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By Estela Villaseñor Allen
Photography by Bob Allen

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"Fire in the hole!"

Dawn breaks at Big Sky resort as ski patroller Nancy Case radios in to patrol HQ. Moments earlier, she slid past the barriers that keep skiers from entering Lone Peak’s permanently closed eastern cliff area. Side-stepping the ridgeline, she ignited the 90-second fuse and expertly lobbed the five-pound charge, sightless, over the jagged, rocky edge into the summit snowfield.

Soon, a brilliant explosion and loud concussion rock the bowl, clearing the face of recently wind-loaded powder. Gaining momentum, the wave of snow roars over the cliffs and reappears some 10 seconds later exiting the Big Couloir. The billowing rush ceases its journey 1,400 feet below. “Nice one!” a fellow patroller radios in.

Moving snow is an integral part of patrol work at the two resorts that share 11,166-foot Lone Peak—Big Sky on the south side and Moonlight Basin to the north. The mountain’s shale-covered summit scrapes the underbelly of the jet stream, catching every climatic nuance that blows over this section of southwestern Montana. Weather changes quickly at this altitude, too; wind gusts often reach 100 miles per hour. All of these factors create one of the biggest snow-control challenges of any ski area in the United States, according to Big Sky’s ski patrol director Bob Dixon.

This year’s near-record 525 inches of snow above tree line makes blasting snowfields a daily occurrence. Warren Miller Entertainment’s director of photography Chris Patterson and his film crew, including athletes Chris Anthony, Lynsey Dyer, and Mike Mannelin, wait in Big Sky’s summit patrol shack for this pyrotechnics show to end, restless to test their mettle on these steep Montana slopes.

WME’s mission, however, is to document the long-awaited inaugural Lone Peak Interconnect agreement between neighboring Big Sky and Moonlight Basin Resorts, which links both resorts to establish a seamless Euro-style ski experience in the Northern Rockies. Some of the newest and most extreme lift-served lines in the U.S. will be captured for this year’s film, Off The Grid, thanks to the resorts’ snow-control expertise, a few lucky breaks in the weather, and a whole lot of filmmaking perseverance.

Finally the go-ahead comes from Scott Savage, Big Sky’s snowsafety director. The crew gears up and leaves before the conditions change Savage’s mind. Ski patrollers Jason Thompson and Chris Moore escort the adventurers on a short tour of the Moonlight Basin backcountry gate, 75 yards from the tram car, and into Big Sky’s new acreage—the untracked lines down the gut of Dakota Bowl.

A sudden storm descends, and visibility diminishes to near zero as the crew heads back to the patrol shack. Patterson, a 12-year WME pro, tells the group, “I once spent a week snowed in, in a tent in Alaska, before I ever shot a foot of film.” Great.
On hold at the top for more snow-control work, the crew’s jubilant mood deflates as the clouds begin rolling in from the west. After two maddening hours confined to the patrol shack, the sun dramatically reappears, and the filmmakers feel the rush to beat the next forecasted storm.

Patterson directs the skiers through a swath of untracked, backlit powder into a section of the bowl open for the first time this season, named Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Gullies. Precise communication between the cameraman and athlete is crucial; a missed line means wasted time and film. And when the weather is this fickle, every second counts. Patterson compliments, “That was good,” or scolds, “Ski through the frame; we’re making a movie.”

Shoot, move the tripod, check the exposure, and listen for the, “three, two, one, dropping.” After shredding his appointed line, Anthony radios up, “I’ll do another one of those if you want.” With an affirmation from Patterson, Anthony’s skis are over his shoulder and he’s boot-packing straight up the steep fall line with a prowess that reminds everyone that he is a 15-film WME veteran and extreme athlete aptly nicknamed “Moose.”

Within a half an hour, the gullies are tracked and the approaching shadow line pushes the filming to the opposite side of the bowl, where the A-Z chutes and the Pinnacles are still illuminated with low-angle winter sunlight. Hiking and skiing in earnest, with the freezing wind blowing against them, the skiers take their turns flying between the surreal pillars and abrupt fins of rock until the light fades.

THE DAYS RUN TOGETHER IN A BLUR OF EARLY CHAIRS AND DEEP powder, big mountain skiing in the Dictator chutes, the Wave wall, and the Big Couloir; waiting for control work and the inevitable arrival of cloud cover are facets of every day. Wrapping up the action at Big Sky, WME’s production crew moves north via Spur Road to film the Lone Peak experience from the Moonlight Basin perspective.

Big Sky and Moonlight Basin resorts, the major private stakeholders of Lone Peak, were finally prompted into negotiations—after years of dispute over public and private boundaries and access issues—when Congress passed the Gallatin Land Consolidation Act in 1998. Thanks to the resorts’ collaboration and resources, the new Lone Peak Pass creates a combined trail network of 5,300 skiable acres with a vertical drop of 4,350 feet—the second highest in the U.S.—with a total of 23 lifts. Similar to the arrangement at the great ski areas of Europe, such as St. Anton and Les Trois Vallées, skiers can access the terrain and amenities at both resorts with one lift ticket.

