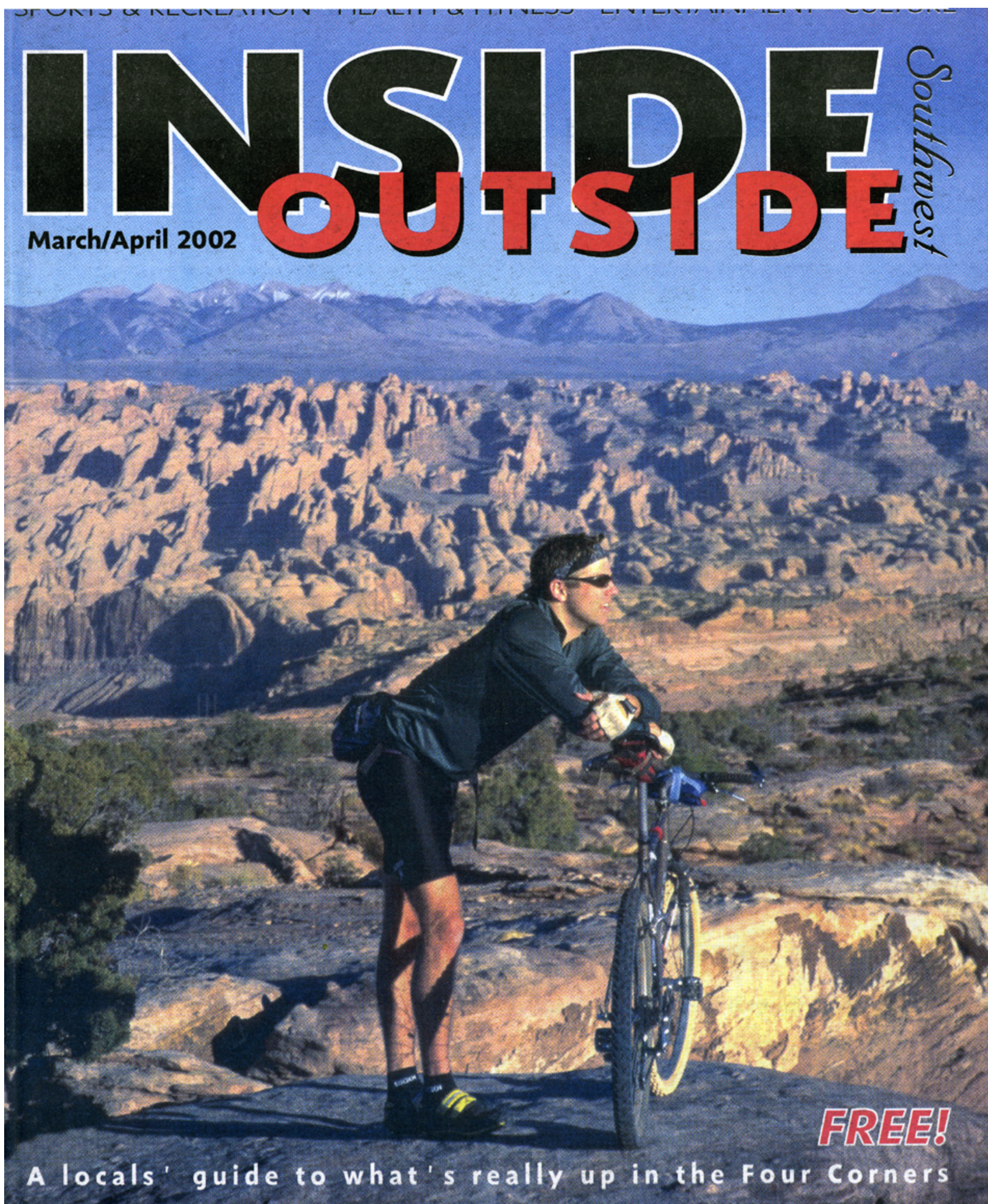


Inner Quiet/Outer Speed

By Dr. Sean Cridland

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Inner Quiet

OUTER SPEED

July 1976, Cervina, Italy. The the Kilometro Lanciato World Championships: ABC sports commentator Bob Beattie asks then speed-skiing world record holder Steve McKinney, "What's the worst thing that could happen to a speed-skier?" McKinney didn't even pause: "You could be slow."

