



photos courtesy of Andrew McLean

Great Ski Mountaineering Partnerships

Andrew McLean and Mark Holbrook

By Susan Schnier

Like many interesting pursuits, ski mountaineering is based on a paradox. It is depicted as one of the most intensely individual endeavors, where man goes up against mountain in a one-on-one battle for survival. But backcountry skiers and mountaineers know that successful and safe trips depend primarily on interdependence with a partner. A great partner motivates you to get out of bed at 4 A.M., no matter how cold it is on the other side of the sheets. You reciprocate when it's your partner who polished off the Cuervo the night before. A partner's tactics may include taunting, ridiculing, and instilling guilt and fear, but it's all in the name of the most noble goal: turns.

Andrew McLean, the Black Diamond (BD) product designer, writer, photographer, backcountry skier, and ski mountaineer—with enough first descents to make your mouse finger ache as you scroll through his resume (www.pawprince.com)—found a rare combination of complementary qualities in his 12-year partner, Mark

Holbrook. Andrew had been working at BD and skiing in Utah's Wasatch Range for about a year, when Mark joined the BD team. The two began skiing together before work from 5:30-8:30 A.M., and kept up their Alex Lowe-inspired "Dawn Patrol" missions for the next eleven years.

"We both love skiing couloirs," explained Andrew. "The skiing might be horrible, but we'd both laugh and shake it off. We'd see a couloir in the distance, say 'huh,' and put in our lists for next time." They grew solid together in their skills and knowledge, and eventually Mark accompanied Andrew on every couloir that Andrew later profiled in his ground-breaking book on backcountry skiing, *The Chuting Gallery—A Guide to Steep Skiing in the Wasatch Mountains*.

One evening in Salt Lake City, Mark and Andrew saw a slideshow together that changed their

perspective. A photo of Denali's Messner Couloir flashed on the screen, and they decided they had to ski it. Though neither had skied above 14,000 feet, they planned a trip, and in 1995 became the first Americans to ski the 5,200-foot, 50° couloir from Mt. McKinley's 20,320-foot summit. Their effortless division of responsibilities and success on Denali made them think seriously about bigger adventures. They soon skied the Mowich face of Mt. Rainer and turned their dawn patrol partnership into multi-day linkups in the Wasatch, summits in Colorado, explorations in France, and even expeditions in the Himalayas.

"Mark is very organized about permits, travel, fuel, and meals, while I'm kind of spacey about that stuff," said Andrew. Andrew notes that Mark's good judgment, great technical skills, humor, and easy-going nature made him easy to ski with. "I never had to worry about him on steep ice or storm conditions, he's very capable of taking care of himself," said Andrew. "Plus he's got a great sense of humor and always joking around." Mark's favorite line? "It's not funny until someone gets hurt."

"With mountains that I might think of as too big, like Denali, Mark would keep the ball rolling, and we'd be able to do it. If I suggested a good line, he would check it out and plan it. It wasn't competitiveness, but an 'I'll try it if you try it' attitude."

For Mark's part, Andrew brings new gear ideas to the partnership constantly. "Every time we had an expedition Andrew had something new, like a pack design or sled modification, to help us out."

"Andrew and I have a really good dovetail of complementary skills," Mark continued. "Andrew breathes like a fish. He likes to break trail, and I hate it. He likes to talk; it's perfect because I can just walk behind and grunt, and he'll keep talking as long as he knows I'm listening."

Andrew and Mark's directional skills also complement each other as well. While Andrew is a route-finding master, Mark has a better global sense of direction. At the same time, similar personalities and backgrounds provide an intangible, but important, bond that has helped the pair through scary situations. Andrew grew up ski racing and Mark was a competitive aerialist; for both skiing was a family focus and regular weekend activity.



"We both watched Gilligan's Island, so we would joke about that if we were lost somewhere together," said Mark. "We read each other's minds. Andrew and I always had the silent thing going."

Half-joking that they developed this ESP while mountaineering with ropes, Mark commented that, "Andrew would be doing something, and I would know what he would need next and get it for him. Sometimes I wish my wife would just read my mind like Andrew did."

Mark recently moved to Oregon, and with Andrew still in Utah, the two haven't skied together much recently. Constantly exploring their respective neighborhood mountains, the move made apparent the high standard that they had set for each other as ski partners.

"We were always going to go skiing," said Andrew. "We'd talk once, and it was set. It takes

a long time to establish a rapport like that. You have to start looking around and consider changing your mind on the kind of skiing you enjoy. If you find someone that you like to ski with, but they only like to ski powder, you need to decide whether to go with them or continue to pursue your goals."

Mark echoed the sentiment. "When I go out with other people, we don't have the same type of connection—I'm always trying to feel the person out instead of going straight to business, and it's harder to compromise." Fortunately they were able to reunite for their first run of this season. While traversing, Mark hit some crust and did a face plant on ice. Coming up with abrasions on his face and a big smile, Mark skied down to Andrew.

