

IDE

EXECUTION

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WILL ONE INDEPENDENT
VISION REDEFINE THE
SKI-MOVIE FRAME?

BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI



"SKIING WAS MORE THAN JUST A SPORT AND CUTE LITTLE CHICK WEARING A NICE DESCENTE OR NORTH FACE OUTFIT. IT WAS ADVENTURE. WE REALLY WANTED TO BRING OUT THE ADVENTURE AND BEAUTY OF SKIING. A LOT OF THE TIME WE WEREN'T TIGHT ON THE GUY BECAUSE IT'S REALLY THE LANDSCAPE AROUND HIM THAT IS SO SPECTACULAR TO THE MOMENT." **-JAMES ANGROVE, RAP FILMS**



CHRISTOPHE MARGOT

As the house lights dim, silenced chairlifts and turning leaves draw us into a story that doesn't start with a scripted skit. Eric Pollard checks the NOAA forecast for Government Camp, Oregon, Andy Mahre slides rockered twin tips into his Dodge Dakota, and Pep Fugas packs a roller bag. Interstate scenery soon ticks past in a geometric drone, hinting hard that the season is on and we are rolling with *Idea*. We follow this crew as they exit the Meadows lot and queue the lift line. After an unload, Pollard drops a misty local's line, Fugas stalls a handplant and skis a tight glade backward. Action leaves the area in favor of the Mack Dawg step-down as Mahre lands a huge zero spin and Pep sticks a switch underflip tail grab. We transition in time to sculpted features during spring conditions and, still, the vibe sustains at an octave more real.

As this scene resonates in Montreal's Cinema Imperial, a flat-brim crowd is engaged with awe, but uncertain of the right reaction. We are one continental flight distant from Hood at the International Freeski Film Festival for the world premiere of *Idea* in September, an event founded not to spotlight athletes, but to judge filmmakers. Sixteen entries will show, but *Idea* is one title expected to break the mold.

The jury is still out on the switch ups and spin tricks, but the cinematic perspective of *Idea* transports us to a different time and place. At the present moment, newschool reaction is trending whisper over shout, underscoring the point that this film is not simply one degree different from the stock format of the last decade. And that distinction was exactly the goal.

THE EXISTING FRAME

It's not just chairlift theory that suggests the ski movie is stale. Each season, we gather in bars, condos and rec rooms to watch new titles that play the same. The cinematography is impressive and the riding otherworldly, but three initials—TGR, MSP or PBP—tell us what to expect.

Longevity, success and the ability to put out a quality product that people will wait in line to see and put money down to buy is at least partly to blame for the formulaic state of ski movies. But after over a decade of hardcore action set to commercial music, we are left wanting more from our sport.

Autograph heroes, inaccessible locations and bottomless budgets have removed the personal connection we once had to ski films. Framing the sport as endless heli lines and professionally sculpted features set against an eternally bluebird backdrop removes any pretense of reality. Real ski culture rarely gets even an onscreen cameo, and we are now given porn stars to idolize instead of a story to follow.

Yet skiing is rich with narrative and dripping with characters, scenes and subplots resonating from within. Capturing elements of style, subtlety of place and nuances of character is what enables us to connect with the experience. And that feeling of dropping in on what is familiar but exceptional transports our soul to that mystical place.



THE ROAD TO FRUITION. THE BAKER HIGHWAY, WASHINGTON. PHOTO: IAN COBLE



"I'D LIKE TO SEE A FILM HAVE A POLARIZING EFFECT, BUT THAT'S WHY SKI MOVIES AREN'T ANY GOOD NOW, BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE SCARED. THEY HAVE FEAR THAT IT'S NOT OUR MARKET. I NEVER ONCE THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT MY MARKET WAS. I MADE THESE MOVIES FOR ONE PERSON: ME. AND, IF MY FRIENDS LIKED IT, THAT WAS GREAT." **-GREG STUMP**

CREATIVITY UNLEASHED. PEP AT BAKER. PHOTO: ALEX O'BRIEN



I D E A \ E X E C U T I O N



"TO REALLY MAKE AN IMPACT ON THE WORLD, WE NEED TO TOUCH A LOT OF PEOPLE OUT THERE AND WE NEED TO MAKE SOMETHING THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE CAN RELATE TO. PEOPLE WANT TO GET TO KNOW THESE PEOPLE. THEY WANT TO BE IMPRESSED BY THEIR SKIING ABILITY BUT THEY ALSO WANT TO LIKE AND GET TO KNOW THE ATHLETES BEHIND WHAT THEY ARE DOING AND WHERE THEY ARE TRAVELING."