Speed Skiing. If there is a more suitable topic for Inside/Outside, I can't imagine what it would be. For the general public and the media it large, the sport could be described the way that Franz Klammer did it over and over again during his commentary of the demonstration event for the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville, France: "These guys are crazy!" I had expected so much more from him, winner of the 1976 Olympic downhill at Innsbruck, Austria. If ever there was

Every speed skier has longed for the day when someone would try to understand what is actually happening.

an athletic performance which personified craziness, it was his daring blitz of the Innsbruck course. I suppose that's why I expected more from him as a commentator. Surely, he knew that what looks crazy and out of control to an outsider is really only the physical manifestation of a keen, sharp mind that knows the limits, its embodiment and is focused clearly enough to let it do precisely what it can do to the full extent of its abilities. All I could think was that Franz must have had some coaching from his CBS producers: make it sound really exciting; don't worry about accuracy. Hence, every media account I've ever read or seen depicts speed skiers as if their just a few marbles short of a dozen. Speed skiers know that they'll attract attention. Like most people – and most athletes – they like attention even when it's a bit misplaced. Being called crazy is better than not being called for dinner. Being flamboyant helps to pay the bills, but it doesn't win races. Every speed skier has longed for the day when someone would try to understand what is actually happening. I guess it takes one to know one and only a speed skier is able to really talk about the experience with any pathos.

I can sympathize with this description at first glance, but not over time. The aerodynamic "costume" that speed skiers use does look like something out of the first Star Wars movie (Episode IV to you youngsters). The helmets are contoured to shroud the head and shoulders of the skier's body in order to lower the drag coefficient of the head and shoulders portion of the body. The plasticized suit is literally skin tight in order to keep air from passing through it and to keep it from stretching and billowing (causing drag) at speeds above 130 mph. Behind the skier's lower legs are attached the trailing edges of wings that reduce the wake-drag effect of his or her legs slicing through the air. All of this stuff works to turn the racer into a human airfoil but simultaneously dehumanizes the appearance of the athlete and make him or her into more of a thing than a person, at least from the outside. It makes for wonderful photos.

Lending even more credence to the perception that "these guys are crazy" is the kind of terrain necessary to attain speeds of up to 152 mph on skis. The tracks at

