

Whether it's lift, split,
wind or hell accessed,
Short's riding will always
be the same. Changing
at Snowwater Hell, B.C.
Dalby photo



TRACKING DAVE SHORT

by Dan Kostrzewski



THE HIGHS
AND LOWS OF
BECOMING
CANADA'S
NEXT BIG
FREERIDE PRO

ACT ONE: THE VENUE

Dave Short has always been a bit of a mystery. In a world where persona is everything and fame is the goal, Short has stayed in the shadows. Spending a decade of time and energy deep in the Whistler backcountry, he pursued not just a pro career but a ride that seeks something deeper. He's a tough guy to pin down, but after false starts spanning multiple seasons, I finally tracked down Whistler's most elusive pro halfway through his winter at the second stop of the North Face Masters during La Nina's February lull.

We were riding Crystal Mountain's new \$5.5 million gondola, sharing Washington's most scenic lift with Dave's former The North Face teammate, Megan Fischke, on a bluebird day with boilerplate conditions. Hers was an interesting story, but I was here to drop in on Short's reality, which had trended from hell runs to high pressure in a few short weeks.

Short was fresh off a heli trip to Snowwater with photographer Russell Dalby, and he'd returned home to the financial panic of two seized snowmobile engines and a busted truck. But what surprised me most about his mid-season situation was that this heavily welcomed member of the Jones Snowboards team was competing on his last functional board—a Hovercraft with a half-season of rock damage and a compressed heel edge.

His current charge started in December's storm swirl after he completed his Concordia University degree in philosophy and migrated back to Whistler for his tenth season in residence as one of Canada's most promising and deeply rooted freeriding pros. But the image and the reality of a pro freeriding career often do not align—and the big question was if this 29-year-old who grew up at the base of Mt. Seymour would be the next Canadian to make the leap to the name-brand recognition of Jonaven, Jeremy or Xavier.

We exited at the Summit Haus to a view of Mt. Rainer, then rolled the ridgeline cat track to the Northway competition venue. This year's event was a big deal in big mountain because Xavier De Le Rue and five fellow Freeride World Tour athletes made the trip to compete. At breakfast that morning in the Alpine Inn, De Le Rue had invited Short to ride with him in the Alps—but to match lines against him here, Short would need to make the cut to the final.

After debating the merits of rolling the icefall or traversing into the kicker, we head for the near, north backcountry and encounter photographer Tim Zimmerman on the next bootpack. Zimmerman switches lenses to capture a portrait

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and asks why Short declined an invitation to shoot during Whistler Blackcomb's Deep Winter Photo Challenge.

Like Short, the answer is complicated. But one reason is he has twice been on the winning team of the contest with photographer Jordan Manley. During his career, Short has also landed the covers of *Frequency* and *Snowboard Canada*, appeared in the editorial pages of every major snowboard publication and developed a reputation for slaying lines in film segments that span nearly a decade, from his breakout in the 2003 film *Gang Show* to his reemergence in *Alterna's 2010 effort Hello World*, with a grassroots appearance in *it77* along the way.

Snowboarding has been his job and focus since he turned pro for Westbeach and DC in 2001 after buying his first snowmobile for \$1,200 and immersing himself into Whistler's backcountry scene. Since then he's been constantly on the verge of a breakthrough, but challenged by a style that defies easy classification and a motivation akin to a soul surfer tracking swells. His commitment is to the line and the ride, and as a result, Short has developed a reputation as both a bit of a wildcard and a bit of an unknown.

And like Short's season and trajectory, this segment doesn't go according to the predetermined plan. I watch his run from the judge's vantage, and while the other favourites play it safe to make the final, Short drops in hot, charging the icefall and losing an edge upon impact. He straightlines through the finish flags and past the attractive sideline reporter. Without stopping, he ollies the fencing and rolls out, exiting to Whistler before the scores are even posted in the day lodge.

ACT TWO: IN HIS ELEMENT

It's snowing sideways on the Sea to Sky when I track down Short for an interview. Whistler has stacked two metres in seven days, and Short emits the glow of a rider in his element as I roll in after dark and park next to a snow bank. He helps haul my gear across a temporary plywood bridge to the Creekside condo he shares with Manley, who has been shooting Short for a Tourism Whistler television commercial.

