



DAK & OAK

The dulcet voices of big-mountain freeskiing

» “What a great day for a freeskiing contest,” might sound the cowboyish drawl over the microphone. “Welcome to Snowbird and the second stop on the World Tour, everyone. There’s two feet of new on and some of the best big-mountain skiers in the world in the start. We’re gonna have quite a show, don’t you think, Dak?”

“You betcha, Oak,” his partner might answer. “It’s going to be a real dogfight out there.”

The flat, nasal tone of a northern Prairie voice floats over the growing crowd in the cold morning air. Whatever the exact words spoken, the level of enthusiasm is unwavering. No matter that this is January and the thermostat is still south of -30°C. No matter that the sun’s rays won’t reach the valley bottom until much later. John “Dak” Williams and Paul “Oak” O’Connor are laying down their comp rap like they were sitting beachside at a big wave contest.

Though both grew up in the flatlands of Middle America, they share a love of alpine vistas and big-mountain skiing. Perhaps, then, it’s no coincidence that Williams and O’Connor became best friends when they migrated west to Crested Butte, Colorado, in their mid-20s.

Williams, who hails from the Dakotas (hence the nickname), and O’Connor, who comes from—you guessed it—Oklahoma, were immediately seduced by the burgeoning mid-’90s freeskiing scene at the Butte.

“It was a really cool time to be there,” recalls Dak. “Seth Morrison and Wendy Fisher were pushing the limits of the sport every time they got on the slopes. And with the U.S. Extreme Championships based in Crested Butte, the skiing level of the local posse was really high.”

Both men soon became avid big-mountain competitors. And though they never broke into the top ranks, they were more than competent.

“It was a lot of fun,” says Dak. “I love freeskiing. And I love freeskiing contests. It’s the biggest rush in my life.”

With that kind of allegiance, was it natural for the pair to find their way from mountain to microphone? Not necessarily, according to Dak, who says their first announcing gig “just sort of happened.”

“It was at the Kirkwood event in California,” he explains. “Six or seven years ago.” At the time, both were involved with a Crested Butte band called Kung Pao that was to perform at the closing party. Paul played guitar, and John was in charge of sound. Someone got



LESLIE ANTHONY

IF YOU HAVE SEEN THIS MAN, PLEASE CALL THE FBI.

the idea that it might be fun if the now-retired competitors did a play-by-play of the event. So they did.

“It was a real junk show,” remembers Dak. “Just me and Paul—out in the middle of this huge alpine bowl with no tents for protection and this hot April California sun beating down.” He laughs. “So we figured, ‘What the hell?’ and plugged the mikes in and got going. After five or six beers, the words and jokes really started to flow.”

And a big-mountain ritual was born. Since that day, Dak and Oak have been plying their shtick at freeskiing events across North America. And competitors love it.

“These guys really believe in what they’re doing,” says 2004 World Tour champ Manu Gaidet. “They’re our biggest fans. Our best cheerleaders. And they bring a level of enthusiasm and passion that wouldn’t be there without them.”

“I just like to see the enthusiasm of the young guns out there,” concludes Dak. “I’ve made a lot of friends on the circuit over the years. And I easily get back as much as I put into this sport. With a little luck, we’ll be able to do this for a few more years.” ◀ MICHEL BEAUDRY

Note: Oak took the 2003-04 season off to pursue his passion for surfing. But friends say the two will be back on the circuit together next year—stronger, funnier and more entertaining than ever.

» OK, let's dispense with all the myths and head-shaking about Peter Chrzanowski, a.k.a. Pete Chernobyl, Peter Peru, and the pejorative fave, Pete Should-Not-Ski.

First, consider the accidents: The whipper down a couloir on Peru's Mount Ranrapallca that blew his skis, boots and socks off, sticking him barefoot in the bottom of a crevasse with a severe concussion; Whistler Ski Patrol adding "Don't Miss" to its permanently closed register after he had to be rescued from it; the infamous Multiglisse Traverse on the Pemberton Icecap, where most participants got lost and Chrzanowski, the organizer, had to be evacuated after breaking a fibula; or the paragliding accident where he snapped both ankles after smacking a building near Pemberton. I'll stop here out of sympathy for his mother, who says, "I worried about him from the day he was born."

Sure, it's easy to prod Chrzanowski for a cheap laugh, but it's easier still to forget his pedigree and accomplishments. The only son of two highly educated Polish émigrés who moved to Canada in 1967, he speaks four languages, holds a communications degree from Simon Fraser University, belongs to the Directors Guild of Canada, and has produced almost 20 films.

One of the reasons Chrzanowski gets into trouble is that he always thinks big and, appearances to the contrary, has been ahead of the curve in at least a half-dozen ways. In the late '70s and early '80s, he was at the forefront of extreme skiing with early attempts on Mount Robson, even rounding up sponsors to pick up the tab. A pioneer filmmaker, he plucked Trevor Petersen and Eric Pehota—and later, Troy Jungen and Ptor Spriceniaks—from obscurity, giving them big-mountain roles on Coast Range peaks that had never seen tracks before. He operated a bare-bones backcountry ski-touring operation on the Ipsoot Glacier in 1981, precursor to the dozens of outfits B.C. is now famous for. And, of course, in 1995, he organized the Multiglisse Traverse, a backcountry race involving alpine, telemark and snowboard participants—the first of its kind at a time when adventure racing was still in its infancy. In 1996, he tagged along with Craig Calonica on a failed attempt to ski Mount Everest and broadcast it live over the Internet. His next oeuvre is a film on the High Tatras, an obscure yet incredibly beautiful range on the Poland-Slovakia border.

Recently, things have gone well for the itinerant filmmaker. He finished *Goldenrush*, a documentary about what happens when a large multinational comes to a town populated by loggers and freaks and turns the place upside down.

"I just met with the CBC about it and they asked, 'Where's the conflict? Where's the tension?' And I told them there were some disagreements, but for the most part everybody gets along really well," says the pathologically optimistic Chrzanowski, who whittled 60 hours of footage into a one-hour show.

Trading on those hard-won years of filming and editing, he recently founded the world's first Extreme Film and Expedition School, dedicated to all aspects of adventure-sport moviemaking—from raw idea through to marketing the product.

"I'm inspired by documentaries more than 'moving wallpaper.' I try to instill a strong sense of story to the students," Chrzanowski says.

Indeed, that theme is central to what Chrzanowski considers his best work, *The Spirit*, a 1997 documentary on the late Petersen. Last year, he scheduled four weeks of film school in hip mountain hideouts like Red Mountain, Fernie, Apex, and Marmot Basin. It even received a plug in *Outside* magazine. Is Chrzanowski finally getting legit?

He currently rents a place in Vancouver's junkie/trendy Strathcona 'hood, home to a vibrant arts, music, and filmmaking scene. From there to Peru and Colombia, Whistler to Kicking Horse, New Brunswick to Tierra del Fuego, Chrzanowski has followed a different drummer his entire life. He lives low to the ground, has a nose for a free buffet table, and seems to have no visible means of support. For a master of the extreme, the very act of living is often extreme enough. ◀◀ STEVEN THRENDYLE

PETER CHRZANOWSKI

Mentor and fomenter

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