

# Resilience

Big mountain skier Jackie Paaso spent years in a dark, depressed state. Through skiing, she found the light.

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

**THE CRASH WAS CLASSIC** Jackie Paaso. It was April, in Verbier, Switzerland, for the final stop of the Freeride World Tour. Paaso, a veteran competitor on the FWT and the 2016 winner on this venue, skied the top of the famous Bec des Rosses relatively conservatively, arcing fast, fluid turns and hitting a couple of tiny airs. The on-air announcer wondered aloud if she was going to step up her game.

She answered back by pointing her skis over a massive, double-decker-bus-sized set of cliff bands. As she catapulted head over ski boots on the landing, the announcer called it the biggest air they had ever seen in a women's ski competition. It was hardly the first time that's been said about Paaso. Her style is all or nothing and she's well known on tour for her bold line choices that result in either a landslide win or a dramatic crash. She's never middle of the pack, never skiing forgiving, safe lines. Sometimes she wins, oftentimes she blows up.

The late Timy Dutton, a close friend of Paaso's and a former FWT competitor himself, once told me, "Jackie skis to be the best female skier in the world not to win the competition."

In Verbier, that crash cost her. She ended up with a knee injury and finished fifth in the overall standings. She was still wearing a knee brace when I met up with her a month later for an interview, on a summery May day on the shores of Lake Tahoe. She had just flown in from her adopted home country of Sweden, where she lives with her husband, Swedish pro skier Reine Barkered.

I've known Paaso for years, but it's still hard to get a read on her. Like her ski style, her personality feels like one of extremes. Some days, she's warm and pleasant, a quiet girl in the corner observing everything. Other days, she turns inward, closing herself off, while her penetrating and steely blue eyes reveal a crippling shyness.

Paaso tells me she has been keeping a secret for a long time—one she's hidden even from close family and friends—but she's ready to open up. For years, Paaso suffered from a devastating depression that nearly broke her and her ski career. Most don't know this side of her. The 35-year-old has always been good at hiding it.

"The best thing about Jackie is that she's always smiling, always positive and happy, regardless if she wins or crashes," said Dion Newport, a long-time judge on the Freeride World Tour. That smile? Sometimes, it's a mask.

"I didn't want people to know," says Paaso. "I tried to pretend that everything was fine. But I was not fine."

While other mountain-sports athletes may talk about sadness associated with injuries or unlucky seasons, nobody is talking about real mental health issues. It's a total taboo. Skiing is supposed to be fun. Mountains, powder, sunshine—what's there to be depressed about? But according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the Mountain West—states like Montana, Wyoming, and Utah—have the highest suicide rates in the Lower 48. Still, nobody in skiing discusses it.

"Why talk about this now?" I asked Paaso.

"The worst thing is keeping it in," she answers. "You never manage to get past it. I'm not an expert at this. But I want people to know there is light at the end of the tunnel."



**“I found freeskiing competitions and there was joy in that. But then I also found the hard side of that—the rejection, the loss, the friends who passed away.” —Jackie Paaso**

**THE FIRST SUICIDE ATTEMPT** happened in 2004. Paaso, who’d grown up an elite mogul skier in Maine, had dropped out of college and given up competitive skiing after she’d failed to make the U.S. Olympic team. The financial burden of the sport was too much to carry. She’d just returned home to the U.S. after an intense 40-day NOLS mountaineering course in India to find out that her boyfriend had met someone else while she was away.

She doesn’t know what caused her to overdose. All she knows is that she panicked, downed a bottle of pills, and her ex-boyfriend found her and took her to the hospital.

“Looking back on it, I don’t know *what* I was thinking,” she says. “I don’t think I was necessarily trying to kill myself. But it was definitely a cry for help.”

