

FINDING TRANSITIONS

CROSSING OVER WITH TOM WALLISCH

"This photo was taken at 10:30 p.m. in -15 degree temps. Before each hit, Tom walked up a ladder in ski boots to a nearly dark in-run. Once on the roof, he had to generate enough speed to drop fully blind off the two-story building onto a down rail. On his first hit, he ripped out his toe piece in the landing. This was his second, laced perfectly." Minneapolis, MN.

Photo: Josh Bishop





"Phil Casabon and Mike Hornbeck had yet to arrive. Tom was on his own hiking a trapezoid rail off a residential street. He didn't like his shot, but it was -10 degrees and he hiked the feature until dark. He's always had a legendary work ethic, but maintaining that level of focus 17-plus years into a professional career is another level." Minneapolis, MN. Photo: Josh Bishop

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HUNKERED

behind the computer at his home

in Park City, UT, Tom Wallisch is obsessively researching. He's not watching ski videos or scouting the next location he wants to film. Actually, it has nothing to do with skiing. He's doing a deep dive into the stock market, enrolled in an online course on financial analysis.

"My kind of job doesn't last forever," says Wallisch, one of skiing's most visible stars for more than a decade. "I've got to learn how to invest what I've made."

It's spring 2020—in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic—and Wallisch has been grounded at home for weeks. Several of his ski and film trips were waylaid, so, like much of the rest of the world, he's staying busy—perfecting his breakfast sandwich, landscaping his backyard, organizing his garage. And yes, becoming an amateur stock trader.

It's a wise move for Wallisch, and hardly out of character. This is the guy who started studying business administration at the University of Utah in the fall of 2006, but a couple of years in, took a hiatus to focus on his burgeoning ski career. Despite rising to ski superstardom, he eventually graduated (after a seven-year gap) while recovering from ACL surgery in 2018.

Wallisch is the breed of business-savvy pro who shows up at sales meetings and talks margins on his pro model. He can call up the CEO of a big company like GoPro and discuss contracts just as easily as he can shoot the breeze with a 10-year-old groom he meets at a ski movie premiere.

One of the more highly paid freeskiers in the industry, Wallisch has appeared in global ad campaigns with The North Face and inked deals with Verizon. But he got there as skiing's version of a blue-collar workhorse, gaining fame from homemade internet edits featuring guerrilla-style rail-sliding

in frozen parking lots and outside closed city libraries. All in all, he's a bit of an anomaly: a skier not only revered by the counterculture, but also celebrated by the mainstream.

"I don't think there's another skier out there who balances respect for the core community and being on the front lines of what freeskiing is now with the ability to cross over into corporate America," says Tom Yaps, Wallisch's longtime agent.

Wallisch has a fan base that treats him like a god. His first viral YouTube clip, which won him Level 1's SuperUnknown contest in 2007 and launched his career, was once posted with the title, "If Jesus freestyle skied." Podcast host Mike Powell once called Wallisch the "Justin Bieber of skiing."

After all of these years, Wallisch still may be one of the most popular freeskiers on the internet. His Instagram videos easily get as many as 50,000 views and last February he was the first inductee into the Newschoolers Hall of Fame.

Wallisch turned 33 years old this summer, and the Pretzel Man (as he is known) is just as relevant now as he was when his rail tricks first started blowing up the internet, back when George W. Bush was president and YouTube was an exciting new platform. Yet it's a different kind of relevancy today. It's smarter, more strategic, more forward-thinking.

"I don't have a set goal for what my next career in the ski industry will look like, but I plan on being involved forever," Wallisch says. "If I can inspire someone along the way, that's even better."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

"A photo of some of the first air I ever caught. I grew up without a terrain park early on but learned to jump on signature east coast snow making piles... aka whalebacks."—Tom Wallisch.

Photo: Wallisch Family Archives

"Growing up in Pittsburgh, PA, our ski season was short and often warm. I spent countless days learning rail tricks in my backyard without any snow. Rail setups like this one taught me balance, edge control, and led to my love of rail skiing. To this day, I find it to be the most accessible aspect of our sport."—Tom Wallisch.

Photo: Wallisch Family Archives

TOM MICHAEL WALLISCH hails from Pittsburgh—not exactly the breeding ground you'd imagine for a freeski superstar. When he was a toddler, his parents bought a condo at Wisp Resort in Maryland, two hours from the Steel City. That's where Wallisch and his younger sister learned to ski when they were 3 years old.