by Dr. Sean Cridland

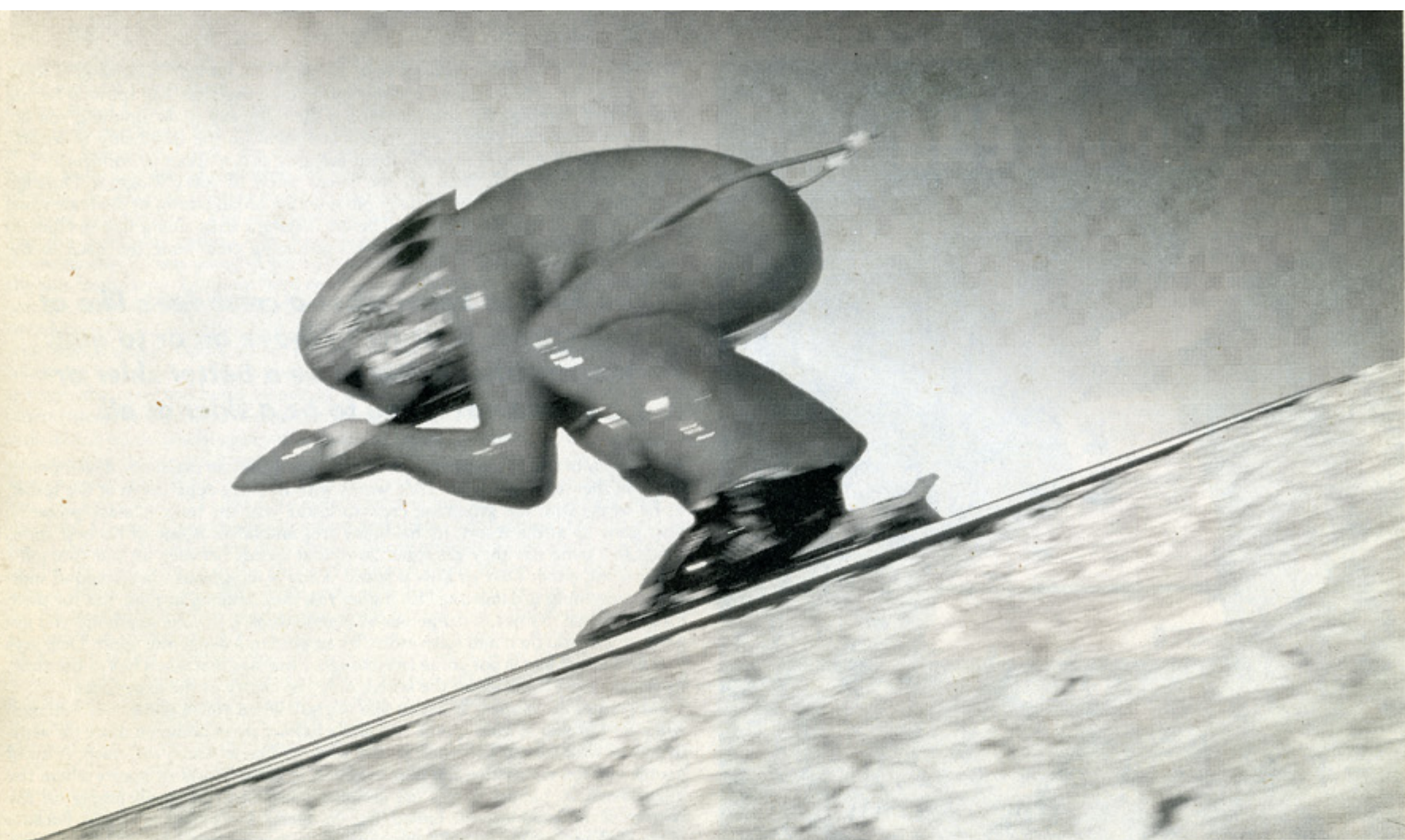
Les Arcs, Vars, and Silverton give most people vertigo looking up from the bottom. Looking from the top down, they're so steep that the horizontal finish areas appear to be pitched uphill. At their steepest, they are angled at up to 56 degrees and are about 1200 meters long before the 100 meter timing area. Until the sport of extreme skiing gained popularity in the 90s, this was an alpine no-man's land. Yet, I would maintain that this is the extremest of extreme skiing sports even though there is no cliff jumping. There is just speed.

Locally, Silverton is a speed skiing track of mythical proportions. Found by Aspen boy Jim Jackson in the late 70s, it has an amazingly steep couloir that rises up between two buttress of what's now called Velocity Peak. At the bottom is a lake that freezes over nicely and is covered with avalanche snow in winter and makes a perfect stopping area. In the early 80s we would hike or snowcat up to the lake in the basin, then fly by helicopter up to a platform carved out of the snow at the base of one of the buttresses, then climb with all of our gear up the couloir so that we could ski down at more than 124 mph. It was so steep up there that the flat run-out area appeared to be angled uphill. Even better, it was about 3,000 feet higher than all the tracks we raced at in Europe, so the air was thinner and even faster. World record material.

I started the sport at the Silverton track in the early 80s – the Steve McKinney/Franz Weber era – and it didn't take long to figure out that this was a different species of human being. But it wasn't because of some mental deficiency, quite the opposite. My contemporaries didn't have less mental capacity than the skiers I knew back home, they had more. In his own way, both McKinney and Weber had a unique insight into the ways of physics and psychology. They weren't madmen who threw themselves off a cliff in a suicidal daze. They were men who had found ways to push the limits of gravity and perception with an

They were men who had found ways to push the limits of gravity and perception with an uncommon focus on their bodily strengths and their ability to master their mental capacities.

uncommon focus on their bodily strengths and their ability to master their mental capacities. Being in their company on the course and off it quickly changed my life and ultimately led me to my degrees in philosophy and awoke an interest in physics, aerodynamics, psychology, and the spiritual aspects of religion. McKinney often spoke about the Zen aspects of his technique, while Weber seemed to embody the Nietzschean notion of Will and Übermensch better than anyone I had met before or since. McKinney passively activated the kenotic sense of self-emptying described by thinkers such as the German Mystic Meister



Ross Anderson deep in the zone!

