



Devore takes a break from mildew and bacon grease in Valdez, Alaska.

JAY BEYER



THE

TELEVANGELIST

Can one yoga-posing, tea-sipping hippie bring telemarking to the masses?

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

The parking lot at Valdez Heli-Ski Guides on Alaska's Thompson Pass is crammed with a half dozen RVs. In one 29-foot motor home, there are four bunk beds, 10 pairs of skis, six cases of beer, and a shower used for ski-boot storage. That's where Nick Devore and three guys from Utah are holing up. On their table sit a bottle of Glenlivet, a three-pound tub of cream cheese, and a half-eaten bag of Jolly Ranchers. The RV smells like bacon grease and mildew.

It's been snowing for four straight days, grounding the helicopters and causing serious cabin fever in RV Land. The boys in the 29-footer haven't skied a single run since they arrived in Valdez, passing their time instead with gin rummy and keg stands. But Nick, a sponsored telemarker from Aspen, doesn't seem bothered by all the sitting around. He's perched cross-legged on the RV's pullout couch and unwittingly reinforcing his own stereotype: He's crocheting a beanie to cover his shaggy, tomato-colored hair and talking about yoga.

He says it helps his strength and visualization. At the top of big lines, he holds a warrior pose because "it's good for mind power," he says. "I can tell myself that I can keep skiing, keep hiking." He looks out the dirty RV window, gazes at the Chugach Mountains, and his thoughts drift. "I want to start a magazine called *Surf Gravity*. It would be about living lightly on the earth," he says. "It won't have any ads. Just cool photos of climbing, surfing, skiing, yoga, golf."

Golf?

He's grinning. "Just kidding. No golf," he says.

If you'd never seen this freckled 23-year-old ski, you might think *he* was the joke, a cliché of the stoned, telemarking idealist. You might think he was the kind of guy who drives a Tacoma (his is purple), eats organic vegetables (he works at Aspen's farmers' market in the summers), lives in a yurt (Nick's is a tepee), and frees his heel to free his mind ("I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual," he says).

His tie-dyed image seeps into everything he does. A few days earlier, Nick and crew stopped at a grocery store in Anchorage to load up on supplies. The other guys in the RV—photographer Jay Beyer and skiers Noah Howell and Andy Jacobson, all from Salt Lake City—bought beef jerky and beer while Nick purchased miso soup, Earl Grey tea, honey, and eight lemons. At the heli lodge, while everyone else watched ski-porn, Nick did Downward Dogs in front of the wood stove. He's a noodling-to-bluegrass type—and he's not afraid to admit it. "I'm a hippie telemarker," he says. "So what?"

But if he's aware of his status as a walking cliché, he's also conscious of how to shatter it: through his skiing.

Nick is officially the best telemarker in the world. He's the only telemarker who qualified for the finals at the 2007 U.S. Freeskiing Nationals at Snowbird, Utah, placing 18th against top-ranked alpine skiers. At the 2008 Jackson Hole Freeskiing Open, his binding ripped loose after he jumped off a cliff, and he still placed sixth, riding his ski like a surfboard to the finish line. "In terms of taking telemarking to the next level, I think Nick has a chance," says

Eric Henderson, a certified telemark instructor and head guide at Jackson Hole Alpine Guides. "He's young, charismatic, and knows how to read big-mountain terrain. If telemarking is going to open up to a bigger audience, he's the one who's going to carry it there. That is, *if* telemarking ever makes it there."

And herein lies the problem. In 2005, the telemark industry attracted fewer participants than snowshoeing. Compared with the overwhelmingly popular, gold-chain-wearing X Games jibbers, telemarkers are dorks in Birkenstocks. The sport may have changed significantly from the days of leather boots and three-pin bindings, but it's still an anachronism, a shout-out to Scandinavians in wool knickers. And its crunchy, tofu-eating ethos isn't exactly boosting its popularity among the mainstream. To grow, the sport needs a hard-charging poster boy, a king among its disenfranchised throngs. It needs a phenom to turn the sport into something marketable. But is a crocheting yogi the right guy to bring the freeheel dream to the masses?

HE'S A NOODLING-TO-BLUEGRASS TYPE—AND HE'S NOT AFRAID TO ADMIT IT. "I'M A HIPPIE TELEMARKER," HE SAYS. "SO WHAT?"

Rewind five days. Nick stands atop a massive 2,000-vertical-foot peak towering over Alyeska Resort in Girdwood, Alaska. It's day one of the first-ever World Telemark Freeskiing Championships, a big-mountain competition that's a runt beside the alpine counterpart taking place here three weeks



Even this turn is cliché. Devore in Valdez.

CABE ROGEL



JAY BEYER (2)

Downward, dog.
Location: Thompson Pass, Alaska.