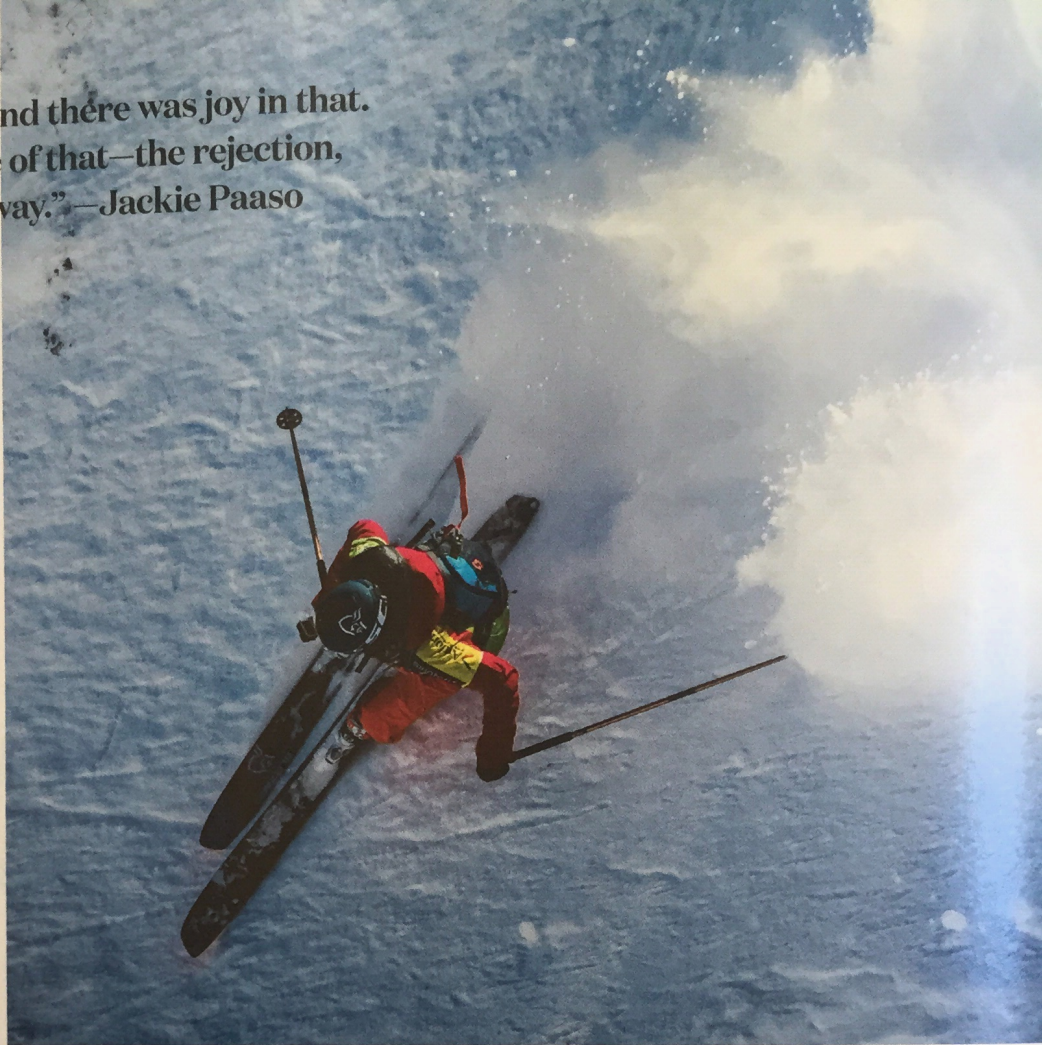
Afterward, she barely told anyone. She met with a therapist, but not for long. The depression lingered. She moved to Tahoe a few months later when some friends from the Sunday River freestyle team offered her a futon to sleep on. She got a job coaching skiing at Alpine Meadows and later worked a slew of other gigs, like supervising an overnight dorm at a boarding school, waiting tables at a sushi restaurant, and working on a blacktop-sealing crew. Her life was a mishmash with no real direction. Which was especially hard for the girl who’d always been a perfectionist with dreams of becoming an Olympian.

Growing up, Paaso was quiet and reserved but never showed any signs of depression, which doesn’t run in her family. Her dad, a former NFL player, pushed her to succeed, but neither of her parents imagined that her drive would one day become a deterrent.

“She kept a lot to herself,” says her mom, Diane Paaso, who only learned of her daughter’s depression after her first overdose. “I think it was this pressure of starting competitions at such a young age and having so many expectations—not that we put on her, but that she put on herself.”

She started chasing Timy Dutton, known for his high-flying antics, and fellow big-air enthusiast Mike Wilson around Squaw Valley in the mid-aughts, and they taught her how to launch herself off 40-foot cliffs. Big mountain skiing gave her an avenue to express herself, and maybe, subconsciously, she was drawn to the riskiness of it all. Maybe she wanted to subject herself to something hard, a physical feat to distract her from what she was dealing with mentally.

When friends encouraged her to sign up for her first big mountain competition at Kirkwood in 2006, Paaso competed on borrowed skis and crashed in the finals, but more importantly, she’d found something she liked. She picked up sponsors, filmed some movie parts, and kept on competing in regional contests. “I found freeskiing competitions and there was joy in that,” says Paaso. “But then I also found the hard side of that—the rejection, the loss, the friends who passed away.”



At a peak in her depression, pro skier JT Holmes told her, “Jackie, you’re kind of a bummer to hang around.” She was never the one laughing or making jokes. Introverted by nature, the world of pro skiing she’d stumbled into—the self-promotion and look-at-me attitude—felt unnatural for her. While her pro-skiing peers were posting smiling selfies atop mountains, she struggled with the notion of putting an image of herself into the world that disguised how she was actually feeling. And she wasn’t comfortable speaking the truth—that she felt lost and alone—because she felt it wasn’t what people wanted to hear.

“I was trying to be a professional skier and part of that is putting yourself out there,” she says. “To this day, that’s hard for me. That’s just not the kind of person I am.”

