



Obsessed

Cody Townsend doesn't do anything half-hearted. So he is giving himself three years to complete the 50 classic ski descents of North America.

BY MEGAN MICHELSON
ILLUSTRATION BY DOUG BODEL

WEARING A GOOFY GRIN and an electric-blue shirt printed with rollerblades and palm trees, Cody Townsend skis off the top of California's 14,162-foot Mount Shasta. He's laughing now—on a clear, windless day in early June, surrounded by friends—but this line, a 7,300-foot slog up the volcano's Avalanche Gulch route has been the easiest, least technical peak he's skied all season.

Last January, Townsend announced his latest project, which he dubbed The Fifty, and would attempt to climb and ski all the lines in the 2010 book, "Fifty Classic Ski Descents of North America," while producing an ongoing video series. Nobody has skied them all before—in fact, several lines have only been skied a couple of times, ever. Even the authors of the book, Chris Davenport, Art Burrows, and Penn Newhard, have only skied about half of the lines collectively. They chose the classics based on input from well-respected ski mountaineers around North America.

Now Townsend, a pro skier who's spent his entire career making ski movies by dropping spines out of a helicopter, is going to try to tackle them all. Oh, and he's going to do it in three years.

The vision started a couple of years ago, in classic Townsend style. He picked up the book and started pouring through it. He began compulsively studying each line, reading everything he could get his hands on. Making ski movies with Teton Gravity Research and Matchstick Productions—he's appeared in 10 of them over the last decade—has been the bulk of his career, but he needed a new focus.

"My motivation was to climb and ski cool lines through North America," Townsend tells me while driving from his home in Tahoe to Mount Shasta. "It just so happened that a few of my bucket list lines—the Grand Teton, Mount Currie—were in the book."

He broke the book into four sections: 30 relatively easy lines, 10 hard or rare-to-come-in lines, seven difficult or very rare routes, and three cruxes. It's those crux descents that may make this project impossible to complete. They are, in Townsend's mind, the south face of University Peak, an exposed behemoth in Alaska's Wrangell

St. Elias National Park that's rarely been skied; the north face of Canada's Mount Robson, which was first skied in 1995, then not skied again until 2017; and the Mira Face of Mount Saint Elias in Alaska, which goes years without being summited and has only been skied by a handful of people.

Some of the lines—in melting, glaciated zones, or low-elevation lines with less snow—may not even exist in years to come. Townsend says in one YouTube episode that he's not skiing any first descents, but he may be skiing some last descents. A couloir on Canada's Joffre Peak—one of the mountains in the book—disappeared completely due to a massive rockslide just a few months after Townsend skied there last winter.

Townsend is not naïve. He understands the gravity of what he's setting out to do. "When I said I was going to do this in three years, I also realized that's a pretty audacious claim," he says.

If anyone understands his unrelenting devotion to this project, it's his wife, fellow pro skier Elyse Saugstad. "There's no doubt that Cody will put in a lot of effort. But he could get to 48 and that's that. It'll sit in the back of his mind and eat at him, I know that," she says. "He gets obsessed about stuff. I don't know that he'll be able to walk away."

Townsend is also smart, and he understands that to remain relevant as a pro skier, you've got to evolve. "Anyone can be an athlete these days with a well-run social media account. But ultimately, the people who are on top are still doing cool athletic endeavors," says Townsend, who's 36. "When I thought about the media for this project, I thought, this is going to be successful. A number, a goal, people are going to eat this up. But to do something like this because you think it'll be successful in media is not only plain stupid, it's also dangerous."

So, what does success look like for a project that's most likely doomed to fail? Goal number one is surviving. "With objective-based projects, ticking things off, I knew that could warp my mindset and I could do dangerous things because of that," Townsend says. Sometimes that means turning around mid-slope to stay safe.



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His YouTube episodes documenting each line reveal Townsend’s decision making process. He reveals moments of deliberation and decision making typically unseen. “If I hear enough ‘I don’t know,’ then we turn around. If one person says, ‘I’m out,’ then we all turn around,” Townsend says.

On his first attempt up Joffre Peak, low visibility and sketchy conditions force the crew to retreat. “You don’t ski to prove that you’re cooler and badder than everyone else...That was the right decision.” On his second attempt, he sidesteps down the couloir because the snow was unskiable.

His videos also show a more revealing, human side of Townsend. The normally stalwart athlete tells us when he’s nervous driving over Roger’s Pass or rappelling into a line. He tells his GoPro or his cameraman—Swedish skier and filmmaker Bjarne Salén—that his hip flexors are sore from climbing 7,000 vertical feet or that he’s got bad gas. As a viewer, this intimacy feels like he’s letting us in on a secret. But, still, Townsend is a world-

class skier with years of experience on the big screen that no amount of fart jokes can disguise.