Nick didn't crochet this hat, but he could have.



later. But for its first year, the field is surprisingly deep, including 77 competitors from as far away as Japan and Australia. Dylan Crossman, the five-time reigning

THE OTHER GUYS
BOUGHT **BEEF
JERKY AND BEER**
WHILE NICK
PURCHASED MISO
SOUP, EARL GREY
TEA, HONEY, AND
EIGHT LEMONS.

champ of Crested Butte, Colorado's U.S. Extreme Freeskiing Telemark Championships, is here to claim his first world title—if Nick doesn't stand in his way.

"Nick would be my horse if I were betting," says Noah Howell, the driver of the RV and the cofounder of Powderwhore, a telemark-ski film com-

pany. "I call him the Golden Child. Alaska is the ultimate playground for his type of talent."

The venue for today's competition is the Shadows—a 50-degree pitch through rocky no-fall zones, mandatory airs, and tight chutes that's never been open to the public. Big-mountain competitions usually include an inspection run, but not today. Judges will be watching from the bottom of the bowl, critiquing skiers on line choice, fluidity, control, aggressiveness, and technique. Even the seasoned athletes are nervous. Many stand at the top with legs shaking like sewing machines.

The grand prize for the winner is 50,000 vertical feet of heli-skiing in Valdez. Unlike the alpine competition happening in a few weeks, where the winner will pocket up to \$3,500, this contest gives its top skier no cash purse, possibly because there isn't a lot of money in the sport.

There's only \$3.8 million, to be exact. That's what



This powder shot was brought to you by Kashi. Togwotee Pass, Wyoming.

GABE ROGEL

the telemark ski industry earned in specialty retail sales during the 2006–2007 season, according to Snowsports Industries America. In contrast, the alpine ski industry brought in \$355.7 million from specialty ski shops alone during that same period. Although telemarking is growing—up from 1.3 million participants in 1998 to 3.5 million in 2006—it’s puny when compared with the alpine world.

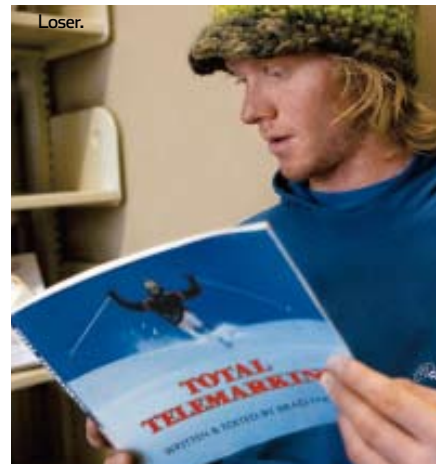
Ross Matlock, the head judge for the Crested Butte telemark comp and a Rossignol telemark rep, flew to Alaska to volunteer as a judge for the world championships. “I’m just hoping to keep this sport alive,” he says. “We happen to be a bastard stepchild and it’s tough to make any money at it.”

Only a small fraction of that money actually trickles down to sponsored athletes like Nick. Matlock says it’s next to impossible to make a living as a telemark skier. “There are only a few people who could make any kind of income on that,” he says. “I think Nick Devore is one of them. His personality is crunchy and down-to-earth. But he’s one of the most solid skiers I’ve seen and he’s someone people definitely look up to. I think he could take telemarking to another

level—because he lets the skiing do the talking. But he’d still be living on small change.”

Nick counts his change in hats. He crochets colorful beanies with yarn he bought cheaply in Argentina, and then sells them for \$30 a pop to friends and over his website. His summertime job at the vegetable stand pays him \$12 an hour plus a few free peaches. He collects some money for travel expenses and bonuses from his main sponsors, Cloudveil and Black Diamond, if he places well in competitions. Last summer, he hosted a weeklong, all-inclusive big-mountain telemark and yoga camp in Portillo, Chile, in which he had to discount the price to \$1,000 to get enough people to sign up. He barely offset his own travel costs with the earnings from the camp.

None of this seems to faze him. When asked how he plans to support himself once his mom stops paying for his health insurance, he says, “Ideally, I want to own land and not need much money. I want to grow my own food and live off the grid. I grew up in Aspen, around all that wealth, where everyone was buying all this shit. It makes me want to buy a plot of land in the Elk Mountains and become a hermit.”



JAY BEYER (3)



Nick surfing gravity at Thompson Pass. Up next: golf.

In the ski industry, however, the pros who make it huge and bring the sport to a wider audience—the Glen Plakes and Tanner Halls—get there through mainstream visibility and a good deal of self-promotion. They didn't become iconic by hiding in the woods.

NICK SETS OFF AN **AVALANCHE** AND CARTWHEELS 800 FEET OVER **THREE CLIFF BANDS.** HE SKIS AWAY WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A BRUISE.

A ski-town brat from birth, Nick played an extra in 1993's *Aspen Extreme*, as a student in Dexter Rutecki's ski-school class. He quickly became part of an elite crew of budding pro skiers called the Aspen Ripper Factory. At age 14, his mother moved him and his younger sister to Chamonix, France, where he discovered big-mountain skiing. There he bought his first pair of plastic telemark boots and watched Aspen ski legend Chris Davenport place fifth in the Red Bull Snow Thrill, an extreme-skiing competition then held in Chamonix.

