paper.

*And that's not good for the industry?*

You just end up with a bunch of stylized garments that have different brands on them. Anybody can throw lines down on a piece of paper and call it design work, but all that really is is a sketch, all it is is a drawing on a piece of paper. Whether or not the product is something great or not is totally in the execution of how it's been patterned and how it's been constructed. It's in all the details—that is what makes the product good or bad. And nobody is really addressing that right now.

I don't think it's good for the industry to be cut off. Short product cycles like that don't make sense to me either. Good design needs to evolve and get better, not just change it up yearly for the sake of style. Of course things need to stay fresh and interesting but, at the same time, they need to get better. You don't see the auto industry flipping styles every season and throwing out good engineering and good design and development work season after season after season just so they can be fresh. The [Porsche] 911 evolves, it just gets better and it gets better and it gets better over decades. Of course it needs to change or it will stagnate, but it doesn't mean you need to throw out what was good about the previous one. You just need to evolve to the next level.

*What major innovations do you see happening during the next three to five years?*

I think there is a real explosion in welding technologies, new ways to construct garments that are evolving. They still have a ways to go, but I think we are going to see feature-based improvements like ventilation systems, integrated electronics, impact protection, improved hoods and things like that. A lot of cool stuff with material innovations and welding. There are a lot of Far East factories that have really stepped up on their technology development in the last few years and we're starting to see that coming through to the products coming out of Asia right now. There's going to be some very interesting things happening in the future.

*So tell me about the sled?*

I got the RX-1 Yamaha, which is the four-stroke sled. I really couldn't justify owning a two-stroke snowmobile. Even the modern engine two-strokes put out 300 times the emissions of a car. It's just disgusting. When you could have virtually clean performance, there's no reason to put out that kind of pollution into the world.



*And the performance is better?*

The motor is fantastic, but the sled does weigh more. I mean, I want a lighter machine, but lighter machines will come. The technology is evolving; there already is a lighter machine available. I've taken 40 pounds off of mine from stock. It had exhaust pipes that came out the back that were pretty disco and they got in the way of mounting a board on the sled and putting packs on the back and weighed a lot.

So I did a custom exhaust with Vision Motor Sports. Our good friend Lincoln set me up with a custom exhaust that exits down into the tunnel, so I was able to take weight off, add power and the sled is still actually as quiet as it was before when all the snow kicked up into the tunnel and muffled the exhaust. So it was just a win-win all the way around.

I also put a cone filter intake and rejettted the carbs, so it probably has an additional 175 horsepower now. I love to get up into the alpine and get into the good zones for snowboarding and I love horsepower too, but it's already mental fast. I don't feel compelled to spend another six grand on a turbo, at least not yet.

*So after sled access and heli drops, resort riding pales in comparison?*

Where we are located now, it is actually faster for us to get the sleds out. We can be up in the alpine in the same amount of time that we'd be pulling into the parking lot at Whistler and still have to upload all the chairs. So, it's actually faster for us to get to the alpine in the backcountry than it is to go to the ski area. Lift access is really just for when friends are in town or if the avalanche hazard is high or you just want really low-effort access for making laps on the chair, then we go to the resort. But, if the day is prime, you're looking for a drop; if it's good, then it's sled access and if it's poor, then go to the resort.

*An American in Canada?*

Don't tell anyone.

*Do you have your citizenship yet?*

No, but I have my application. Just need to take the time to get the paperwork together.

*What is it like to live in a different country that is still very similar?*

I love Canada. It's pretty low-key; it's not as aggressive as the States, both people and government. It's just the opposite of the US in a lot of ways. You have all the space with only 10 percent of the people. It has a tiny military that is bordering on pathetic, but it's not going around trying to police the world either. It's a bit more socialistic and has more support that it provides in terms of health care and education. And supporting these kinds of benefits is more palatable to its citizens. Though taxes are higher, but whatever, you pay one way or the other.

*Either health insurance or the GST?*

Yeah. One way or the other you're going to pay.

*Anything that concerns you about the current state of the world?*

Wow.

*Top three?*

George Bush: number one, Peak Oil: number two, and the collapse of the US dollar: number three.

*Pretty much sums it up?*

Pretty well, yeah. OK, no, wait—even the biggest thing of all would be global warming. What the hell—we were sitting out here in March wearing shorts and flip-flops. Is this a fluke or is this a glimpse of where we're headed that actually has implications beyond George Bush, oil and the dollar? What the hell do you do if it is reality, what does that mean for the future of snowsports? You can only go so far north and we're already pretty far north and it's not so good. So, that's a fourth thing that could have implications far beyond politics and natural resources. Maybe that's the biggest one and it's just a longer-term one than George Bush, oil and the collapse of the dollar. But it's pretty much in our face.

*Last question: girl, job, house, car—looks like you've got it all dialed?*

Yeah, but I still need an RS4 Avant. I'll call you as soon as I hook it up.