-STEVE WINTER, MSP FOUNDER

ABOVE: FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HIS FATHER, KYE PETERSEN EMERGED THIS WINTER AS A STAR WITH BREAKOUT SEGMENTS WITH TGR, *BELEVE*, AND *JOEZ*. PHOTO: BLAKE JORGENSEN. HERE: NECK DEEP IN SKI CULTURE. PHOTO: GRANT GUNDERSON

The ski-film format traces back to early rivals such as Warren Miller and Dick Barrymore, but the modern story starts with Greg Stump. Shooting in a rockumentary format, Stump's 1988 film *The Blizzard of Aahhhs* aggressively captured Glen Plake, Scot Schmidt and Mike Hattrup skiing steepes and hucking cliffs, but was spliced with travel and character.

Stump's film created an exhilarating, season-long story that utilized slo-mo shots and personal interviews to turn skiers into idols. His vision set the standard during a six-year cycle with such titles as *License to Thrill*, *Groove Requiem* and *P'tex, Lies and Duct Tape*.

More *Endless Summer* than Warren Miller, Stump's films fused ski action with modern music and underground lifestyle to inject new attitude into an old medium. Skiing embraced the fractional disciplines of extreme, film was the catalyst and a genre was redefined as visible athletes pioneered a new profession. Yet, with each generation, the focus narrowed on these stars and the narrative form Stump fathered devolved into a segmented medium.

STRAIGHT TO DVD

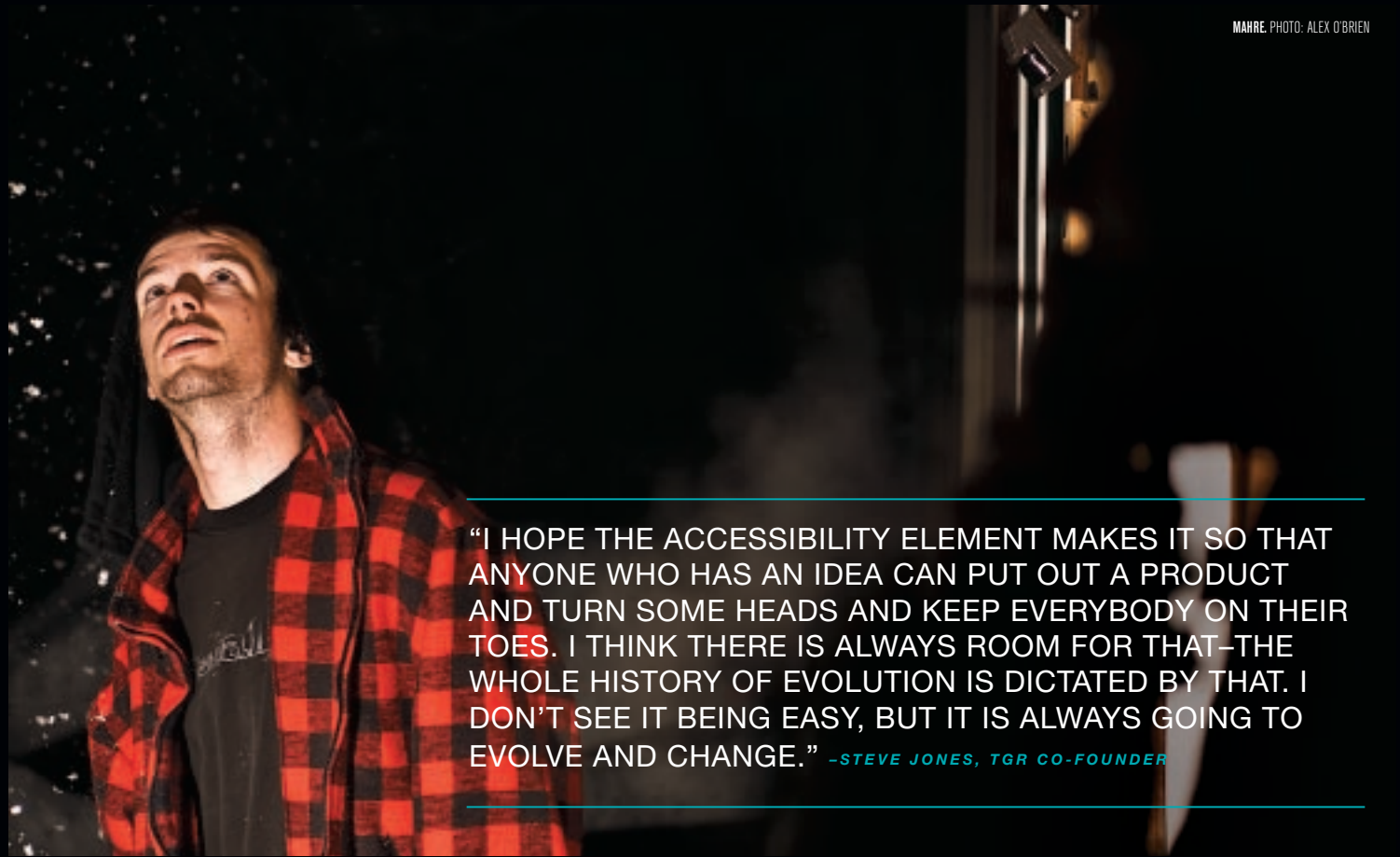
Back when the E-word was still used without irony, advancement found a new advocate in Real Action Pictures (RAP). Capturing Trevor Petersen and Eric Pehota skiing stunning peaks, RAP panned back to give a sense of scale, exposure and risk.