Short's sled is still in the shop, but the word in the condo is that he has been slaying stacked pillow lines outside the area and logging GoPro footage in a sector Treetop Films made famous. Short is signed up with Sandbox Films this season, but shooting with that crew requires reliable two-stroke access. In the mechanically-challenged interim, his focus has shifted to capturing GoPro footage, posting Facebook updates and creating his own edits of spine blasting and pillow lines.

A decade ago, pro success hinged on video segments and cover shots, with team managers placing riders in the right places at the right times and literally buying them into the big films. The old formula of the chosen ones is still an effective strategy, but the template is now more free form with avenues open to DIY creativity, and brands expecting their pros to find a niche, create content and build an audience—at the same as time self-managing the constantly moving parts of storm cycles, film crews, trip logistics, travel budgets and photographer invites, not to mention the hassles of sled ownership.

It's the busiest weekend of the year in Whistler, and our sled-less crew waits an hour for an upload at the Creekside gondola the next morning. But the media crew leaves the other 26,000 skiers on the hill behind and follows Short's mental map into the trees. Treetop Films footage from films such as *Clearcut* was Short's inspiration to explore this zone—but Short is the new master of a maze of old growth, second growth and pressure differentials. He leaves us at the entrance with the words, “Don't get sucked left.”

But the four of us—writer, rider, blogger and photographer Brian Hockenstein—can't stay on his swallowtail, as I catch a tree branch and wreck at the junction, and then unstrap myself into a tree well. Hockenstein was the instigator behind last season's roadtrip to Tailgate Alaska where Short competed in the King of the Hill contest, but he knows from experience that plans often shift with this crew. He stops as I claw out of the unconsolidated snow and look for a sign of Short's line.

“Did he go left or right?” I ask.

“It's Dave Short—you never know,” Hockenstein replies.



Calculated in what could be chaos. Dropping in the Whistler Backcountry. Soarphoto



As a photographer, you hit paydirt on a day out with Dave. Russell Dalby had a ton of them. Whistler backcountry. Dalby photo

THE INSIGHT: INTERVIEW

Do you think this year has been a year of innovation for you? Yeah, I feel like this year my snowboarding has grown the most out of any other year. Not on purpose, but it has gone a bit away from freestyle, just getting into some way bigger situations. And my big mountain is just medium mountain to other people, but for me it's big.

I like to have sustained pitches where from the top you can't see your line, but you know where it goes. I feel like I've grown in confusing situations, lines where you have to map it out beforehand and figure yourself out even before you get near the mountain, like, spend some time looking up and figuring out what's going to happen.

I used to sweat where I was going to put all my turns on a bigger slope, like, where I was going to put each toeside and heelside. It's good to know important turns. If a slope has four turns, having two of those turns decided on—that helps sometimes. But just knowing where you are is so important.

Does the GoPro open up more possibility? Well, the GoPro was cool because I wasn't as dependent on other people, like media. You can take it in your hands a little more, so I was out there every single day with it and trying to share my perspective with everyone. And riding big mountain, I love having it because at the end of the year you have a big pile of stuff, and I get to watch my footage quickly every day. **Does that allow you to take more control and not rely so much on film crews?** Well, yeah, definitely. With that I put out exactly what I want. But I like to rely so much, like when I'm shooting bigger lines with Serfas or Dalby. This year has been some big sends: just trying to send some big shots and stomp them out like no problem, and a lot of sluff management, getting into some spines with more consequence and exposure if the stability allows. Exposure scares the hell out of me in general—it keeps me away from a lot of stuff. But this year it's been peaceful. I love sluff management and the idea of it, and having to think out your line and, as you're doing it, having to adapt quickly and race ahead. And this year, I've been focusing more on doing less turns down the mountain and keeping my nose pointed down the fall line, eliminating these hesitant turns and having the confidence to mob into a cliff, especially if it's a blind one. When it's laid out and you can see it—well, why not? But when it's more convex, it's hard to just pin it into stuff. That has been my biggest focus this year. **All the GoPro footage, the editing, the evolution of your riding—is that going to change where you sit in the spectrum of the**

snowboard industry? I'm not sure. I hope people take note. I mean, I'm happy to share [the footage], but at the end of the day, it's still a job for me and I'm trying to make it more of a job for me with the media content. It's obviously for myself, too, because it is a big passion. But I need to produce to make some worth because I haven't been winning contests this year. At the beginning of the year, I had some meetings and made some decisions. It was my father who told me to do the daily updates—he could see I didn't have as many sponsors as I've had in the past. So I'm trying to get back into that position and gain a little more support. So this was my way of making a mark and trying to brand myself more, making sure people know who I am and what I'm doing—that's the hard part, especially when you aren't getting as much mass-media coverage.

