

SNOWBOARDING'S MOST SOULFUL VORTEX

L

I

WORDS BY

THE BAKER

DAN KOSTRZEWSKI

N

E

BREEDS ITS NEXT PRO GENERATION

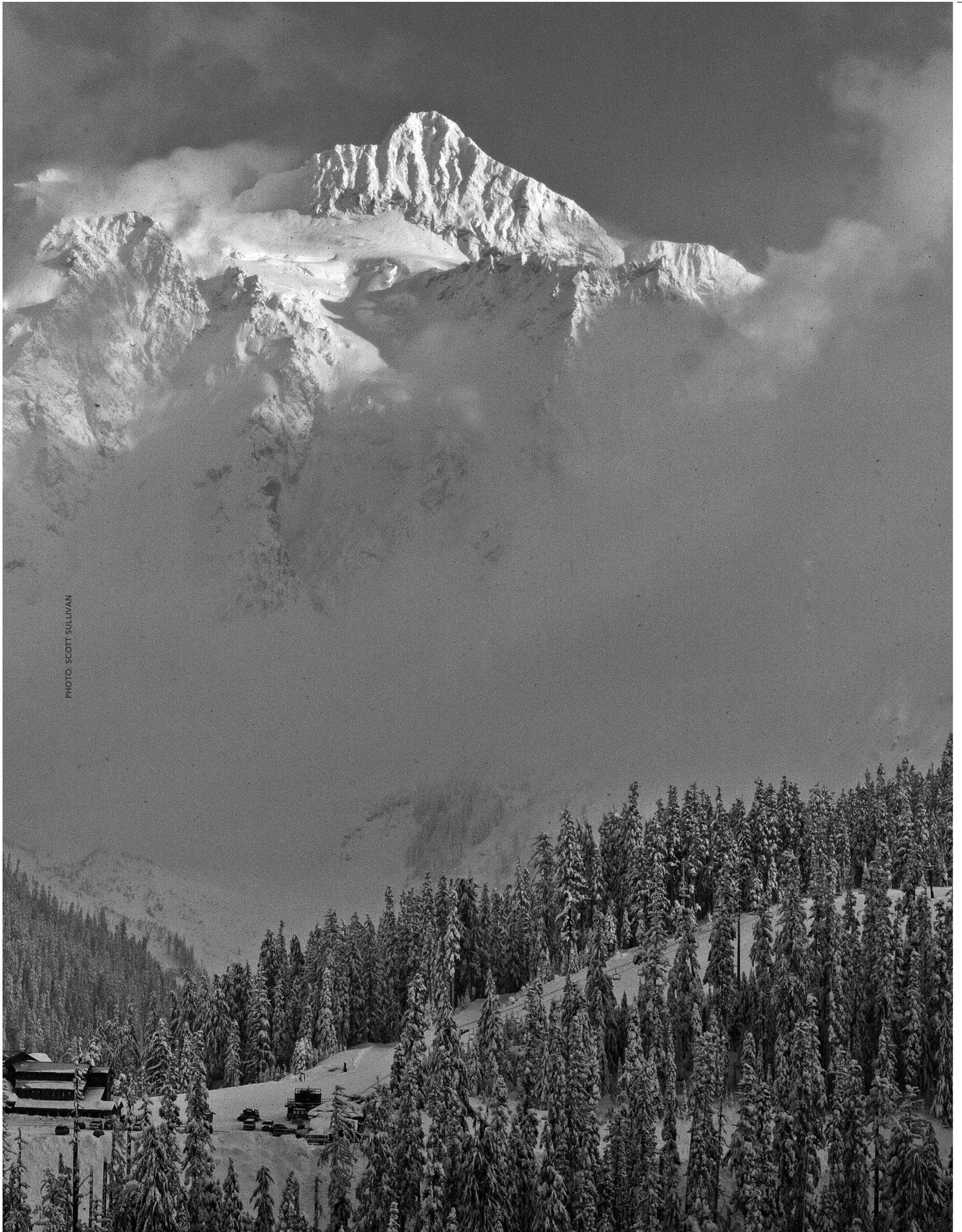


PHOTO: SCOTT SULLIVAN

The in-run alone for the Baker Road Gap is more than most can handle. Nate Lind, out of the gauntlet.