As he got older, Wallisch and his friends would build jumps on the side of the trail and take turns throwing themselves into the air. He'd make jumps out of anything—piles of snow on the frozen lake behind his condo or the roof of his house in Pittsburgh.

By age 14, he was watching any freestyle ski video he could get his hands on. He'd record X Games contests on VHS tapes and screen them on repeat, dreaming of standing atop his own X Games podium one day. When he found ski movies from Level 1 and Poor Boyz, he sat mesmerized, watching pioneering young freeskiers such as Tanner Hall and Simon Dumont revolutionize the sport.

On school days, Wallisch would night ski at Seven Springs, PA, a ski resort about an hour from his house with 750 feet of vertical drop. In the resort's terrain park, he taught himself tricks from the videos he'd watched. It didn't take long until he was the best skier in the park.

Wallisch used to joke, "My dad taught me everything I know about skiing until I was 4." His dad, Mike, filmed his son in the park for years, until the day Wallisch and his friends started filming each other.

When he'd leave to go skiing, his mom, Patty, would ask, "What's your middle name?"

"Caution," Wallisch would call back on his way out the door. It sounds like a joke given his antics, but at a young age, he developed an understanding of calculated risk. He was always willing to walk away from a jump that didn't look right, and learned increasingly harder tricks in steady progression. After skiing, Wallisch and friends would come back to the condo to review footage while Patty cooked up a batch of French fries.

In high school, he took AP classes, ran cross-country, and describes himself as having been a bit of a nerd. But being on skis was his secret superpower. Suddenly he had confidence. When he'd win rail jams, he'd be rewarded with gift cards to

"Some of the first twin tips I ever got were Line Skis. They finally enabled me to learn 540s, land switch, and progress my skiing in wild new ways. Fifteen years or so after this photo was originally taken, I moved back to Line Skis as my ski sponsor and began building my own pro model ski with them. It's been an amazing full circle story to go from learning my first switch skiing with Line to creating a ski for future generations to ride."—Tom Wallisch.

Photo: Wallisch Family Archives

"It was 8 p.m. on the backside of Mammoth. We were battling pockets of thunderstorms throughout the shoot, patiently waiting for pockets of light. It was almost dark when the clouds cleared enough for the rain to stop and give us a perfect backdrop. The iconic minarets of the Ansel Adams Wilderness were once described as 'very lofty and inaccessible grand pinnacles of granite' by the California Geographic Survey in 1868. To this day, they are the defining feature of shooting in Mammoth, CA."

Photo: Josh Bishop

the local ski shop. He progressed from there, competing in the Vermont Open and other regional contests.

He enrolled at Salt Lake City's University of Utah in the fall of 2006 and fell in with a crowd of skiers that remain some of his closest friends today. He met a girl back then, too—her name was Steph and she was a talented skier as well. Although they'd stay friends for years, she would eventually become his wife.

Online edits were just emerging at that time, so instead of waiting for annual ski movies in theaters or ski magazines to arrive in the mailbox, ski fans were suddenly getting their fix on demand. Sounds normal now, but at the time, it was game-changing—especially for a kid like Wallisch. He could upload his content for free and speak directly to his own fan base. Production budgets and sponsors didn't exist for him yet, so his videos felt gritty and real.

He and his friends, a group known as 4bi9 Media, lived together in Salt Lake and filmed each other on basic camcorders. That's how he made the edit for Level 1's SuperUnknown contest, which he put together his freshman year. He was doing technical rail tricks nobody else was doing. Specifically, he'd mastered the pretzel—spinning one way onto a rail and spinning the other way off—and the edit made him known across a tiny but fanatical corner of the internet. At the time, if you wanted to become a pro skier, you had to win competitions, but in this new online age, Wallisch was renowned before he'd ever entered a major contest.

His fan base exploded largely because Wallisch was exceptionally good at hitting something a kid anywhere in America could also hit: rails. He didn't come from a destination resort out West or an elite ski program. He had a shovel, a bit of snow and a rail. "Rails were always my thing," says Wallisch, who would set the world record for longest railslide when he slayed a 424-foot beast at Seven Springs in 2016. "That was the way I could shine."

Invited to his first X Games in January 2010, Wallisch made it to the slopestyle finals but didn't land a finals run. At X Games in Tignes, France, a couple of months later, he took home his first gold. His breakout year came in 2012, when he earned a score of 96—the highest recorded X Games slopestyle score at the time—and another gold medal.