Eckhard and the 20th Century Zen master D.T. Suzuki to become – I know it sounds like a cliché, but it isn't – one with the forces of gravity and the spirit of the mountain. Weber dominated the environment and his competitors with a strength and guile that left most of us wondering what the hell had happened to us most of the time. Their styles were worlds apart, but equally and superiorly effective. There was no madness, only deeply disciplined method. Skiing with and against them probably contributed more to my understanding of the world and myself than any other single set of experiences in my life. And the few times that I managed to beat them were the defining moments in my life: not for merely competitive reasons, but because those experiences affirmed that I could be, if only for a few brief instants, equally capable of the same kind of focus and style.

According to Durangatang Dale Womack, who participated at the 1992 Olympics in Albertville, France during the only year that Speed Skiing was an Olympic Demonstration Sport, there is "nothing like it in the world. It's exhilarating, a lot of fun." Dale says it gets him energized and when he's around a speed skiing track he can't stand still. But just because Dale gets a little bit hyper, he's not a heavy metal head-banger, at least not when it comes to his skiing. He

What seems like a few seconds to the spectators slows down in the mind of the competent racer so that a good run seems mentally and even spiritually eternal.

spends a great deal of time on mental preparation. He practices mental imagery both in the morning and in evening in the months and hours leading up to his competition season. He envisions making several perfect runs in his mind. He goes through all of the aspects of the run in the slow motion: an aggressive start with several skating strokes, dropping into his tuck position with his ski perfectly flat on the snow, perfectly centered between the tip and tail of his skis for maximum glide efficiency, his head low and out of the airstream as much as possible, hands together right in front of his face. As gravity takes over and the speed increases, the most important aspects of the sport are maximally mental and subtly physical, even if it looks like it's the other way around to the spectators. Maintaining a clear mind at speeds above 130 mph are what allow a skier to quickly and quietly adapt to the contingencies of the airflow and the nuances of the track surface. What seems like a few seconds to the spectators slows down in the mind of the competent racer so that a good run seems mentally and even spiritually eternal. A good run produces an air of euphoria. A bad (read slow) one produces a deep seated disappointment.

According to Durango's Ross Anderson, the Fastest Native American on Mother Earth, what most people miss about the sport of speed skiing and the athletes that make it an integral part of their lives is that people just don't see what's really going on. They imagine fear and chaos because that's what a normal person would feel if he or she were flung down the hill unawares at those speeds. But according to Anderson, if you're any good at what you do, any sport should be a song that plays in your mind and in your heart: something more beautiful than the eye can see. He also compares speed skiing to painting a picture. You have a blank canvas and you can make it into anything: blank, beautiful, ugly. "Speed skiing's creative," says Anderson, "and creation is everything."

Many speed skiers (including me) have talked about a natural experience of altered consciousness. The first time I went over 120 mph in 1982, I couldn't speak for a couple of weeks. People kept asking me what it was like and I couldn't tell them. It wasn't like anything! Anderson says that "whatever you live for, dream for, changes your perspective about everything else in your life." Ross recently shared with me that "I don't think that I would have said this two years ago, but I feel wiser, more knowledgeable about everything. You see so much and

experience so much. You take chances, but that's what life is. The speed skiing experience is just the beginning of knowledge. This comes from exposure to danger, but also the focus that is required. It brings a different kind of knowledge. It's like a chess game. You have to have brains and wit. In order to win, you need both. When you're on course it's magic, a gift of really focusing.

I was so focused that I didn't really know what was going on anywhere else. I was in what sports psychologists call the zone. I focused on the wind. I experienced the wind and was able to hear it, feel it and could play with it. It was only 15 seconds going down, but it felt like minutes. I could play with the wind. I could play with the speed."