**THE SECOND SUICIDE ATTEMPT** happened in the fall of 2009. Paaso was living a dream ski life, yet she could barely get out of bed. “I basically woke up every day and thought, *I hate my life. I wish I wasn’t here,*” she says.

She found out her mom had cancer. Paaso stopped eating and quit working out. She doesn’t know how she spent her days—it’s all a vacuum, a black hole of wasted time. While visiting home in Maine, she swallowed a jar of codeine. Realizing her dire situation, she told her parents and they took her to the hospital.

There, she asked to be checked into a psychiatric ward in Lewiston, Maine. It was the kind of place where they confiscate your shoelaces and belt,



Jackie Paaso makes a big impression on skis. But behind her smile is a depression she’s kept secret even from those closest to her. She is coming forward now so others will be encouraged to get help sooner. Photos, from top: Jeremy Bernard, Chris Holter



Skiing—and jumping off large cliffs to stand on top of podiums—is Paaso's best kind of therapy.

Photos, clockwise from top: Thomas Bekker, Christoph Oberschneider, Dom Daher

where screams echo in the hallway in the middle of the night, and where mandatory arts and crafts sessions are meant to heal the mind. A doctor there told her she should quit skiing because it was too dangerous.

None of it worked. "It turned out locking me indoors was not the best for helping me heal," she says.

She spent nearly a week in the ward. Her mom took her out just before Thanksgiving and brought her home for a few months. "We have someone whose whole life is skiing and they're telling her to quit the one thing that makes her happy," her mom says.

Paaso returned to Tahoe that winter, and to her skis. In March of 2010, the Freeride World Tour was making its lone U.S. stop at Squaw Valley, Paaso's home mountain. She wasn't yet qualified for the tour, but she had a few of the international competitors sleeping on her living room floor. She begged the tour's director, Nicolas Hale-Woods, for a spot in the competition. After a few beers the night before the contest, he caved and granted her a wild-card entry.

Entering the competition as a relative unknown, Paaso chose the line that the gutsiest guys were hitting—a massive 45-foot air at the bottom of Squaw's Silverado. She backslapped on the landing, bounced wildly into the air, then miraculously landed on her feet. She won the contest, beating out local legend Ingrid Backstrom, who took third.

Paaso weighed just 118 pounds at the time, a shell of her normal self, due to the months of lost appetite and no training. "I remember people talking about how you needed to have strength to land those cliffs, but I had very little muscle," she says. "It was more will than anything."

That win, coupled with the fact that she'd finally found the right therapist, changed her life. She began talking to a psychiatrist in Tahoe who understood her and didn't prescribe quitting ski-



ing. She took anti-depressants but didn't like the way they muted her personality, so she stopped medication and focused on the things that brought her happiness and surrounded herself with people she could trust. She spent hours on the phone with her mom, talking through her feelings.

"I think she actually pulled herself out of it," says her mom.

It wasn't overnight, but as time passed, Paaso started to feel like the black curtain was lifting. "Getting out and skiing was the best solution for me," she says. "I finally had direction."

That direction? Downhill, over some cliffs, and fast.

**AFTER HER SQUAW VALLEY VICTORY**, Paaso went on to win five more Freeride World Tour stops in the eight years she's been on the circuit. She's had a lot of crashes over that time, but she keeps coming back year after year because she wants the overall title, which has eluded her.

She is just now coming forward about her depression—which affects more than 15 million American adults—with the hopes that talking more openly about mental health—an often-ignored issue, especially in mountain communities—will encourage others considering suicide or fighting depression to seek help.

Paaso and Austrian skier Eva Walkner are working on a movie project, due out in fall 2018 and filmed partly in the Alps, that is about resilience and adaptation. "You have this path, these things you're

trying to do," Paaso says about the film. "When you veer off that path and you realize it's not going to work, it's easy to say, 'My whole life is ruined.' But it doesn't have to be that way."

For now, Paaso says she's in a good place in life—she's a coach and competitor in mountain biking, leading women's avalanche clinics, and working on her Swedish language skills. She still has days when she feels that sense of dejection and aimlessness resurfacing, but now, she has people she can talk to. She's not afraid to seek professional help from a therapist when she needs to.

Her husband, Barkered, has been a huge help, too. They started a cross-Atlantic long-distance relationship at the Chamonix stop of the FWT in 2011, two years after her last overdose. "I have seen her get sad and her mind go to dark places," he says. "We usually talk through it, but it can be hard to wash it away. This is something she is working on all the time." And that's the hard thing: Depression isn't cured instantly or ever; it's something you chip away at, bit by bit.

Back on the beach in Tahoe, Paaso seems relieved just to have everything out in the open, to let her secrets out. "I'm happy with who I am right now," she says. "I think if there's one thing I regret, it's not that I had these incidents, it's that I didn't seek help sooner."

*The National Suicide Prevention Hotline is 1-800-273-TALK (8255). \**