

Racing for turns

RANDONNÉE RALLY RACES

TAKE THE UNITED STATES BY

STORM



Jordi Canals of Spain on Twin Lakes Pass. Tom Beer photo

Avalanche forecaster,
Drew Hardesty climbing
Patsey Marley ridge.
Tom Beer photo



By Susan Schnier

A small crowd of supporters and race officials stood at the finish line, vying for position. As I scanned the blank slope for the first competitor to emerge, a black speck at the top of the mogul field approached, becoming discernable as it neared. Shirt fully unzipped, a bare-chested figure sporting long hair greased down with sweat powered through the finish, delirium and delight in his eyes. Greg Hill politely waved to the crowd, answered a few questions from media and friends, then veered off to the side, darkening a patch of snow with projectile vomit before returning to the circle with a smile. "I couldn't believe it," said Hill. "I had so many mishaps during the race, determination and heart were my only strengths. It was full on ski mountaineering epic where everything can go wrong and you must be ready to deal with every hurdle."

The rest of the field started to trickle in a few minutes later as the Whistler Life-Link randonnée rally drew to a close. It was the first North American rally of the season, and the first one ever staged at Whistler. Snaking up a demanding 5,000 vertical feet, the course was set by the Whistler Ski Patrol, taking competitors up glacial peaks, across scenic traverses, and down steep ridges and icy bump runs.

Popular for more than a decade in the Alps, randonnée rally races hit the States three years ago when John Scott, Life-Link's executive vice president, organized the first one at Jackson Hole in 2001. During his travels to Europe while distributing Dynafit products, Scott observed rally races ranging from smaller events at local hills to large international competitions. The events drew thousands of spectators with Europeans embracing the sport as Americans do car racing or football. "I saw what was going on there and how in to it they were," said Scott. "I thought it would help grow alpine touring in the States and bring the backcountry community together." Since then, rally races in North America have been gaining momentum every year. Life-Link put on five rallies last season at Whistler, British Columbia, Crested Butte, Colorado, Alpentel and Stevens Pass, Washington, and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. This season Alpine Meadows, California replaces the Stevens Pass venue as Life-Link sticks with five events.

Many local ski areas, including Silverton and Aleyeska, are jumping on the rally wagon and organizing their own races. Last season, Black Diamond introduced the PowderKeg, an uphill/downhill race with a true backcountry feel, through rugged undeveloped terrain in Utah's Wasatch mountains.

This year the PowderKeg will be a World Cup event, sanctioned by the Swiss-based International Council for Ski Mountaineering Competitions (ISMC). Athletes who compete ISMC events earn points toward the world rankings. Rally organizers in Europe and North America are pushing to get ski mountaineering into the 2010 Olympics and to do so, there must be World Cup events throughout the world. The Jackson Hole Life-Link rally was ISMC sanctioned last year, but it probably won't be this year. "They'd like us to sanction all the events, but that costs us money that could be going to better places like avalanche forecasting and search and rescue," says Scott.

Scott has created a new non-profit group called the United States Ski Mountaineering Association. The point is to funnel money from competitors and sponsors to local avalanche forecasting and search and rescue centers where the events are held. The non-profit structure helps get more money directly to these groups and makes it easier for sponsors to donate.

The Wasatch PowderKeg has 3,550 and 5,250-vertical-foot climbs in Race and Recreation divisions. By European standards, rally races have about 5,000 feet of uphill and U.S. race organizers are trying to stick to this format. The PowderKeg course runs from the base of Alta, up Patsey Marley Ridge, Honeycomb Peak, and Twin Lakes Pass, and finishes at Brighton Ski Area. On the morning of the event, a kilted bagpiper serenaded competitors at Alta's base, shrouded in Mt. Superior's pink dawn shadow. Six inches of Utah's champagne had coated the mountains the night before, and the clear dawn sky hinted at crispy conditions for the day. After gear

had been extracted from hatchbacks and light breakfasts scarfed, competitors chatted amicably about how little they had been touring or how excited they were for the start. But the small talk ceased the moment the announcer gave the five-minute warning, as Schoeller-clad bodies lined up behind skis and proceeded with last minute gear futzing.

Andrew McLean, the brainchild behind the PowderKeg, had seen randonnée events in Europe and competed in most of the Life-Link series. "I wanted to put one on and see it from the other side," said McLean. "Nobody got lost and everyone was happy with the results. The conditions were great—not too much snow for avy danger, but just enough for good skinning."