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So do you think the work you put in will translate to a sponsorship level?

They appreciate that stuff, and they take it in and share it on their avenues. And in terms of it translating, that would be nice because at this point, what do I do? Do I go for my master's now? I really want to stick it through, and I have nothing on my mind except snowboarding, but I'm getting to a point where I almost have to. There are bills to pay in real life, and it's starting to catch up. **It would be good to have a new truck...** Exactly. And my whole career has had peaks and valleys. There have been years where I have been on fire, and I can't believe the unbelievable support I've received. Then the following year, when a company goes under and I lose a sponsor or whatever, I'd be on my savings for a whole year, and then it would come back. It's always good peaks compared to the valleys—I've always had a working sled. But I don't own a house. I've made enough to be a ski bum for the

past 10 years, and it's been awesome, and I hope to keep doing it. Maybe not a ski bum, but I've made enough to sustain my happy lifestyle with a little travel budget on the side for some trips. **You obviously have a huge passion for snowboarding, but there is the whole business side to it too. Do you ever have a hard time mixing those together?** I don't have a tough time with it when I'm on the top of a mountain—I know it's my passion, so there is no problem there. But when it comes down to it, it seems a lot of people want to work for free or just work for nothing. It's hard to ask for too much compensation when it is your full-on passion, but, at the same time, it takes a lot of resources. It's a costly pursuit, not only in terms of money, but also in mental and spiritual energy. **You're being asked to put yourself at huge risk for not a huge payout.** It's not a huge payout, no. I'm not asking for much. Some of the other guys, they'll go up, and if they land something dope, they'll see the footage and say, “Sick, I got this sick shot.” And they can put a price and a value on that shot in terms of their career. But when you are shredding lines, it's hard to gauge. I've been doing more Ian Mac-style shredding, where it's just pin it out the bottom. I still love spinning, and I still spin off cliffs, but I never got my Nines this year—not yet, anyway. I haven't gotten around to it. **Is there more push for line-style footage now in the snowboard industry?** I guess... I think so. But that's been the word on the street for years and years—that lines are getting so important and getting more accepted. But if you look on the *Transworld* video website, Xavier's project is still getting way less hits than *A Walk in the Park* Bear Mountain edits. So, is there a draw? I don't know. It seems like the industry is doing a good job, and there are a lot of companies who are supporting it more. I'd like it to be that way because a lot of the older guys do that stuff. I'm becoming one of the older guys, and I don't want to stop snowboarding. I'd like to get a little more support for that side of the industry, or I'll need to get a job. **What would it take to reach the position of Canada's top big mountain rider now that Jonaven Moore is not so much on the scene?** I think someone to come from a big mountain background because all the kids who get into snowboarding, they do it from a freestyle background. When I was getting into it, freestyle seemed to be more fun. And I still love it. It seems like freeriding is an older man's sport, and there are many reasons for that. One is natural desires; when you're young, you just want to hack yourself and be right on the edge. And then when you're older, you can't go out and do Double Corks. ▶

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You start realizing when you rag-doll, it takes it out of you. When you fuck up a jump and slam, you are out and hand-capped. At the same time, there are more refined tastes when you’re older. Some of those kids, I don’t think they appreciate the big mountain for what it is, just because it’s a realm that is harder to enter. Because the ski resort is tracked out and it’s hard to be a freerider on the ski resort—although, it’s the best training ground—and to get into the backcountry, you need a helicopter, sled or a lot of energy. **Does it ever bum you out that it’s not just about who is riding the best line?** No, that doesn’t bum me out. I know you have to work the angles. Some people are just naturally predisposed to have a better hand dealt, and some people just do it better and have those better relationships with better people. Who’s to say the world is not fair, nature is not fair? It stays true to itself, but it’s not fair. The snowboard world is dog-eat-dog—everyone is trying to get your job. That’s the thing: a lot of people say if you’re not pushing the levels, get out of the way for someone who will. At the same time, it’s almost an exploitive industry because they know that and they see that, and they exploit the young talent and get them to work for free. **What’s going to be different or the same for you this coming year?** I’m not sure. I hope to expand out of Whistler a bit. As much as I love it and this is my home, I feel like my shred frontier wants to grow. I still want to see all these different mountains. I’ve been here a long time, and if you stay somewhere too long it limits you because there’s only a finite amount of terrain even though it’s gargantuan. Like Chocolate Bowl: I’ve been spending a lot of time there, and the vertical is good, but it’s not great. There’s still a lot to explore here, like around the next corner could be the twice-as-high version.