Shifty disaster on a gap to down rail during a -20 degree night
filming out in the streets. Bismarck, ND.
Photo: AJ Dakoulas



"Bright clothing shoots better. Glen Plake knew it, Mike Hatstrup knew it, and anyone shooting in the days of *Blizzard of Ahhhh's* knows the deal. To any young, aspiring comp or film skiers, wearing contrasting colors might set you apart. Here, Tom warms up another gap to down rail on a frozen evening in Minneapolis, MN." Photo: Josh Bishop



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Tom Wallisch and Alex Hall looking up at their lines on a sleeper powder day. Both have filled their trophy cases with X Games and FIS medals in recent years, but they've never wavered in their pursuit of style. Brighton, UT. Photo: AJ Dakoulas

"Henrik Harlaut has one of the most analytical minds in the sport. His visual memory for skiing is profound and he has near-perfect recall. He can quote monologues from ski films he saw 20 years ago, describe segments trick for trick, and recognize any song used in a film. Most professional skiers have stories about Henrik's ability to mimic something they've said or done in film segments. Here, Henrik shows off his best Wallisch impression at the 4bi9 house in Salt Lake City, Utah in 2008." Photo: Josh Bishop



Tom and Steph Wallisch enjoying a day out on the links. Because it's not all disasters and down rails. Park City, UT. Photo: AJ Dakoulas

Tom Wallisch setting up a gap to roof to down rail while Dale Talkington keeps the ladder sturdy. Despite his acclaim, Wallisch still often travels with a small tight-knit group of skiers throughout the season. Somewhere in Wyoming. Photo: AJ Dakoulas



Along the way, he filmed segments with big movie companies like Teton Gravity Research and Level 1 as well as 4bi9. By 2013, he decided to put out his own short film, called "The Wallisch Project." Shot by his friend Kyle Decker, it was the first snow-athlete-specific short film to be released on iTunes for purchase. Tom and his agent, Tom Yaps, partnered to create their own media outlet, Good Company, where premieres took place on YouTube, bringing in Decker and cinematographer AJ Dakoulas, from the 4bi9 crew, as collaborators.

"It wasn't ever about the money. He wanted to create," Decker says. "With Good Company, he had control over what he did. It was so obvious even then that this guy was going to change skiing."

Slopestyle was making its Olympic debut in 2014 in Sochi, Russia, and Wallisch, who'd won the FIS Slopestyle World Championships the year before, was considered a medal favorite. But then he tore his ACL training in New Zealand. He postponed surgery and skied every Olympic qualifying event without a functioning ACL, but couldn't secure a spot on the

team. There was talk of him earning the last discretionary spot on the U.S. men's slopestyle team, but ultimately that position went to his friend and Park City native, Joss Christensen, who went on to win the sport's first gold medal.

After surgery, Wallisch took six months off skiing and reevaluated where he was in his career. "Coming back, the first thing on my mind wasn't trying to do the hardest trick to win the X Games," Wallisch says. "I was continuing to fall out of love with competing."

In 2016, a 140-foot-high snow-covered big air ramp was installed inside Fenway Park in Boston. Top freeskiers, including Wallisch, were invited to compete under the lights on a bitter cold February night. Fans filled the stadium bundled in layers. Wallisch didn't make the finals, but he stood, freezing, to watch the end of the contest with friends. It was the last FIS contest he entered.

In a way, that was also the moment Wallisch stopped skiing competitively. He'd proven himself plenty already. Instead, he started thinking, *How can skiing be something that fuels a fire not only in me but in someone else?*



Sapporo, Japan is the urban center with the most amount of snowfall in the world, a fact supported by the parade of dump trucks transporting loads of snow to the outskirts of town all winter long. Here Wallisch samples the goods.
Photo: Chris O'Connell

TOP TO BOTTOM

"In the early 2000s, Mammoth Mountain helped build the foundation for park skiing. Their creativity and dedication produced unrivaled features and countless private shoots, while pushing the sport to astonishing levels. A combination of warm temps, massive snowpack, and closing days as late as August create a perfect environment for getting the shot. This photo was taken on June 4, 2019. If you haven't been to Mammoth Lakes, California in the spring or summer, make the trip. It's a special place." Photo: Josh Bishop

NEW YORK CITY is sticky hot in the haze of summer. Wallisch is there with his fiancé, Steph, who's getting fitted for her wedding dress. He has a meeting with Tom Yaps, who's based in Brooklyn.