PHOTO: MEG HAYWOOD-SULLIVAN



Rain is hammering the blacktop on the Mt. Baker Highway and I am being pulled back again, one mile-marker at a time, to the heart of a storied Northwest community. The vortex at the end of this winding two-lane is the mossy hamlet of Glacier and its anti-resort of Mt. Baker, which has long represented something original, defiant and pure in a sport that has been heavily trending for three decades. As an icon, Mt. Baker is deeply woven into the lore and the history of snowboarding. But Baker is equally famous in the pro ranks as a grassroots breeding ground, spawning riders, rebellion, and style defined by big-mountain skill and a proudly maverick streak.

Like many Baker locals, I've been down this road hundreds of times before, chasing converging storms to the 1,500-foot, 1,000-acre ski area that will accumulate 808 inches of snow during the 2011/2012 winter. As a birthplace, it all began in the early '80s, when longtime General Manager Duncan Howat granted Craig Kelly, Dan Donnelly, Carter Turk, Jeff Fulton, and the Mount Baker Hardcore (MBHC) access to his slow, diesel-powered Riblet double chairs at the edge of the North Cascades Wilderness. The scene that sprouted from those roots has created a pro lineage intertwined with a mountain that now resonates with snowboarders worldwide—and not just for its steep terrain and massive accumulation.

Not all days at Baker are the same, and the February weekend of my arrival is the biggest draw of the season—Glacier is packed with pros who migrate here annually to compete for the most coveted roll of duct tape in snowboarding. At Mervin's Method House party, local pros such as Matt Edgers and Forrest Burki mix with big-budget celebrities from Travis Rice to Mark Landvik over fish tacos in the kitchen. Muddy shoes pile up by the front door, medicinal smoke wafts from the balcony, and stiff drinks in red keg cups circle as musicians Scott Sullivan and Wes Makepeace play the living room to an eccentric crowd. Downstairs in the garage, the next pro hopefuls wax on and off with One Ball Jay as the Glacier mist continues its steady drip from the forested canopy.

It is a pre-race scene that has played out for more than two decades, but one where wave after wave of homegrown pros from Craig Kelly and Temple Cummins to Lucas Debari have backed up the Baker mystique by winning bragging rights against the biggest pros in the business. At the Method House, the party rolls on as riders who haven't yet made the finals roll out early. After all, this is the Legendary Banked Slalom where skill trumps fame, and race day is taken almost as seriously as the freeriding.

L

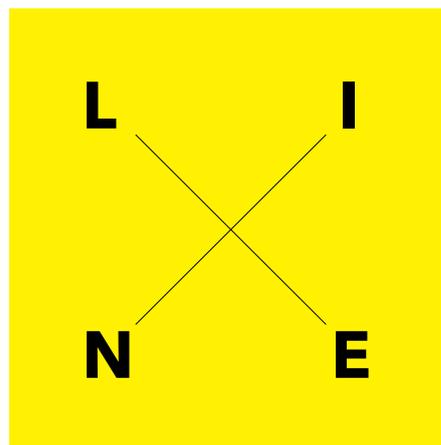
I

N

E



Winning the LBS at 18 helped put Lucas Debari on the map. Drops like this keep him there.
PHOTO: SCOTT SULLIVAN



Temple Cummins. LBS.
PHOTO: SCOTT SULLIVAN



Born and Bred

The sky has cleared, but I am deep in The Cave—a snow cave next to the course—drinking a contraband Rainier on finals Sunday in a party of team managers, photographers, and Glacier locs' with my deck stacked in the snow next to 20 Lib Techs.

On the course, the second and final run of the pro men's division is now on tap, and a mix of the biggest names and best unknowns in snowboarding are rocketing down the serpentine, half-natural, half-man-made course. The heavy favorites—Terje, Temple, T. Rice—are about to drop in.

Competitive spirit is in the air and the crowd cheers heart and flow, but remains undivided in its loyalty for local favorites such as Blair Habenicht and Temple Cummins as well as Maria and Lucas Debari. Raised 22 miles down the access road in the hamlet of Glacier, the brother-and-sister pros were brought up on Baker's deep snowfall and the heaping pasta dishes served at Milano's, their family's roadside Italian restaurant that hosts the

LBS victory dinner each year.

Later in the 2012 winter, Maria Debari will go on to win the Freeride World Tour title in dominating fashion, but Lucas has been representing on an equally huge stage over the years, stacking impressive big-line footage in films for Absinthe, Rome, and *Further*, landing on magazine covers and holding his own in the biggest mountain realms. But his rise to recognition started on this natural halfpipe run when he took the pro LBS win in 2008 at age 18 while the standing-room-only crowd in the White Salmon Lodge erupted with the hometown pride.