cinematography, locations, and athletic talent.

While a big-mountain battle was successfully raging, Johnny Decesare launched Poor Boyz Productions to document a new freestyle reaction. Starting with *Fade to Black* in 1996, *State of Mind* in 1997 and his breakthrough *Degenerates* in 1998, Decesare showed newschool action right from its root. The Poor Boyz formula clipped from trick to trick with an action-sports method that was not just scored, but edited to music.

No filmmaker is more deserving of both credit and blame for turning movies into a rapid-fire showcase than is Decesare. Aggressively highlighting a new era of grabs, flips and spins, Poor Boyz launched a crop of stage names—such as Shane Szocs, Mike Douglas, and J.P. Auclair—calling out the old with air and style.

As new freestyle went big, the company fostered filmmaking talent such as Tanner Hall, Theory-3 and Eric Iberg under the Poor Boyz tag in exchange for a cut of the action. Inspired by his films, and aided by advancements in technology such as digital cameras and editing programs that fit on a laptop, new film companies began to sprout up through the cracks. Newschool at the time was centered around parks and urban rails, meaning a film could be produced with a miniscule budget, and without ever setting foot off-piste. Pros who weren't happy with their segments in bigger films could merely start their own companies. From this breeding ground rose directors like Iberg and in this generation was the genesis of *Idea*.



MAHRE. PHOTO: ALEX O'BRIEN

"I HOPE THE ACCESSIBILITY ELEMENT MAKES IT SO THAT ANYONE WHO HAS AN IDEA CAN PUT OUT A PRODUCT AND TURN SOME HEADS AND KEEP EVERYBODY ON THEIR TOES. I THINK THERE IS ALWAYS ROOM FOR THAT—THE WHOLE HISTORY OF EVOLUTION IS DICTATED BY THAT. I DON'T SEE IT BEING EASY, BUT IT IS ALWAYS GOING TO EVOLVE AND CHANGE."

-STEVE JONES, TGR CO-FOUNDER

CONTENT AND CHARACTER

Andy Mahre carries a surname that has been celebrated by skiers since his dad Steve and uncle Phil raced to a silver-gold finish at the '84 Olympics. Andy was raised outside Yakima, Washington, and taught to ski fast at White Pass. Yet, like many outgrowing a shadow, he made his name on his own terms, giving up gates and collecting film segments during a four-year stretch. While Phil and Steve will always be a ski-show draw, Andy represents the next generation of ski-poster star.