Ross includes music in his mental exercises during the year. He says that he picks out a soundtrack, a CD, for the year. Then he listens to that CD the night and morning before the race. Last year it was Gladiators. He produces a mental picture of himself making his own movie. He sees the air, the crowds, the run, his skis, the motion. He focuses so hard on what's going to be happening that he can

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hear his song in his consciousness as he mentally skis his run. According to Ross, "The song, my consciousness, and my spirit come together. My spiritual feeling is important. Keeping the spirit in mind is the right way to do anything you do. I bring my medicine pouch and prayers and focus on the spirituality of world." For Ross, speed skiing is as much about morality as it is about performance.

Ross and Dale both train on the lower pitch of Ray's Ridge at Durango Mountain Resort. It has a very steep pitch with a broad outrun to dissipate some of the speed – a much as 100mph – before making a wide arcing turn to come to a stop. The Durango Mountain Resort's grooming crew hone the track to the

You need to know what a crash feels like at high speeds in order to move on or to quit. You're either going to be a better skier or you're not going to be a skier at all.

smoothness of a baby's bottom so that Ross and Dale can maximize development work on their tuck positions. Dale works with the race department at the resort, so he works with the grooming crew to insure that the track is made properly. Ross grew up at the resort. It's his home area and DMR is one of his best sponsors. On a good day they get about 20 runs at speeds between 80 and 100mph.

If you ask either Dale or Ross if speed skiing is dangerous, they respond similarly: everything is dangerous. It's higher risk than walking around, but for them it's just normal. It's not as dangerous as people think it is. Like anything, you get good at it as you do it and learn more. It's an art, not a dangerous sport. Dale says that his biggest fear is not going fast enough. Ross says that when he's in the zone, he doesn't even think about the speed, only the clarity of the experience.

But crashes do happen. What's it like to crash when you're going over 130 mph when it's just you, a little plastic suit and a helmet that's designed more for aerodynamics than safety? Everyone knows what it's like to watch the crash. A lot of people can remember that old clip from ABC's Wide World of Sports where the Yugoslavian ski jumper misses the jumping point and cartwheels limply off the bottom of the jump into the crowd. But the speed skier's crash is special. Because of the slickness of the suits; the skier doesn't really slow down for a very long time – if he or she is lucky. Slowing down quickly would be lethal. I crashed at La Clusaz, France in spring of 1986. A lot of people said that it looked horrible and immediately asked me if I wanted to see the video. No, I said, I already saw it once up close. That was enough.

I figure I was going about 110 mph at the time, but I was only one third of the

way down the course. The course at Las Clusaz is very steep – about 55 degrees at its steepest – and there is a boulder as big as a house about ten feet off the course about a third of the way down on racer's left. The organizers were kind enough to pile about 30 or 40 big lift-tower pads in front of it, but it was still a freaking house-sized rock. We were going for the production class record and I had a really fast pair of skis from the year before. I had been waxing them and cleaning the bases all summer long and had cut the tips down so that they would be more aerodynamic. The problem was that we were running in the afternoon and the snow was getting soft. Just above the rock, there was a gentle roll. Knowing that if I was going to get a good speed, I would have to keep the tips of the skis from rising, I pressed hard coming over the knoll. Suddenly my balance was off, as if I had hit a clump of snow. Shit, I thought, this is going to ruin my speed because I'm going to have to break my tuck. I instinctively went for the wide stance which is more stable, with hands out. I jammed my feet apart for stability. But guess what. The little blip that I had felt was my left ski breaking through the snow and being ripped off my boot. I had only my right ski on and when I went for the stable position, my boot dug into the snow going about 100 mph and it immediately spun me around backward. I remember dispassionately looking over my shoulder as I flew, both feet off the ground now as I became a human wing, toward the rock. I closed my eyes and silently said to myself, "this is it. I'm going to die." I closed my eyes, turned to face uphill and waited. Almost instantly, I heard a large snapping sound and then...felt nothing. Dying's not so bad, I thought. I still had my eyes closed. Those who were watching were aghast as I hit the pads in front of the rock and bounced about 20 feet into the air. That's why it didn't hurt. I was still flying, eyes still closed. Then reality hit, er...then I hit the ground. Now I was only going about 60mph. But I still had about five or six hundred meters to slide. Again, I thought, shit...and I remembered Steve McKinney telling someone that the best thing to do is to go limp and just slide it out. I had my cotton underwear on under my suit and was going slower now, so I didn't have to worry about the friction melting my suit to my skin, as happens to some of the skiers who fall at much faster speeds. Then I remembered the snow ramps placed in front of the timing lights for people like me so we didn't hit the 2x4s holding them in place. I was on my ass heading right for them. I started swimming across the hill at 60 or 70 (because by then I was accelerating again due to my VERY low frontal area, sliding on my back). Finally I came to a stop all the way out on the flat. My friends came running out to me. Not to save me or check my condition, but to bitch me out for gouging the track. Then the ski patrol flew me away in the helicopter to the hospital. It wasn't the greatest of afternoons. I had a great run going and my ski came off and ruined it. I was so sure that I would get that record, but I just got a helicopter ride instead. Oh well.