"Growing up in Glacier, the people who I looked up to were the Mt. Baker Hardcore—Tex Devenport, Bass, Bryan Hollenbeck, Little B, Jason Loeb, Dan Donnelly. I mean, they were my heroes," Lucas says. "Spending every day at the restaurant, I saw those guys coming in all the time. Glacier was a really tight-knit community at the time, so we really were part of the community, and growing up around them, I wanted to be just like them."

Glacier has long welcomed rebels, lurkers, and outcasts. The atmosphere created an underground that gave rise to countercultural icons such as the late George Dobis and hangouts like the Mt. Baker Snowboard Shop. The dynamic incubated brands such as Lib Tech, Gnu, and K2 while also honing the big-mountain style pioneered by riders such as Carter Turk who earned lasting respect for laying down lines so burly they still rarely get ridden. "There are a few breeding grounds like Squaw and Jackson and Mt. Baker where you can really gain that amazing control of your snowboard in all sorts of terrain," Debari says. "Mt. Baker allows you to ride some of the most technical terrain but in a competitive workout scenario."

"There is great terrain all over the world and especially up in BC, but Mt. Baker really is something special," Debari says. "The concentration of epic snowboarding is so high in such a tiny little area that it blows my mind."



Baker's roots run deep. Real deep. Forrest Burki knows this.
PHOTO: NEZ HAYWOOD SULLIVAN

B A K E R

The Secret Handshake

In traditional LBS fashion, Blair and Lucas have a bet. Whoever runs slower in the LBS finals will have to drop in on the other's summer sport—big-wall climbing for Blair or big-wave surfing for Lucas. While other pros such as Landvik and Jake Blauvelt have made Baker their home mountain, Blair and Lucas are linked by their roots.

With a Baker season pass in hand since age four, Lucas was born local. Habenicht migrated to the woods after an introduction as a 16-year-old by his cousin, the late Scott Stamnes, during the 1998/99 season that saw a world-record-setting 1,140 inches of snowfall. "It was snowy and foggy out in classic Baker style, and you couldn't really see your line," Habenicht says of his first day at Baker, when he found himself riding with legend and early Standard star Tex Devenport. "And Tex, in full Texan voice, was like, 'Just point it.' I ended up pointing it, and it was quite a bigger straight run than I anticipated. It was a really heavy line for

me at the time. I'd been watching Tex for years in snowboard movies, and now I was at Baker, fourth run out of the gate, pointing some blind spine line with him in a chute that I now know doesn't fill in all the time."

He survived the introduction, moved to Bellingham for college at Western Washington University, and spent a season in residence at the Pink House across from the Mt. Baker Snowboard Shop, during an era that spawned riders from Matt Edgers, Tarek Husevold, and Johnny Martens to Sean "Donkey" Mansfield, Ralph Backstrom, Kael Martin, and Forrest Burki. "Temple Cummins has definitely been the biggest influence on my snowboarding," Blair says. "I met Temple at Crystal [Mountain], but when I saw him ride Baker, he expanded my eyes as to what was possible on a snowboard as far as speed and control. He exposed me to how technical you can get with the terrain and still keep it fun and fluid."

That technicality is possible at Baker due to deep

coastal snowpacks that stick to near-vertical walls, but also because of a mountain management attitude that has long kept consequential zones open that would be permanently closed at other areas. That attitude has filtered out to backcountry access, keeping the gates open to the Shuksan Arm and Hemispheres training grounds that lack the hype of other media hotbeds. "At Baker, in my opinion, you have some of the best snowboarders in the world, like Temple and Tex and Lucas Debari, and everybody is just humble," Blair says. "It creates this really great environment to grow your snowboarding without this jock, Southern California-hype bullshit that covers up so much of snowboarding."

The Underground

Baker has always been the regional epicenter for Northwest riders looking for a little support. But as pro snowboarding rediscovered its freeride roots and gravitated to deeper, under-hyped locations, riders such as Habenicht, Debari, and Mark Landvik

earned their shots out of what had become a dead zone for exposure during the park-and-rail era. With the explosion in digital media, more crews started showing up to shoot lines and features. And especially during lean years in other locales, like last winter, Baker becomes a place to get a few shots and stack some footage.

Like many, Burki landed at Baker due to its terrain and its vibe. But with wins at the North Face Masters, he's now filming, shooting, traveling, and working at solidifying a career as a pro freerider. It's a tough niche compounded by factors like crew dynamics, Baker's prevalence of stormy skies, and unforeseen problems like the smash-and-grab theft that resulted in the loss of his splitboard the night before my arrival.