Landing switch and riding without poles is Andy's unconventional signature. His no-pole runs at a Snoqualmie rail jam in 2004 broke tradition and sparked online controversy, but he refused to bow to critical pressure. This irreverent streak of seeking fun rather than recognition continued, and his stock rose with a huge zero-spin huck over Pyramid Gap in the Poor Boyz 2005 film, *War*, and TGR's *Tangerine Dream*. Mahre is now on a full K2 salary and his star is on the rise. Yet it's his heritage that provided insight on building a lasting ski career through self-direction.

His profile made Mahre exactly the one to spark change and the impetus for *Idea*. "The idea had been in the back of my mind for awhile, but when I broke my back it just all fell into place," Mahre says, referring to a T6/T7 injury at Breckenridge in 2006. "Most of the storyline in skiing has diminished; there are a few out there that are trying to keep it rolling, but it's too easy to go out and capture only the action and sell that. When I was five years younger, I loved to see just the action, action, action. But now I like to see the smaller things that are involved."

Mahre backed the concept so strongly that he later agreed to fund his travel

"I HAD FULL-ON DESIRE, DRIVE AND PASSION TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT—AND IF PEOPLE HATED IT, SO BE IT, BECAUSE I WAS COMPLETELY OVER WHAT WAS OUT THERE AT THE TIME. THEY WERE MY INSPIRATION, BUT I HAD A NEW VISION BECAUSE I SAW EPIC MOMENTS OF EVERYBODY'S MOVIES THAT I WANTED TO MAKE INTO A FULL-LENGTH MOVIE."

—JOHNNY DECESARE, PBP FOUNDER

COLBY WEST FOLLOWS TJ SCHILLER DURING A SHOOT FOR MSP'S *7 SUMM'RY DAYS*. MSP, WHO EARNED AN EMMY NOMINATION FOR THEIR CAMERA WORK LAST YEAR, CONTINUES TO BRING INNOVATIVE CINEMATOGRAPHY TO A WORLDWIDE AUDIENCE. PHOTO: BLAKE JORGENSEN/MSP

budget out of pocket, and scrawled a clause on his K2 contract ensuring exclusive focus, but he carefully gathered the crew one at a time. While Eric Iberg was driving him to Mammoth after the injury, Andy pitched the screenplay. Iberg was reluctant due to predictable financial loss, but when Pep Fugas tapped in at the Orage Masters, his first refusal thawed.

Fugas is one rider whose contrasting style is not done justice by an XL image. He is fully credentialed with an X Games silver medal, the Fujative ski and an impressive segment resume from films such as PBP's *1242*, *War* and MSP's *The Front Line*. His marketed persona seems closer to Tanner Hall's crew, yet he was eager to take this risk since *Idea* aligned more with his outlook.

"Most of the other movies seem concocted—like you're going to go shoot lifestyle so you see shots of Sarah Burke in a hot tub," Fugas says. "It's all glamour and glitz and a mirage of stuff that isn't happening just to make someone look better and inhuman."

A standout season for a rider on Pep's tier typically includes constant airline travel and continuous obligation. Making connections from one event to the next, shuffling between locations and dropping in on preset film crews mean few pros

have the luxury to pick their own line. An exclusive commitment to *Idea* meant Pep's responsibilities—such as big-money contests—were set aside for a blank-slate season that provided a rare opportunity to shape a portrayal.

The project still needed a visionary and Eric Pollard's presence made *Idea* a reality. Immersion has always been Pollard's style, and his resume lists skier, artist, ski designer and, for this project, editor. Since he signed with Line at age 15 and integrated smoothness into freestyle, Pollard's visions have led to artistic topsheets, altered ski design and early abandonment of poles. His cardboard templates were the source of Line's early-rise skis that—along with the K2 HellBent—make *Idea*'s lines and landings possible.

From structure, shot list and visual vibe to website design, Pollard's fingerprints are visible in every frame. "There's this formula that most people are applying when they make a ski movie," Pollard says. "I know I'm tired of watching it and most of my friends are. Skiing is the thing that we are so passionate about and it completely shapes our lives, and it didn't feel like anything was representing that."