One of the newest destination ski areas in the U.S., Moonlight Basin offers a unique inbounds backcountry ski experience on some of the rockiest, steepest, and longest lift-accessed terrain in North America. When it snows or blows on Lone Peak, Moonlight’s patrol gets the predawn call to duty. On this powder day, a mesmerized WME crew is riding the Six-Shooter lift with the patrol.

A RAY OF SUNSHINE: On Big Sky’s Country Club run, Sun Valley native Lynsey Dyer makes the most of the sweet late-afternoon sunlight.
the imposing Headwaters ridgeline rising 1,700 feet straight ahead of them.

Hanging out at the modest Moonlight Basin patrol headquarters, jammed to standing room only, Chris Shelly, snow-safety director, distributes control route assignments, quick announcements, and duct-taped explosives. Couder, a one-year-old Labrador avalanche dog, entertains the assemblage with his energetic pacing, while Dyer, bored with the confinement, sketches an accomplished portrait of the group. The patrollers disperse to their tasks.

Throwing a blast into the Three Forks chute on the Headwaters, snow controller Ellie Thompson liberates a two-foot crown with a class-two avalanche, hitting a home run in the snow-safety world. Twenty minutes later, patroller Chris Catarina invites the WME crew on a guided hike into the Headwaters and later a tour of the North Summit Snowfield.

A single-file boot pack leads up the Headwaters, the knife-edge boundary that separates the two ski resorts. With heads bent against the cold crosswind and every step a deliberate placement, the skiers begin the precarious trek across the ridge’s rocky backbone. They pass a prominent sign that reads, High Stakes! Know Before You Go! Chasing the fleeting light, they hustle to their appointed chutes: Moose has a long line scoped out in Three Forks; Mannelin is heading for a line with mandatory air at the bottom of Jack Creek; while Dyer works her way to a cliff drop in Firehole. Each athlete’s descent is an individual expression of agile, swift turns through tight chutes of cold smoke as the cameras roll from the Stillwater Traverse 1,000 feet below.

Après ski at the Jackass Creek Saloon, Anthony respectfully declares the Headwaters hike as challenging as the skiing, at places even more so. “Most resorts don’t allow this kind of exposure to real challenges with real consequences and rewards. This is what makes this mountain very special,” he says.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: In Moonlight’s patrol shack, Couder the lab hangs with the WME crew; Mike Mannelin lifts off in Moonlight’s Three Forks chute; Chris Patterson rolls the film as Chris Anthony works the flat light; Dyer and Mannelin hike the knife-edge Headwaters ridgeline that now connects Big Sky’s A-Z chutes to the left and Moonlight’s Headwaters Bowl to the right.
accompanying the snow-safety staff into Deepwater Bowl below the North Summit Snowfield, Moonlight’s newest acreage and the showpiece of the Interconnect. Stated in a protected zone, a patroller triggers the Avalauncher, a compressed-gas cannon, discharging six rounds of explosives to release the recently snow-loaded slopes. Subsequently, the area is declared open, and the morning progresses with slow movie-making deliberateness while snow-covered locals, with face-shot-induced grins, blow by the film crew.

The lunch hour approaches with an invitation to the Moonlight patrol’s traditional Saturday barbecue. Patroller Eric Dobbs, a Hawaiian shirt brightly visible underneath his open patrol jacket, is flipping marinated racks of ribs on the grill. “We like to keep it light on this side of the mountain,” he says, poking fun at the Big Sky patrol with competitive camaraderie. Cameras rolling, the athletes chill with patrollers while the meat sizzles. Remembering their North Summit Snowfield reservation for 1:30, the team reluctantly skis away from the mouth-watering aroma, settling for water and energy bars.

After departing Big Sky’s tram, the group signs waivers at the Moonlight shack while a patroller checks for the mandatory transceivers, shovels, and probes. In order to keep tabs on skiers and preserve the backcountry experience, Moonlight only allows groups of four into the vast and isolated snowfield every 15 minutes. Arriving at the gate with a patrol guide, the crew is greeted by views of the Spanish Peaks, Fan Mountain, and the Madison Valley. Arcing deep turns down the wide-open pitch, they transition into Deep Water Bowl via a steep rollover called the Rips and traverse below the untracked chutes of the Gum Wall, the venue for the film’s next sequence.

At the day’s final set, while Anthony and Dyer boot up Trident chute and Mannelin picks a line in Orbits, the ominous sky engulfs them. Patterson puts the athletes on standby for the next hour, gambling on the appearance of a few moments of sweet light—known as the photographer’s “sucker hole.” Breaking the long silence, Mannelin keys his microphone and asks, “Could someone use the Avalauncher to shoot us up a few beers?” Laughter lifts the mood but not the cloud cover as the skiers rip their last ephemeral tracks, without documentation, through the enormous Montana landscape.

BLAZING HIS OWN TRAIL: Showing why he’s a longtime WME favorite, Chris Anthony blazes into new terrain above Moonlight Basin’s Horseshoe Bowl.

“KNOW BEFORE YOU GO!”

THE FINAL DAY OF FILMING STARTS OUT WITH THE WME TEAM

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