



THE FOURTH WALL IS COMING DOWN

Swedish skier and filmmaker Bjarne Salén is flipping the script and shaking up the way we watch ski movies.

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

A group of skiers sits on the southeast face of the 6,634-foot Pontoon Peak, an iconic ski mountaineer's objective deep in Alaska's Chugach Range. Just 150 feet from the summit, they're trying to figure out their next move. They're also filming for pro skier Cody Townsend's wildly popular YouTube series, *The Fifty*, a documented attempt to ski all of the lines in the heralded 2010 book *50 Classic Ski Descents of North America*.



“We just started running into more firm conditions,” says Points North Heli Tour Camp guide and group member Jeff Dostie. “As this pitch ramps up into the mid to high 50s in slope angle, this is just edgeable, and I don’t know if just edgeable is a good call on that slope angle.”

Dostie pauses, then looks straight at the camera and says, “What do you think?” It’s clear that he’s not talking to the viewer, but rather to whomever is behind the lens.

Brennan Lagasse, another mountain guide, is barely visible in the frame and adds, “Yeah, what do you think, buddy?”

An accented voice from behind the camera calmly answers back: “Do you want me to be honest?”

“Yeah, you’re the man,” Lagasse says.

The voice speaks up again: “I already decided when I was down there that I’m not going to go all the way up. I already made my own decision.”

Pause. That statement sinks in.

Then Lagasse says, “Dude, I respect the fuck out of you. That makes me want to bail!”

Out of the shot, Townsend hollers from a short distance away, “If Bjarne says that, we’re done.” With that, the crew turns around and starts their descent. Pontoon Peak’s summit will have to wait for another day.

While these conversations are commonplace in backcountry skiing, it’s rare for them to make it into the final cut of ski media. In typical ski movies, you’ll see a skier standing atop a giant face, tips pointed over the edge. It’s often unclear how the skier even got to that point—helicopter? skins?—and what decisions, logistics, efforts or safety precautions went into getting there. Most of what a viewer sees in ski porn is the payoff—the untouched powder—with little of the lead-up.

It’s part of Townsend’s goal with *The Fifty* to document what it *really* takes to climb and ski a big line. This means you’ll see way more staring at maps, waiting for weather windows, long pre-dawn trudges and very little powder skiing. Townsend started his project in the winter of 2019 and, now two years in, he’s completed 30 lines. His YouTube series can easily rack up 200,000 views per episode.

On Pontoon Peak and in many of the dozens of episodes from *The Fifty* series, the viewer gets a glimpse at the guy behind the camera—the guy who made his own decision about turning around. “The man,” as Lagasse calls him, is Bjarne Salén, a Swedish-born skier and filmmaker whose documentary style is changing the way we consume ski media. Usually the person toting the heavy camera pack and chasing professional athletes around the mountains isn’t seen, but the cinematographer is no longer invisible throughout *The Fifty*.

“One of the things I knew when I asked Bjarne to film this project is that he’d be good on camera,” Townsend says. “On day one, when we linked up in Utah to film the first line, I told him explicitly to turn the camera on himself. I said, ‘You need to be a character in this. So, when you have something to say, say it on camera.’ It’s refreshing to have his voice in there, to see him there, to understand what’s going on with the whole team.”

In filmmaking, there’s a concept called the fourth wall. It’s the barrier between the audience and the cast, the thing that keeps the fantasy inside the movie and the reality (and us) outside. It’s why actors never look straight at a camera when delivering their lines or why the cameraman never talks to the crew on screen. But Salén is breaking that wall right down.

In the Pontoon episode, as they’re prepping to turn around, Salén pulls the camera around and films himself. “We’re nearly at the top, and personally, I feel that I don’t want to come home and be angry at myself because I made a stupid decision,” he says into the lens. “A dear friend of mine taught me that once.”