"I think it's time," Wallisch tells Yaps. "I want to put on an event."

Yaps tries to dissuade him, reminding him how much work contests are, how much time and money go into them—and how little profit comes out of them.

But Wallisch is determined. The next few months are filled with endless calls, sponsor pitches, recruiting athletes and sorting logistics. The idea is to host a rail jam—the kind of grassroots contest where Wallisch got his start, and one that's fading at the local level—on his home turf at Seven Springs.

"To me, rails are the most approachable aspect of the sport. In ski towns in the East and Midwest that don't have big hills, rails bring new people into skiing, yet rail jams are going away," Wallisch says.

The contest, called the Steel City Showdown, took place in January. Wallisch's mom picked him at the Pittsburgh airport. It was a proper homecoming. The invite list for the contest was a Who's Who of current top Olympic and X Games athletes, but some film skiers such as Khai Krepala and Dale Talkington, who rarely enter traditional contests, were on the roster, too.

The day before the big event, local skiers were invited to compete in an amateur rail jam for their chance to ski against the pros. A kid named Tucker Fitzsimons qualified from the amateur contest, then ended up in third place in the finals, beating some of the biggest names in his sport during a rainy night in front of the resort's Foggy Goggle Bar.

Fitzsimons, who's 22, is a next-gen Wallisch. He's stealthy on rails and a presence on social media. "Tucker was the kid who made me feel like the whole thing was a success," Wallisch says.

Colby Stevenson, also 22, took second. A teenage Wallisch once gave Stevenson, then just a starstruck 9-year-old, trick tips when they'd first met on the slopes of Utah's Park City Mountain Resort.

"Being a little kid, that was amazing," Stevenson says now. "I worshipped him. I'd watched all of his edits... He's still every little kid's favorite skier."

"Tom was skiing rails better than most pros as an unsponsored grom in Pennsylvania. By the time he went to Utah and filmed his Super-Unknown entry, no one was even close to his level. His ability to rotate onto rails, stop his momentum, then rotate off in the opposite direction was unreal. Tom owns the pretzel in skiing and made it a signature in film segments and pro models alike. I've also seen him order a large Bavarian pretzel every time it's on the menu." Minneapolis, MN. Photo: Josh Bishop

The 2020 Steel City Showdown was Wallisch opening the gates of the sport he helped hone, and inviting everyone to the party.

A few weeks after the Steel City Showdown, Wallisch returned to Aspen, CO, for the X Games. This time, he was in a unique dual role as competitor in the new knuckle huck competition and on-slope announcer for ESPN. He wore a wireless microphone, an earpiece with producers blabbing into his ear and a heavy radio in his jacket pocket. Stevenson won knuckle huck and slopestyle that week, the first rookie ever to win two golds at X Games. The next generation had officially arrived, and Wallisch, who commentated hilariously on his own runs, was there to mark the moment.

In recent years, Wallisch has been doing a lot more TV analysis and commentating for big contests, and he's a natural. Although his core fans have known forever, audiences on major networks are now becoming acquainted with his humor and encyclopedic trick knowledge for the first time. As he once did on skis, Wallisch now brings crossover appeal to the announcer's booth.

He also sits on the board of directors for the U.S. Ski Team as the athlete representative for freeskiing, acting as the voice of his discipline within its governing body. "He's a powerful figure in skiing. His voice matters," Decker says. "What he's doing now is continuing to make the sport better. It used to be, 'Hey, I made this awesome edit. Push play.' Now it's way bigger than that. Tom is shaping a new path for what the future might be."

Wallisch looks to pro skiers like Chris Davenport and Glen Plake, both legends in the sport, for examples of directions he could take in the years to come. "I can see myself in so many roles—working with kids, coaching, doing clinics, working with brands in design or marketing," he says.

But in many ways, he's still that kid building jumps in his backyard. At home in Park City, he'll lap the park for hours, skipping lunch. When he finally comes home, he and his friends will drag junk from his garage—an old table, a PVC pipe—to build a ramp in front of the house.

Steph jokes that he acts like he's still 12, fueled by fruit gummies and Pop Tarts. Well past nightfall, he'll finally come inside, and Steph will remind him to clean up the mess in the front yard.

"I will," he'll say. "But first, I'm going back to hit it tomorrow." §