A year later, the Devores returned to Aspen. Nick attended Carbondale's Colorado Rocky Mountain School, a private academy

Clearly, he took his role in *Aspen Extreme* seriously.

JAY BEYER (2)



with a strong outdoor curriculum. He joined the telemark team and began entering mogul competitions, eventually winning the Red Bull Mogul Mania. The following year, 2003, he signed up for his first big-mountain competition, a telemark-only event at Jackson Hole. He went off an 80-foot cliff and knocked himself out momentarily on the landing. He regained consciousness within a few seconds, skied to the bottom, and placed 12th overall.

That spring, when Nick was 17, his father killed himself after a battle with alcohol and drug abuse. Nick's dad, Nicholas Devore, was a French-born avant-garde artist and *National Geographic* photographer who wore eyeliner and drove a hearse around Aspen. After separating from Nick's mother, Nicholas moved to Bisbee, Arizona, and opened a gallery named ArtAttack, where he once displayed a controversial piece called *Sushi Pup*, a dead puppy shellacked on a plate.

When his dad died, Nick returned to Europe for three months on a solo rock-climbing mission. "I often felt lonely and kind of in shock," he says. "But it was a turning point for me. That's when I really grew up."

It wasn't until he moved to Salt Lake City in the fall of 2003 to attend the University of Utah that he decided he wanted to be a pro skier. He picked up a Black Diamond sponsorship, took the next winter off from school, and got a job washing dishes at Alta's Peruvian Lodge, the same place freeskiier Sage Cattabriga-Alosa had worked the winter before him. He skied every day and lived in a tiny room

with four other guys. He eventually scored segments in two Powderwhore films and an Aspen documentary called *Mountain Town*. Other sponsors began calling.

Traditional school didn't suit him, so Nick switched to an independent study course through Arizona's Prescott College, where he's currently enrolled. He's created a hybrid major perfectly suited to his off-the-grid personality—nature photography, high-altitude permaculture, and sustainable building. He moved back to Aspen and bought a \$3,000, 450-square-foot tepee, which he erected on a friend's property 10 minutes outside of town. He lives there with his girlfriend, sponsored alpine skier Jacqui Edgerly. With his independent study program he can continue his education from his tepee, an RV in Alaska, or wherever else he may be. And that suits him just fine.

In 2006, Nick joined Chris Davenport on part of his mission to climb and ski all of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks in a single year. Nick bagged 24 of the state's 54 high points. In the summer of 2007, he and Davenport went to Alaska to ski off the summit of 20,320-foot Mount McKinley, tackling famous lines like the Orient Express and the Messner Couloir. After the trip, Davenport, a legend in his own right, said Nick was one of the most gifted big-mountain skiers he's ever seen.

Nick continued to knock off big lines, charging descents from Chile to Utah. He was on a mission to prove that he wasn't just one of the most talented telemark skiers out there; he was the best. Now all he needed was a world title.

please turn to page 115

At 11 A.M. on the first day of the 2008 World Telemark Freeskiing Championships at Alyeska, the announcer, pro telemark skier Max Mancini, says Nick is dropping in from the top. When he crests the ridge near a line called Jim's Rock, you can tell from 2,000 feet away that he's hammering. He makes one bended-knee turn over the top third of the mountain, then aims toward a 30-foot cliff. When he airs it, a waterfall of slough cascades down, clouding him in a burst of white powder. He emerges, stomps the landing, and makes one more Olympic-downhill-size telemark turn at the bottom of the run. A total of three turns, over almost 2,000 vertical feet. Yet he comes through the finish line laughing.

The crowd stares at him, mouths agape.

Nick wins the competition for this line, beating defending champ Dylan Crossman by a slim margin. He stands on top of the podium at the awards ceremony the next night with a sheepish look, well into his fourth pint of IPA.

When asked what was going through his mind during his winning runs, he pauses so

long it looks as if he's going into a meditative trance. Then he responds. "Whenever I'm standing on top of a big mountain, I always say a prayer and ask for guidance from nature, family members, and spirits. Sometimes it feels like I'm guided down a run, guided by some higher power."

A week later, Nick sets out on a backcountry tour in Valdez, boot-packing to the top of a 1,500-vertical-foot spine. A few turns into his descent, he sets off an avalanche. He loses his footing and cartwheels 800 feet down a 55-degree slope, tumbling over three cliff bands. Miraculously, he skis away without so much as a bruise.

It's hard to buy into the whole "guided by some higher power" babble, especially from a guy who lives in a tepee and does yoga. And it's hard to think that he can turn the sport of telemark skiing into something big, boosting its popularity and spreading the freeheel love to the masses—especially given his reluctance to self-promote in a braggadocio-laden industry dominated by young icons in gold chains. But there's something about Nick—his eternal optimism, his baffling, sweet-natured modesty, and his blinding talent—that makes you want to believe. ♦

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