Goal number two is to have fun. See his hilarious monoski and snowblade descents of Terminal Cancer, a couloir tucked into Nevada’s Ruby Mountains. Or his ridiculous ski-mo-suit-clad flailing sprint on Whistler’s Spearhead Traverse.

Goal number three: If he gets a majority of the 50 done, he’ll walk away proud. “I mentally prepared for announcing to the world that I was doing this, then giving up. That was harder to prepare for,” Townsend says. “Turning around the day of, when your life is on the line, is easy. But saying, ‘Hey, world, this is what I’m doing.’ Then saying, ‘Hey, world, I’m not doing it anymore’ felt much harder.”

Last season, Townsend attempted 24 and successfully skied 20 of the 50 peaks on the list, including some of the tougher descents, like the Landry Line on Colorado’s Pyramid Peak and Meteorite Mountain in Alaska. Not bad for year one. For his final ski of the season, he wanted to

ABOVE: Townsend and Bjarne Salén approach the Sphinx in the Chugach Range.
Photo: Ming T. Poon

RIGHT: Townsend and Jeremy Jones skip on Pontoon Peak.
Photo: Bjarne Salén





ABOVE: There's a reason these are the classics. Townsend finds his line down the Sphinx. Photo: Ming T. Poon

BELOW: A former football QB, it appears Townsend did not peak in high school after all. Photo: Ming T. Poon



bring his friends together for a corn-crushing volcano mission on Shasta, a celebratory send-off to his first year on the project.

I texted Cody in late May to ask about the plan. "Just got off Rainier," he writes back. "Looking like weather finally switching Monday/Tuesday. Looking at those days."

"Hope Rainier was a success," I reply.

"Well, it's always a success when you're back, but it wasn't a success in terms of checking a list," he responds. "That's the thing with skiing. You still get to ski down even if you don't ski what you wanted to."

PEGGY TOWNSEND was six months pregnant in 1983 when she and her husband, Jamie, took a ski trip to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. She remembers skiing Cody Peak and thinking, "This is free and wild. That's what I want this child to be." When their son was born a few months later, they named him Cody.

Peggy, a journalist, and Jamie, a high school English teacher, raised their only son in Santa Cruz, California. They were committed to driving five hours each way to teach their kid to ski on the slopes of Squaw Valley. Townsend joined Squaw's

race program and his dad worked as a parking lot attendant to help pay for the high costs.

At six years old, Townsend vividly remembers watching the old 1983 Warren Miller film "Ski Time," seeing skier Scot Schmidt onscreen, and thinking, "That's what I want to do when I grow up." One weekend, when his parents didn't make the drive to Tahoe, Townsend, then in the fourth grade, walked out the door and threatened to hitchhike.

He grew into a talented ski racer—he won Junior Olympics in downhill when he was 16—and ended up spending winter living in Tahoe and attending the local school so he could train. In high school at home in Santa Cruz, he was the quarterback dating the head cheerleader and his dad was the football coach. His nickname was the Ghost, because he'd disappear all winter for skiing.

Townsend raced until he was 20, but when it snowed three feet at a U.S. Ski Team training camp at Valle Nevado, Chile, his coaches yelled at him for skiing powder, so he quit.

He met Saugstad when he was 21 at the ski industry trade show in Las Vegas. She was a striking, tough-as-nails former collegiate ski racer from Alaska living in Tahoe and at the expo

modeling for a startup outerwear company. He was a relative nobody, who'd shown up with printed resumes and DVDs of him hucking cliffs, hoping to land his first sponsors.

Not long after, Townsend got a call from Saugstad. She wanted to hang out. He was in disbelief.

Once he was back in Tahoe, as the story goes, they met up to ski Squaw together. He remembers picking a rowdy line with a chunky cliff in the middle, aiming to impress. He stuck the landing, then turned back uphill to spot her reaction. She'd followed him down the line and was nailing the air behind him. Turns out, it was he who was impressed.

It took a couple of years, while juggling jobs as a bartender and at the local cookie shop at Squaw, but eventually, Townsend started filming with Matchstick Productions, alongside his Squaw Valley-based idols like Shane McConkey and JT Holmes. Saugstad was working as a waitress at night and had halted plans for law school. Townsend was (and still is) sponsored by Salomon, and after they'd starting dating, Saugstad tagged along on a company sales meeting in Utah. She was ripping a line under the chairlift when a Salomon marketing rep spotted her from above. "Who's that?" he asked. Townsend made the introductions and Salomon became her first major sponsor.

"This project, this career wouldn't be possible without Elyse," Townsend says. "She's unbelievably supportive. She also sets me in my tracks. She calls me on my shit."