Jeannie Wall de-skins at Twin Lakes Pass
Tom Beer photo

For many of us, especially relative backcountry newbies like myself, hiking for turns is a way to escape the daily doldrums of computer radiation, to find solitude, and achieve internal goals rather than external ones. Not to mention that most of us do it for *fun*, not punishment. Though I had the option and was encouraged to compete in the Wasatch PowderKeg, I opted out, choosing instead to take a couple laps in Grizzly Gulch and cheer on competitors from the Patsey Marley ridge. From the numbers and the glowing faces at the finish and after-party, I know people enjoy these grueling competitions, but I've still got to wonder: What poses rational human beings to happily subject themselves to this type of physical punishment? I picked the sweat soaked brains of competitors at the Whistler Life-Link Rally and the Black Diamond PowderKeg to try to find some answers.

Greg Hill, winner of the Whistler rally explained, "Socially it's great to meet like-minded people. Ski tourers travel in small pods, and we all have a tendency to tour with our select friends whom we trust and understand. It's rare to come in contact with other pods. These races bring us all out of our seclusion and allow us to meet new friends and contacts."

Jeannie Wall, a Patagonia designer from Bozeman, Montana, took first place in the PowderKeg's Women's Race Division and third overall with the smokin' time of 2 hours, 39 minutes, and 25 seconds. "It was like combat survival out there but it was a great race, very well run with great people and good skiing. I have a Nordic racing background and this combines those skills with downhill skiing. This was my second rally ever but I took first place at the Life-Link rally in Jackson Hole. This course was more rugged than the first."

The first place finisher in the Men's Race Division (2:20:55), Chris Kroger, lives in Wilson, Wyoming and patrols at Jackson Hole. He entered the Life-Link rally races at Jackson Hole for the last two years and took second place last year and fifth the year before. To win the PowderKeg he switched to a randonnée setup from telemark. "The PowderKeg felt more out-of-bounds than Jackson which was nice—everyone was smiling and having a good time. Everyone from

area skiers to backcountry skiers to Nordic skiers to bikers enjoyed it.”

Tim Wagner from Salt Lake City placed second in PowderKeg Race Division with a time of 2:37:23. “I haven’t been touring much this year, and I’ve only been skiing for about three years,” Tim explained humbly. “I used to hike a lot with my board, but I’m not a very good skier so these races are all about the hiking and strategizing. When I entered rock-climbing comps I had high expectations and would always get frustrated. I had low expectations for this, and I did well. I do it mostly to stay in shape and not get fat.”

Rachel Medley, originally from Northern California, spends winters working at the Alta Rustler Lodge. “My boyfriend, Pat, was entering the PowderKeg and I thought I should push myself and give it a try,” she explained. “I didn’t finish, but I will do it again next year and do better, it was a great experience and lots of fun.”

Chris White, a Black Diamond employee, took third in the Men’s Race Division (2:40:52). “It was very strenuous. The course was excellent, but the wind and spindrift were challenging and made it tough to even breathe. It was like a combination of a Chinese downhill and a really strenuous hike. It was my first race, but I’ll do it again.”

So why is randonné rally racing growing so quickly? According to John Scott, it’s growing because backcountry skiing in general is growing and more and more people would rather ski out-of-bounds than in-bounds to test themselves, and push the limits.

But I’ve waited at finish lines and cheered words of encouragement atop ridges. I’ve chatted with ruddy-cheeked competitors and drank microbrews at after-parties. And I have to admit, I still do not understand exactly why backcountry skiers are eagerly flocking to the race course. But as with many things of quality, sometimes you simply cannot truly connect with their essence until you take the plunge, decide to participate, and take on the experience first hand. Or like Dad used to put it, “Don’t knock it ‘till you’ve tried it.” So I guess, even though it holds as much appeal to me as taking a cold shower or getting gum in my hair, I’m going to have to give this deal a try. And all potential excuses are out the window since a Life-Link rally is coming to Alpine Meadows this season, right in my backyard. See you out there...?



Piano, Piano: The Fast and Furious

Story and Photos
By Andrew McLean



Alfons Gaston - aka “The Lion of the Pyrennes,” wolfs down a piece of pizza at the Life Link North American Championships.



Alfons getting some lovin’

Jeannie Wall (left) and Heather Paul (right) fall victim to the sex appeal of a fast Catalanian racer, Alfons Gaston.

With backcountry skiing being such a peaceful pursuit, you might wonder why anyone would want to ruin it by turning it into a competition. The answer, as with thoroughbred horses or hissing cockroaches, is that racing improves the breed. True, not everyone sees touring around in emasculating skin tight suits as an im-

provement, but many other aspects of Ski Mountaineering racing can directly improve your smiles per hour ratio.