Template and tone are painted with Pollard but his greater contribution is

inspiration to embrace natural style. "We all come from a background that is very park-orientated, and that aspect of the sport right now is revolving around difficulty. We wanted it to revolve more around feeling and relating to people and style," Pollard says. "The act of skiing and how it just moves your life."

The distillation of *Idea*'s concept was capturing the feel of an endless session with a group of friends. Yet stripping back the sheen to reflect a rider's true season from start to finish was the simple genius. Rather than plot, script and capture perfection, this project was intended to be the story of three skiers living a life that was attainably real and skiing at a level that was unbelievably not.

CONTROLLING DESTINY

This unconventional faction found a hub in a nondescript rental under the Brightwood, Oregon, canopy. In this temporary location the tight crew—Andy, Pep and Pollard, as well as Justin Wiegand, Matt Schwagler and Iberg—transformed a season of footage

into a finished film between frozen pizzas and MacBook diversions.

As the grassroots location suggests, the entire project was outside the normal six-digit sphere. Plane tickets, hotels and heli days had been sacrificed for road miles, floor space and microwave cuisine. Yet the relative luxury of a set crew and flexible schedule resulted in the freedom to ski as one entity all season and made possible instant departures to Utah, extended stays at Baker and a 50-hour drive to AK.

At snowmelt, rather than high five and hit the coast, each member of the crew committed to the creative process. Pollard spearheaded the edit between sets of off-season pushups while Pep and Andy each had their say. Amid this creative chaos, Cali P and Chris Stolz created an entirely original soundtrack in the living room, while Wiegand collected the season's stills into a photobook. In every respect, *Idea* was a collective effort, but at each stage Iberg was the chief instigator.

For those not posting on Newschoolers.com, Eric Iberg is no household name. Yet as producer, *Idea* was ultimately his risk. Minnesota hot laps at Highland Hills taught him to ski, and tape-to-tape mixes of Stump movies introduced him to filmmaking. Inspired by *Degenerates* and Mack Dawg's snowboarding film *Decade*, Iberg linked



“IT’S LIKE GOOD SEX: IT’S GOT TO HAVE A BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND AN END. IT’S A THREE-PART STORY, AND DON’T RUSH THE MIDDLE OR THE BEGINNING, JUST SNAP THAT ENDING, BABY.”

—GREG STUMP

ATTAINABLE YET UNBELIEVABLE? THAT’S ANDY MAHRE AT MOUNT BAKER.
PHOTO: MATIAS FREDRINSSON



TOM DAY SHOOTS FOR WARREN MILLER AS JULIAN CARR SMOKES ONE. ALTA, UTAH.
PHOTO: WILL WISSMAN



“MAYBE THAT HOT TUB AIN’T SUCH A BAD IDEA.” PEP TAKES A DIP AT BAKER. PHOTO: ALEX O’BRIEN

SCOTT GAFFNEY



“IT’S SKI PORN, YES, BUT IT’S MORE PROPAGANDA FOR A SPORT THAT WE’VE BEEN TRYING TO CREATE AND SET THE FOUNDATION FOR. EVERYTHING WE’VE DONE, WHETHER IT’S HOW THESE GUYS DESIGN THEIR SKIS OR HOW I MAKE MOVIES, WE’RE TRYING TO MAKE SURE IT GOES IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. THE ONLY WAY I CAN DO THAT IS THROUGH MOVIES.” —ERIC IBERG

up with J.T. Holmes and Tanner Hall during a '99 freshman season in Utah. He shot friends with a Sony VX 1000 and donated footage to Poor Boyz for *13*.

His first project, *Royalty*, was a segmented team film that exposed a vanguard of the Three Phils, Candide Thovex, Mickael Deschenaux and Pollard. Iberg followed with *Stereotype*, a rail-and-kicker sequel of riders lacking high-rolling sponsors. Two seasons later, *WSK106* [dub-ski], a co-production with Tanner, refined raw style with vignettes that satirized the trend of oversold image.

Iberg's history is polarizing, but he gets a lot done with little funding. Handshake deals are the reason *Idea* got through the season on just \$62,000 of sponsorship money, all but \$8K of which funded salaries, processing and 16mm stock. In the past, rider funding kept Iberg solvent, and each subject kicked in cash on this project, but mortgaging future royalties to Poor Boyz in exchange for a check is what ultimately got *Idea* made.