"Hey, you've got blood on your face," exclaimed Andrew. "Someone got hurt, and this time it's you!"



photos courtesy of Carl Skoog

Great Ski Mountaineering Partnerships

Carl and Lowell Skoog

By Peter Kray

Despite its vast glacial wildness and reputation as the American Alps, the mountains of the Pacific Northwest are probably the least-publicized realm of North American skidom. Which is what makes Lowell and Carl Skoog the perfect products of the region. They would rather ski the many peaks and faces of the North and South Cascades than advertise them.

The brothers' pioneering ski traverses of Washington State's Picket, Chiwaukum, and Bailey Ranges and nearly one dozen first descents—along with Carl's own mini-compendium of steep ski descents like the Mowich Face—could easily mark them as the kind of thrill-seeking ski heroes the media is so quick to pump up these days. Instead, the brothers refer to themselves as curators

of a living ski museum. Their photographs and writing celebrate the place more than the person. And while others in the ski community might use an interview as a chance for self-promotion, they would rather discuss the aesthetics that drew them to ski mountaineering.

"Carl and I were skiers first, then mountaineers," said Lowell from his home in Seattle. "For us, backcountry skiing was a way to unite those passions. I think we've both always liked the way the summer trails disappear beneath the snow, leaving a blank map to find your way through the mountains."

The two youngest of six brothers and sisters, Lowell and Carl (the younger) grew up in an outdoor-oriented family in Bellevue,

Wash. Their late father, Dick, came from a ski jumping background. As an early stockholder in the fledgling hill at Crystal Mountain, he made a point of individually introducing each one of his children to the sport of skiing.

"We would stick a sandwich in one pocket and an apple in the other," said Carl, who lives in Redmond, Wash. "I don't think I saw the lodge until after I was a teenager, when I went in there to see what was going on after all the skiing was done."

Although both still ride the lifts, they could not ignore the looming siren of Washington's myriad of snow-capped volcanoes and peaks. After first hiking into the backcountry by foot, the brothers quickly reasoned they could cover a lot more ground by skiing.

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“The incentive for a lot of the ski traverses that we ended up doing over the years was in the way the snow would interconnect the mountains,” said Carl. “We saw it as a way to connect the ranges, kind of like connecting the dots. And there was an immersive aspect to it that we both found particularly rewarding.”

Rewarding in a sense of accomplishment and emotional satisfaction that might last for several weeks, adds Carl, in direct opposition to the satisfaction of a ski day, which might only last into the evening. That sense of emotional fulfillment from being outside is just one of the mental facets the brothers share. Another is in the creative act of being able to study the geography of a mountainous area, then imagine the route by which they could travel through that region.

“I’ve long debated whether to start writing guidebooks, because I prefer the creative process of finding a path. That act of seeing a place on a map and then actually moving through the



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terrain is one that's so fulfilling," said Lowell. "It's a real opportunity for personal discovery, and I'm reluctant to change that element of wildness by listing a set of directions for someone."

Over the years, old ski trip buddies became less reliable, and Carl and Lowell found they could often only count on each to actually undertake the trips they planned. Carl said it was just as well, as they find it so easy to get along, know each other's technical ability so thoroughly, and share each other's passion for making rest stops and campsites embrace the natural beauty of the backcountry as best they can.

"Some people have a certain mindset of where you camp, like preferring secluded areas. But I'll readily sacrifice protection from the wind for better scenery," said Carl. "It's the same with skiing by a particular peak that is so attractive you can't help but stop and take a run, or hiking after it's dark if you know it means you'll camp somewhere with a better view in the morning. You want to see things when you're out there, and it's nice to be with someone who has the same mindset as you do."

It's that eye for natural beauty that helped inspire Carl to make photography his profession. His work (www.carlskoogphoto.com) has graced dozens of magazine covers, including *Couloir*, *Backcountry*, and *Skiing*, as well as ads for The North Face, K2 and Rossignol Telemark, and Sierra Designs. And although he's an engineer by trade, Lowell's taken an increasingly extended hiatus to work on a historical perspective of Washington State ski mountaineering. Encompassing more than 80 years of sport, Lowell's compulsive research is fueled by the fact that he wants to be complete in honoring the people who made it possible for him and Carl to ski so many mountains.

"My father's generation and the early pioneers made all of this possible for us by setting aside the parks and wilderness areas," said Lowell. "And we're reaping the benefits of that right now. My goal is to celebrate that, and continue it in a spirit that doesn't exploit. I'm a regional kind of guy, and I have a very intense appreciation for Northwest mountaineering."

You can read more about Lowell's research and writing at www.alpenglow.org, and www.nwmj.org.