[Opening Spread] Bjarne Salén steps out from behind the lens on an icy trip to Svalbard, Norway. **Reuben Krabbe**
 [Above] Before dropping into the Sphinx in Alaska while filming for *The Fifty*, Salén takes a moment to weigh in. **Bjarne Salén**
 [Below, Left] Salén’s skill set includes wedge turning in couloirs. **Christian Pondella**
 [Below, Right] While filming in Alaska’s Chugach Range, Salén does some heavy lifting. **Zoya Lynch**

SALÉN GREW UP ON a small island off the southwest coast of Sweden, near the city of Gothenburg. From a young age, he wanted to leave his mark on the world. At 12, he tried to make it into the Guinness World Records by collecting more empty toilet paper rolls than anyone else on Earth. (When his dad discovered a pile of garbage bags full of toilet paper rolls, the bags and the plan were discarded.)

Salén played table tennis, ice hockey, soccer and a Swedish game called floorball, but he grew to love skiing the most. His mom would take him and his older brother, Morgan, to a tiny ski hill a few hours away once a year, but as he got older, he started taking the bus three hours each way once a week for the afternoon freeski club at another ski hill. He and his friends once built a jump over a roadway for what was certainly the island's first road gap.

Both Salén brothers enrolled at a high school geared toward outdoor adventure, which is where Bjarne learned to climb and whitewater kayak and how he came to make his first film on a borrowed camera about a road trip he and his classmates took to the south of France. After finishing school, Morgan was working as a waiter when he met a Swedish climbing guide and skier named Andreas Fransson, who was working on Sweden's tallest mountain, Kebnekaise. The two became ski partners, and Fransson eventually convinced Morgan to move with him to Chamonix, France.

After high school, Bjarne, then 18, moved to New Zealand to kayak, climb and surf before moving in with his brother and Fransson in Chamonix. They lived within walking distance of the lifts in a tiny apartment that was scattered with ice axes, ropes and ski jackets. Salén worked as a dishwasher by night and skied every day, learning his way around bigger mountains by chasing Fransson, who would go on to become a professional skier, and Morgan, who would become one of the youngest Swedes to earn his international mountain guide certification.

In 2010, Salén was on a 15-hour bus ride in Nepal for a kayaking trip when he had an epiphany: he needed to make a film. "I don't get those realizations very often," Salén says. "But every few years, I get these wow moments, like, this is what I need to do."

He bought a camera and started shooting everything he could. In truth, he didn't have much of a plan. But he knew he

liked being a fly on the wall, telling stories in the mountains and rivers in which he liked to play, and capturing what was happening around him.

"Bjarne's strength is that he has no limits of crazy ideas. If you have 20 crazy ideas and one works really well, that's enough, right?" says Morgan. "He also has this way of being slightly naïve that's almost a strength. He was like, 'I'm going to do this. I'll solve the problems as they come.'"

Bjarne has never taken a film or photography course—he's entirely self-taught. His big break came when he got a job working with pro skier Seth Morrison on a film called *The Ordinary Skier*, which came out in 2011. (Bjarne didn't know who Morrison was prior to the project and once called him a snowboarder in an interview.)

He later made a film about skier Ptor Spriceniaks entitled *Dream Line* that was shot in the high peaks of Pakistan. It was on that expedition where skier Greg Hill broke his leg in an avalanche, and it was Salén who helped stabilize the leg and dug the snow cave in which he huddled beside Hill through the night while they awaited helicopter rescue. "Bjarne is the person you want there if something bad happens in the mountains," says Hill.

Salén has worked for brands like Salomon and Patagonia. He also worked as Fransson's personal filmer, traveling with him all over the world. Salén's specialty has always been filming in places where other filmmakers can't get, like deep in the river canyons of the Himalaya, the mountaintops of Alaska or the big waves of Maui. On mountains, Bjarne climbs like a nymph, moving swiftly despite the heftiness of his camera pack and frequent stops to grab shots from precarious angles.

As Morgan puts it, "There are people who are better than Bjarne in the mountains, but they can't film. There are better filmers than Bjarne, but they can't move in the mountains. It's the combination. He's tapping into something else that nobody else can do."

Photographer Christian Pondella has worked with Salén on a number of projects, including the 2015 Patagonia-funded film *Jumbo Wild*, shot in the mountains of British Columbia. "If you have Bjarne with you and your objective is to go climb some mountains, you're not worried about him," Pondella says. "He's not going to be a weak link. He's very strong in the mountains."