Although the balance sheet rarely pencils out, Iberg earns rider respect because his films showcase the next level in advance. And skiing is on the verge of a significant switch, with style replacing difficulty as the defining factor and newschool maturing beyond what can be contained within a three-minute segment.

At the forefront of this shift are Andy, Pep and Pollard, which is why *Idea* fit Iberg's profile. “No one will ever make a movie on three guys who are changing the sport as much as they are in a time period which is so crucial like it is with us—twin tip, rocker, reverse sidecut—all the stuff they are leading,” Iberg says. “It all added up. I could lose everything I have this year and still create something no one else will ever be able to create again.”

THE COLLECTIVE RESULT

Blending cosmopolitan culture and Renaissance architecture, Montreal's Cinema Imperial is a majestic location. So it is a fittingly transportive setting for traveling back to Mount Baker in the last segment of *Idea*. Most of the skate-shoed kids here have never been West, but in this venue they are experiencing a legendary Northwest storm exactly the way it went down.

First the Mount Baker snowphone declares in Gwyn Howat's voice the good news of eight feet since Friday. Then the crew cleans off the truck in a friend's Glacier driveway and hits Highway 542 as the DOT plow scrapes past. Their truck winds up the road, skips the chain up and comes to a stop as the foursome exits in the upper lot.

It is snowing hard and Pep and Pollard take one overhead run right to the lift. Andy sneaks first into the trees for better visibility, and the three skiers start dropping a secret waterfall. Andy clears the whole stack to switch, Pollard hits fluffy pillows and Pep lofts through the trees then runs it out of sight racing contrails of snow.

In the next shot, trailers tote sleds up an unsigned logging road. Andy unloads his

sled and soon Pollard's vision is clouded by consecutive face shots. Pep, Andy and Pollard build a booter and session it as one crew. Pep and Pollard reaux sham beaux for a hit, then Pep closes it out with a brilliant sunset line in reverse. As the lights come up at IF3, the audience is left lingering in a greybird reality that feels a bit surreal.

RANT AND RAVE

Visionaries should be celebrated, yet it is easier to criticize than create. Rather than generating constructive solutions, posted rants about what is whack, stale or wrong have become a common thread in ski culture. Yet the creative process is not an armchair task. In a sport still undercut by resisters, those who seek a new line show us skiing in a new light. Their influence is our evolution, and without their risk the future would take longer to reach.

There have been other worthy attempts at an unpredictable result, like Bill Heath's *Sinners*, Gaffney's *Immersion*, Tanner's *Believe*, and a collection of smaller, independent crews who lack the budget and/or talent to get noticed. Yet *Idea* stands alone since an evocative focus tells a season's story without a single scripted line. And unlike these single shots, *Idea* is simply a first stanza since the film will sequel into a more ambitious format, taking advantage of new media such as streaming web video and podcasts, next season. The product is not perfect—the story line is told subtly without key elements like narration, natural conversation or interviews, and the film contains a few shots that probably would have been cut out by a more established editor—but predictability was never the point, and raw edges easily trump met expectations. Validated or vilified, *Idea* is our time stamp and is one that will endure.

Iberg proudly brought his parents to Montreal's madness, yet there was no standing ovation or critical recognition. Neither the riders in the seats nor the judges in the balcony picked *Idea* for the prize. The awards at IF3 went down unscripted with an underdog (Rage Film's *Enjoy*) taking home the stack of cash. Spirited dissent after the drink tickets ran dry included an Iberg-induced judging dispute and Poor Boyz director Tyler Hamlet trying to regift his People's Choice ski to Andy Mahre.

Amidst this mixed reaction *Idea* proved only that this film will take time to sink in. Early response is not muted, with simultaneous ire and praise proving the state of the format is a heated topic. IF3 brewed with ideas at 1 a.m. but Red Bull attitude is only one ingredient in an equation of change. Making a 42-minute stand, however, illustrates the difference between inspiration and execution. The definitive ski movie of the next generation has yet to be made, but regardless, one assertion is irrefutable. No matter ski shape or brim shape, this crew deserves respect for one reason: style is moving unstopably on and changing our medium is the message skiing needs to hear. ■