For a freerider like Burki, shooting tree jibs on a powder day seems painful. Generations of other local chargers like Devenport, Cummins, and Edgers have long lost their powder-day patience for film crews, but Burki is still trying to earn his shot. "It's not going to change that much," Burki says. "The weather is gnarly, the snow is gnarly, the terrain is difficult to ride, and the mountain in itself regulates since there are only a certain type of people who can handle living up here."

By afternoon, Forrest escapes the crew, links back up with the photo editor and ducks into an undercover zone pioneered by Cummins and Chris Fulton. The lines on this near-vertical wall are still clean because few riders could survive the exposure. We snake around to watch from below.

In the zone, the light whites out as Forrest shimmies through a rock face into a two-meter-wide, near-vertical nub, sluff pouring toward us in the basin below. We wait for a window but the clouds taunt. Frustrated, Forrest drops in and rides the straight shot clean, but with too much graybird background for a publishable photo.

Five minutes later, the sky cracks, the photographer swears up a storm, and Burki slips back into the trees.

"A big inspiration for me is all the locals who shred here who aren't trying to be in the spotlight or have snowboard careers," Burki says. "Those are the people I gravitate toward to ride with because their approach to the mountain is a little more pure than the people who are trying to make a living off it. Being around that energy is refreshing to me, especially the more that I'm around the other side of things. It's grounding to come back and just shred with the locals."

The Progression

In the MBHC era of snowboarding, Baker was a bit of a secret. "We had utopia, dude," original MBHC Dan Donnelly confirms. "I'm just glad that we were lucky enough to have the opportunity to have what we had, at that time, that golden era of unlimited powder. It's similar to having Pipeline or Malibu in the early '50s with you and your four buddies—it's all there for the taking, just for you."

But as riders from Jeff Fulton, Carter Turk, and Craig Kelly





ABOVE RIGHT
The MBHC might have "had utopia," but there are still plenty of goods if you know where to look. Curtis Ciszek.
PHOTO: VERON DECK

BAKER

Maybe the early days at Baker were like Pipeline in the '50s, but it's still just as much of a proving ground today. Kael Martin.
PHOTOS: SCOTT SULLIVAN

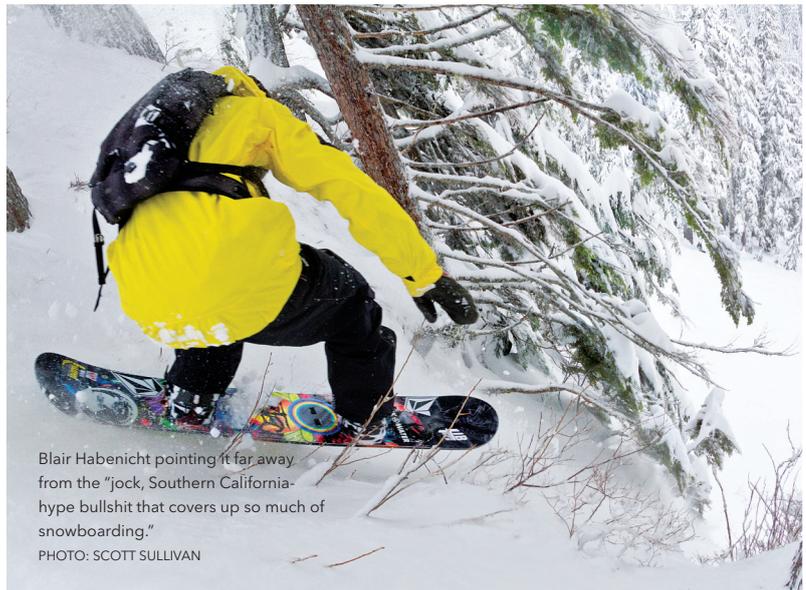


The Mt. Baker Snowboard Shop and LBS duct tape trophies: symbols of the tradition.

TOP PHOTO: MEG HAYWOOD-SULLIVAN

BOTTOM PHOTO: SCOTT SULLIVAN

BAKER



Blair Habenicht pointing it far away from the "jock, Southern California hype bullshit that covers up so much of snowboarding."
PHOTO: SCOTT SULLIVAN



Terje Haakonsen. LBS.
PHOTO: TIM ZIMMERMAN

to Mike Ranquet, Jamie Lynn, and Tex Devenport gained respect and renown, the mountain started attracting wave after wave of attention and ridership. But no spike in traffic compares to the boom since 2005 that was sparked by a combination of new media exposure, the resurgence of freeride, and the rapidly growing population of neighboring Bellingham.

