

ELLIOTT Bernhagen got his first snowboard at Walmart—it was the toy kind without metal edges. As a kid growing up outside of Chicago, he learned to ride at age 14 on a small, snow-covered hill in Wisconsin. By 18, he fled to Colorado in search of bigger mountains and to attend Colorado Mountain College in Glenwood Springs. He only lasted a year in college—he wanted to move to Breckenridge to snowboard—but it was there that he met an ambitious photography student named Patrick Orton. The two, both passionate about steep mountains, became fast friends.

Patrick Orton took this photo of me on a memorable day in Rogers Pass, BC along with Revelstoke local legend Jake Teuton, who was probably only 15 at the time. There was a sparkle in the air that if you're lucky enough to ever experience, you never forget. It wasn't until last year that I learned to covet these genuine moments of life through the camera and not just the intense action.—Elliott Bernhagen
Photo: Patrick Orton



They started exploring the backcountry together, hiking into Colorado's Gore Range and throughout the Vail Valley, Orton taking photos, while Bernhagen made turns in front of the lens. A few years later, they bought a 2003 Ford F-150 with a camper for \$1,000. They towed their snowmobiles and lived out of the car (#twodudesonecamper, they called it), driving long stretches between British Columbia and Alaska.

In the winter of 2013, they met pro skier Dane Tudor in Revelstoke, BC, and began skiing and shooting together. "The two were camping in a pop-top, their sleds needed tinkering every morning, and their stoke level was high," Tudor remembers. "Their experience on sleds was fairly limited and Pat ended up getting his sled stuck up a tree while hill climbing. I remember thinking, 'These guys are loose.'"

Loose, maybe, but both young men were undeniably talented. Orton's stunning photos from their travels began getting published in major magazines and Bernhagen's snowboard career took off as well. They were living the dream. "It was by far the best winter we'd ever experienced. We finally got it," Bernhagen says. That all came to a halt on a summer night in July 2013, when Orton, then 24, jumped off a bridge into a creek in his hometown of Sandpoint, ID, and accidentally drowned.

His death rocked Bernhagen. "I wasn't sure if I was ever going to snowboard again. Patrick had been such a big part of that world," Bernhagen says. "There was the emotional aspect of it and also this physical aspect—I needed a partner to go into the backcountry with and I no longer had that."

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Plus, Bernhagen was out of money. So he moved to North Dakota to run excavators at an oil processing plant for a few months and afterward he stopped in Idaho to visit Orton's parents. They decided to give Bernhagen their son's camera and lenses.

The next winter, Bernhagen went back to Revelstoke and started taking pictures of their pro athlete friends, skiers like Tudor, Sammy Carlson and John Spriggs. "I started shooting because I wanted to honor the fact that I'd been given this camera," Bernhagen says. "I had no intention of becoming a professional photographer. But immediately, I was drawn to it. I barely rode any lines that winter—I only wanted to shoot."

Bernhagen had helped Orton edit photos and set up shots and it didn't take long to realize he had a natural eye for composition. He developed a knack for capturing skiers in rugged environments from the unique perspective of someone who has been an athlete himself.

"Elliott has a great eye for stunning imagery and loves to shoot photos, which enables him to capture the moment," Tudor says. "Elliott is one of those guys who does things differently and succeeds at everything he does purely from his stoke and intellectual power."

He never took any formal photography classes—he is entirely self-taught, and he admits that during those first couple of years, his style and technique improved a lot. When Orton's camera broke, Bernhagen went to Alaska to work on a commercial fishing boat to make enough money to buy a

new one. Soon, his photos were published in big magazines, too—including ESPN and *Outside*—and after that came commercial photography projects for The North Face, Spy Optics, Dakine, and Scott Sports.

Bernhagen started shooting subjects other than just skiing and snowboarding. While on a road trip with a friend who works as a model, he began shooting high fashion. He snapped portraits, cars, fitness. "Everything's a challenge. The more I step outside my comfort zone, the more fun I have," Bernhagen says. "A successful photographer once told me to stick to what I know and what I'm good at—which would be skiing—but that's the worst advice ever. I've had so much fun pushing myself to do things I don't know how to shoot."

Now 29 years old, Bernhagen moved to Los Angeles a year ago to focus on his photography career and be closer to the fashion world he's shooting more frequently. "It's rare to come from the ski world and go to the fashion world; I know that," Bernhagen says. "But it feels right."

Although Bernhagen has made a name for himself entirely on his own grit and raw talent, he still credits Orton for giving him the drive—and his first camera.

"I owe everything to Pat," he says. "He had a nearly unfathomable appreciation for life, for his parents, for the Earth from which he came and returned. He taught me to appreciate a flickering moment of light. I would certainly not be as enlightened to the infinite gifts of this life [without him], and I am forever grateful." §