Pro skier Johnny Collinson shot with Salén in La Grave, France, and remembers the filmmaker as the one setting the bootpack. "Bjarne is an incredible athlete," says Collinson. "He's got the talents of an athlete with the skill sets of a cameraman."

In September 2014, Salén was in South America filming for a movie project with Fransson, freeskiing pioneer JP Auclair and Swedish photographer Daniel Rönnbäck. Salén and Rönnbäck were setting up for shots from an opposing ridgeline while Fransson and Auclair were climbing up a massive couloir on Monte San Lorenzo, a 12,000-foot peak on the border of Argentina and Chile. Less than a thousand feet from the summit, in an exposed spot, an avalanche



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[Facing Page] Bjarne (right) and brother Morgan in Gothenburg, Sweden in 1999. [C] Courtesy Bjarne Salén

[Left] Morgan (left), Bjarne (front) and Andreas Fransson take a moment on the summit of Jiehkkevárri, Norway, on a film project in 2012. [C] Bjarne Salén

[Inset] Greg Hill and Salén hike in to Gashot Peak, Pakistan, where Hill broke his leg and was evacuated in 2012. [C] Bjarne Salén

[Below] Rafael Ortiz hits the Spirit Falls outside of White Salmon, Wash., while shooting with Salén. [C] Bjarne Salén





[Above] Salén proves he's just as capable in front of the lens as he is behind it in Chamonix's Diabie Couloir. **Christian Pondella**

[Right] Salén (above) and Cody Townsend share a typical day in the office while filming on the Sphinx in Alaska for *The Fifty*. **Ming Poon**

[Facing Page] While filming in Alaska's Chugach Range, Salén's quiver includes more than just skis and boots. **Zoya Lynch**



released. Fransson and Auclair disappeared into the cloud, never to return.

Losing Fransson and Auclair hit Salén hard. He took a break from skiing, and grief covered him like a heavy blanket. "I knew the realities. Choosing to go into the mountains is choosing that risk," Salén says. "Andreas pushed it a lot, but I never felt safer in the mountains than when I was with him."

Salén says that now, years after his close friend's death, Fransson is still teaching him lessons, like having pride in turning around. "He taught me about suffering in the mountains," Salén says. "Getting outside your comfort zone, being extremely tired, navigating through dangerous things in the mountains teaches us about ourselves. You have to meet yourself."

In 2015, Salén moved to the U.S. There was a girl involved, but Salén also needed to get out of Chamonix. That year, he met Townsend on a Salomon-sponsored film trip to Svalbard, Norway, to film skiing under a solar eclipse, and the two became close friends. A few years later, Salén called Townsend to catch up and see how he was doing.

"I may have a job for you," Townsend said. He was still dreaming up the idea for *The Fifty*, but he knew he'd need a full-time filmmaker who could accompany him on some of the toughest ski descents in North America. There was really only one guy for the job.

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SALÉN ADMITS THAT HE'S NOT comfortable in front of the camera—that is, after all, not his job as the person making the movie. But he also knows he wants to show a scene like it is. And if he's part of a team in the mountains, then his voice is a part of that critical decision-making.

"I don't want to be the person who's like, 'I want to be in front of the camera,'" he says. "But I watch ski films and I'm like, that's cool, but there's someone else there worrying the camera. It's that person's job to make that film, but from an audience's perspective, I personally feel it would be really interesting to see behind the scenes to see how you make that."

When he's making a film, Salén spends days, weeks, months getting to know his subjects, opening up lines of communication, building trust. "When you make documentary films, you convert yourself to them," he says. "You're not making the film about yourself; you're making it about others. You have to be on their schedule, their routines. In documentary films, sometimes you have to follow and be invisible. I've practiced that for many years. Being invisible."

But now, with *The Fifty*, he's realizing that making himself visible might be the only way to go. When he and Townsend saw a skier tumble down Central Couloir on British Columbia's Meade Peak, while filming for *The Fifty*, Salén stayed with the severely injured solo skier while Townsend went to call for help. Salén—once someone hidden behind the scenes—essentially became the hero of the episode. ■