Now, unless you spend most of your time splitboarding—like Donnelly—scoring Baker without the side-slipping hordes is an almost unheard of experience. But three weeks later, I drop into a timewarp. An unpredicted spring storm has delivered a sneaker powder day, and the hill feels eerily empty. My silence is broken by the booming voice of longtime 686 pro Pat McCarthy, heckling me from the chair. We link up at the entrance to the sidecountry, one slow-speed quad ride above the new Raven Hut Lodge.

When McCarthy drops in, his housemate follows

and I follow their track through the pow to the Womb. In 10 years at Baker, I've never had the combination of sack and opportunity to hit this infamous line. But McCarthy eggs me on and I follow, holding on highly exposed heelside down the frighteningly steep, board-width-wide ramp, the vertical rock walls hemming me in on both sides. McCarthy drops in fast, slashes right, and cleans the fresh snow off the refrozen layer beneath. Fully committed, I have no choice but to follow and I survive. Turns out, McCarthy has a bit of a history with this Baker tradition of testing a rider's skill set on sack-shrinking terrain. "When I was filming with *TransWorld*, they'd send rail guys up and say, 'Make sure these rail guys get a few shots,'" McCarthy says. "And damn right the first thing I'd do is bring them to the road gap and say, 'Let's do this, boys.'"

No image is more classically Baker than the road gap, and McCarthy has hit this famous huck with riders from Hana Beaman, Josh Dirksen, and Eero

Niemela to Wille Yli-Luoma and Gigi Rűf. This season he sessioned it with Lucas Debari and says shooting the gap ties all of the Baker pros together. "We're all drawn back and fully connected to that shot of a shirtless Shawn Farmer doing the cranked-out method," he says.

McCarthy made his name through Think Thank and People videos when jumps and rails were king. Now, as he eases into a post-pro industry career, McCarthy sees the environment as something more than a venue for filming. "The very best thing Mt. Baker has given people is an oasis from all of the media and all of the hype behind snowboarding," McCarthy reflects.

L
N



Yes, Forrest Burki got a shot, but that means he had to sit around while the filmers got ready. Tough one.

PHOTO: SCOTT SULLIVAN

I
 “You take away all the parks and double corks and the hype and the music and the energy drink tent at the bottom of the run. You take all that away and strip it down and that is just what Baker is—just going to the mountain with your friends, riding hard and having a nice cold Rain Doggy on your tailgate at the end of the day.”

The Guru of Flow

E
 I’ve slugged my share of parking lot beers and the season is officially over at Baker, but the snowbanks at the Heather Meadows parking lot are still solidly double overhead. It’s a slushy May morning and I’m gearing up to go splitboarding with Temple

Cummins, who represents a presence that is half-guru, half-godfather to the current generation of Baker’s best.

He takes off and I don’t catch up until I find him on top of Table Mountain and gazing at the gnarled fingers that fall from the pinnacle of Mt. Shuksan. Cummins rarely says much, but before we drop into the cooking amphitheatre he tells me of coming to Baker on family trips in the ‘80s and then being drawn north when Jason Basarich, Brian Hartman, and Jason Loeb held court on the hill and in the Heather Meadows Lodge.

“There were very fluid snowboarders coming out of Baker very early on.” Temple reflects. “But definitely the early acceptance of snowboarding started progression much quicker than other places even in Washington and around the country. People respond to that. Baker is known worldwide for the people who come out of it and the terrain equally. They are like mini generations.”

Sick lines and deep days blur together at Baker, but local riders mark the timeline of seasons by the LBS. Cummins shows up in most memories of the event. When the LBS times were tabulated for 2012, Habenicht won the friendly local wager, beating Debari by less than a second, stacking a fifth-place finish in the pro men’s division and avoiding a big-wall climbing trip for at least one more year. Adding to the lore, 37-year-old Terje Haakonsen took home his seventh LBS crown, slipping out to catch a flight to Norway before the duct tape was handed out at the White Salmon Lodge and the victory dinner raged late at Milano’s. Cummins slid smoothly into third, making yet another podium appearance. Then, like many of the elusive Baker riders, he disappeared again into the storms, leaving only tracks to follow for the remainder of the season. And, like all of them, he continued to make his mark on a mountain that has raised so many, so well, in its shadow. ❄️