The two made the Freeride World Tour, where they competed side-by-side around Europe for a few years. That was Saugstad's time to shine—she won the overall title in 2008, the first American woman to do so. Townsend's best result was a third-place finish at the tour's Verbier, Switzerland, finale. But it was Townsend who was picking up big-budget global sponsors, like Swatch, and securing major video parts with MSP and TGR, while Saugstad was fighting for equal pay, hustling for sponsors, and getting dismissed by the movie companies. "I was hoping the films would make room for another woman," she says. "They didn't." (Her time would come later: She's since had mind-blowing, award-winning parts in major ski films.)

Townsend and Saugstad married in Hawaii in 2011. During that era, he was juggling it all methodically: his growing business, his mounting ski career, his new marriage. Along the way, he became obsessed with the idea of skiing straight-line couloirs. He skied one that he described as like surfing the barrel of a big wave, where you're going so fast, you can't stop. For years, he looked everywhere for the perfect straight-line, scouring



When he can't rely on his good looks, raw talent, or intellect, Townsend turns to humor.
Photos: Ming T. Poon



LEFT: For richer, for poorer, in high tide and low.
Photo: Blake Jorgenson

RIGHT: Cody and Elyse do date night. Mica Heli, B.C.
Photo: Blake Jorgenson



books, maps, and rock faces from the seat of a helicopter. Then, in the winter of 2014 while filming with MSP in Alaska's Tordrillo range, he spied *The One*. He didn't know it at the time, but snowboarder Travis Rice had ridden it earlier in the season and named it the Crack.

The footage of Townsend ripping the 2,000-foot-long, pencil-thin chute at 70 miles per hour went completely viral. It had 300,000 views within 12 hours (it now has a whopping 11 million views) and Townsend appeared on Good Morning America, ESPN, and CNN. The media called him a death-defying daredevil. "It felt like a circus," Townsend says now. The footage won him Line of the Year at the Powder Awards that winter.

After the Crack, his sponsors and the media kept asking, "What's next?" Townsend didn't have an answer. "I'd spent six years dreaming about this one line. So, I don't immediately have the next thing," he says.

Obsession, it turns out, is a Townsend characteristic. Just ask his mother. "From a young age, he was the kind of kid who, when something interested him, he would delve deeply into it until he mastered it," says his mom, Peggy.

At various points in his life, he's gotten into motorcycles, then cooking, then big-wave surfing,

kite-surfing, and fly-fishing. He taught himself to tie flies. In no time, he went from fishing rookie to having a fly-fishing sponsor and appearing on the cover of a fly-fishing magazine.

"When I get into something, I go full bore," Townsend says. "I have this innate desire to be good at things."

His tendency for obsession gradually turned to ski mountaineering. He remembers asking friend and Everest guide Adrian Ballinger, "Do you teach any ski mountaineering courses?" Ballinger did not. So, instead, Townsend squeaked his way onto an expedition to Svalbard, Norway, then did a basecamp trip to the Tordrillos in Alaska, where he climbed and skied for 14 days while camped on a glacier. That was his crash course.

After that, he was hooked. He picked up the 50 classics book and his next obsession was born.

"There are athletes, then there are people who get sprinkled with magic dust. Cody has that magic touch, he's just talented," says Queen. "That's why he could go into *The Fifty* project saying, 'I am absolutely not qualified to do this, I do not have the skillset to do this, but those are minor details. The goal is to do it. So, the answer is to learn how to do it.' Most people couldn't process it that way."

One of the first people Townsend told, after Saugstad, about his goal was Chris Davenport, one of the book's authors. A month later, Davenport texted him to say that another skier—Utah-based mountaineer Noah Howell—was also attempting the 50 lines.

Howell's been at this for years. He started skiing the lines before the book was even published and has quietly checked off 30 lines over the last 15 years,

without ever bothering to announce it publicly.

"When I heard Cody was doing this, I was surprised—it seemed out of his lane," Howell told me. "I am looking at this as a lifetime project, not a three-year publicity stunt. But after sitting down with Cody, I respect the ways he's going about it. He's proving me wrong—he's done a lot of the peaks in one season."

Townsend and Howell have spoken a few times about their shared project, swapping beta and going for tacos after both bagged descents in Colorado last winter. They mutually insist it's not a race. "It's cordial," Townsend says. "It'd be fun to link up with Noah and do a line that neither of us have done before."

"It's not a race, but I'm definitely a competitive person," Howell says. "Cody doing this too has spurred me to be like, if you want to be first, you have to get your butt in gear and take it more seriously. It's made me want to focus on it more."

Back on Shasta last spring with Townsend and a half-dozen of his friends, the vibe is low-key and jovial, like nobody's in a rush to check this one off. We take our time on the pre-dawn approach, leisurely eat a sandwich and drink a beer at the summit, then party shred 7,000 feet of corn all the way back to the car.

When Townsend peels off his ski boots at his truck, it marks his final turns of a long, hard winter. He looks exhausted but also relieved. "This year has been such a growing experience. I've learned so much," he says. "It's a different style of challenging myself. I could quit tomorrow, and I'd be super fine with that."

I'm not so sure I believe him. *