In standard touring mode, if somebody is slightly faster than you, you can write it off to explainable circumstances: youth, training, equipment, less beer, etc. But, if they are in a completely different stratosphere, it makes you wonder if you aren’t missing something critical. Yes, you are both using skis and appear to be carbon-based



Mild mannered speed master Toti Bes from Catalonia (left). Toti won the Life-Link North American Championships by blasting off 6,400' of gain and descent in just over two hours.



Penn Newhard, Andrew McLean, Polly Samuels, Leslie Ross, Jordi Canals, Toti Bes, Jeannie Wall, Alfons Gaston, Nick Heil

a loop of bungee cord instead of the steel tip loop. Leave an extra three-inch tail on the bungee cord to act as a pull-tab for stripping them off. These skins should have only a single ply backing, which means a pair of them rolls up to about the size of a muffin. Carrying a spare pair is an acceptable safety measure.

Since carbon fiber skating poles are outlawed (they can splinter into sharp spikes if broken) the aluminum versions are the pole of choice. The increased height prohibits you from steeper skinning, but lengthens your stride. For boots, you'll want something

like Scarpa F1's or the lightest Dynafits. Remove the tongue, drill holes in the shell, grind down the sole, and replace the buckles with Velcro. For speedy change-overs, some have an integrated lockdown lever that tightens and locks the cuff with a single push.

In clothing there's only one choice: a racing suit. Referred to as Homohosen by some, these suits are serious pieces of equipment. They're constructed of Schoeller fabric, and feature beacon pockets, integral gators, and a kangaroo pouch for stuffing skins; they are aerodynamic, durable, and of course, very sexy. As a fashion accessory, you'll need a flyweight pack capable of holding only a shovel, windbreaker, and one liter of water. Mesh pockets on the side are good for stuffing skins, but all extraneous padding and straps should be removed. Contact lenses will do

for goggles.

Now that you've trimmed your gear down, you have to streamline your climbing techniques to match. As a steep skinning aficionado, I hated the idea that the key to going faster was, "piano, piano," Italian for, "softly, softly." The concept is to go faster by treading lightly and carrying a big reserve. Instead of blowing yourself out by stomping your skins and trying to stick to the steepest, straightest line, keep your leg rpm's up and the skinning angle down. Many racers only have two heel climbing positions, one flat and the

other raised by about an inch. The theory is that you will build up less lactic acid and your legs will be in better shape for the switch over from climbing to skiing.¹

As in marathon running, pacing is vital. This is something that can take a while to get a feel for. Take a best guess at how much vertical you will be tackling, how long you think you'll be at it, and what your reserves are. The goal is to keep it as hot as possible for as long as possible without boiling over. This can be hard, especially in the beginning when the adrenaline is flowing and you're feeling fresh.

Change-overs are another area ripe for improvement. With practice, stripping skins from both skis, stashing them, buckling your boots and getting underway is possible in 15 seconds. To do this, anticipate the upcoming change-over, take your pole straps off and transfer both poles to one hand. When you stop, set them down off to the side and use that same downward effort to: 1) engage your heelpiece (if you use them), 2) buckle your boot, 3) reach forward and grab your skin pull-tab at the tip of your ski. Stand up and rip your skin, give it a quick fold and stuff it in a pocket or inside your shirt. Repeat on the other side, but also grab your poles while you are down there. The idea is to develop a smooth back-to-front system and to only bend over twice.

Now that you're cross-eyed with hypoxia and clamped into fiddly gear, how are you going to ski, let alone go fast? It takes patience and practice. Instead of gaining more control from heavier gear, you have to adapt your technique to make the most out of the least. My initial delusions that this gear was only suitable for racing was shattered when Toti and Alfons dropped into Corbet's Couloir on the same gear they had used to win the Jackson Hole North American Championships an hour earlier. No problem. To a large degree, skiing should just be second nature at this point, with your focus on recovering for the next climb. It's not a beauty contest; whatever gets you downhill with the least effort and without falling is fine.

Aside from being fun in itself, racing has lots of crossover with daily touring. For instance the idea that it's not how fast you go, but how long you stop, or focusing on a sustainable all day pace can greatly increase your range. Making an effort to reduce your pack weight by carrying just enough water and trimming out unused gear can make touring seem like a whole new sport. And who knows, you may even start eyeing a one-piece suit instead of Gore-tex.



¹It's good to see that Andrew is finally beginning to see the light, even if begrudgingly

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