You just have to go more toward Pemby or Squamish and use the computer to figure out how to find access and how to find mountains. There are a lot of guys doing some more exploring and finding new zones, in Squamish and Pemberton especially. I want a piece of that—I want to find my little private Idaho somewhere.

And Alaska—I blew it not going up there this spring. For years I’ve been telling myself to move up there for two months starting in March. I just never do it. **What is holding you back?** It’s the opportunity cost of shredding almost-as-awesome mountains somewhere else. I’m here, and I have a tough time traveling. I hope it doesn’t hold me back. You see all these people migrate, but it’s your home, so why migrate when you are where you want to be? There is a whole world out there. But I hope to come back into a wintertime with support enough to get after it even more. And, hopefully, I want the givers of support to feel like it’s worth it for them. I hope I’m providing something for them, something for the big mountain realm. **That’s a good mission right there.** Yeah, keep the dream alive.

ACT THREE: DISCONNECT

Act three of this story was scheduled to take place at Tailgate Alaska as Dave Short competed in the King of the Hill contest and improved on his ninth place finish from 2010. But AK was not to be. Poor planning, a late-arriving snowpack and a spike in airfares left Short unfunded by his The North Face travel budget, and this story stuck in Whistler while the season delivered in Valdez and Haines.

The backup plan was a sled-accessed overnight outside Pemberton or Squamish, but that option fell through. I made an unsuccessful attempt to link up for a sled day with Sandbox, and

then missed Short during the World Ski and Snowboard Festival—but I did see his Vimeo edit slaying spring spines while the city folk were partying and puking in the village.

I finally track him down for the ender on the last day of April. Weather in Creekside is melting into spring, but Short’s new sled motor pins it, and his eyes open to massive new zones. Dead season has hit, with Whistler closed and collective consciousness trending toward the bike park or the surf season. But storms are still buffing out the zones, and Short is filming until the endless winter ends.

Then his truck dies and our fourth backup plan falls through. Short leaves the logistics behind as he heads out to stack more footage for his Sandbox part, and returns spent and shaky from almost going down in an avalanche. Inside the condo kitchen, I watch the hairy GoPro replay of the crack and the slide. We recap the season over a Tecate and a surf video as Short reflects on where he’ll land when he moves out in a few weeks and what his future holds.

The next morning is good timing for a slow burn, so we go for a split on Blackcomb. We take it easy after exiting the area, Short shuffling ahead on his Jones split. At the Y of indecision, we opt against Disease Ridge and instead climb to the top of a rockier face. Short had picked his line through the maze of rocks and chutes on the uptrack, and I plan to follow as it rolls over into oblivion.

But the clouds stack in, and as we wait for a clear window, Short keeps his calm while I psych myself out. When the clouds lift, he drops in and nails his line. But my fellow line hits a rock hop to a chute landing that’s bigger than my confidence. I freeze up and snake around, finding a cautious exit and scraping, with absolutely no style, through the crux. At the exit, Short senses I was spooked.

“I’ve been in that situation a ton,” he says. “You just have to keep your composure and have confidence in the line you picked.”

We exit out the Blackcomb Glacier and roll back to civilization, but his words keep spinning in my head long after I leave. Halfway home on the 99, my stress about missed opportunities starts to fade. For a true backcountry disciple like Short, the riding is the easy part—it’s the rest of his professional reality that is tougher to navigate. But one layer removed from the intensity of this season, it hits that Dave Short knows his line—even if the rest of us are still trying to predict where it might lead.

Dave slashes way north in what may one day be home. Valdez, AK. Hughes photo