Dale Womack fell on the same course a couple of years later, destroying what had been my fastest pair of skis that I had sold him when he first started his speed skiing career. He says that it happened so fast, yet his perception was clear, focused, and passive. He says, "I just found myself going out front really fast. It was terrifying. The first ski that came off completely blew up. I was tumbling and bouncing and very relieved when the second ski came off. I had a lot of time to think about things because I was crashing forever and ever. I just grabbed my head with my hands, flipping around again and again. It's always amazing to watch what happens to the equipment during those crashes. Speed skis are not little toys. They are big and heavy, but when people crash the skis often explode. In

the 1985 World Championships at Les Arcs, Franz Weber crashed and they had to rake his skis off the hill. At the awards ceremony, the race organizers presented Franz with a little bundle of sticks that had once been a part of his skis. We all got a kick out of that.

Ross had a crash going about 131mph early on in his speed skiing career. He says that it's like going to hell and back. He didn't know what to expect. He tells it like this: "I realized how much clothing I had on and how it was going to be. You need to know what a crash feels like at high speeds in order to move on or to quit. You're either going to be a better skier or your not going to be a skier at all. You have to deal with fear in this sport. I anticipated all kinds of stuff before I crashed. Then, once I did it, I moved on. It was the most painful, but yet most informative experience because it makes you go a step up in your thinking." Or, as many people would do, go home.

Sean Cridland was the 6th fastest skier in the world in 1986 with a speed of 126mph when the record was 129mph, set a training record of 162mph on a car on the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1985 which still stands, and now teaches philosophy and political science at Fort Lewis College. In the spring he takes students to Nepal, Tibet, and India to study the political, philosophical, and religious dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism. He can be reached at www.adventurestudies.com



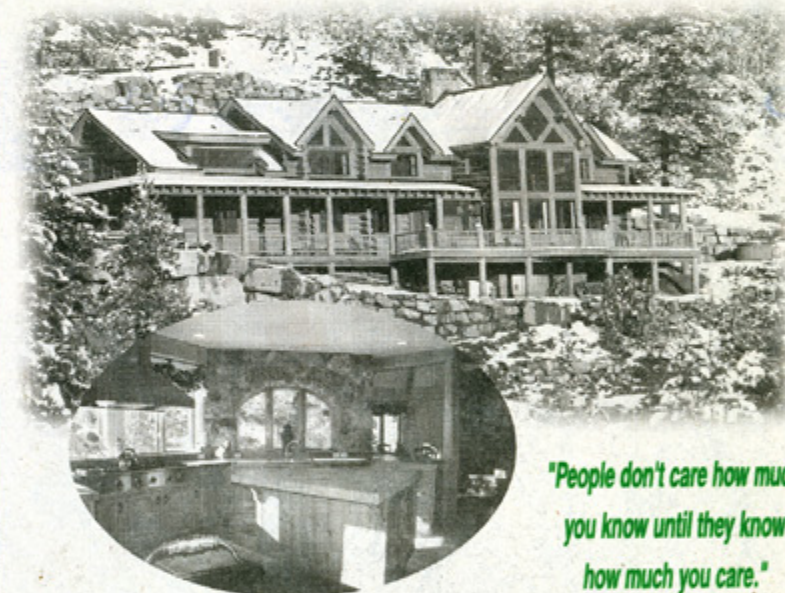
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Sean Cridland holding the record.



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