



While staying at a Lutheran retreat center on a trip to Washington's North Cascades, Noah Howell attends his own kind of service. **□ Jim Harris**

## THE GNARCISSIST

Legendary backcountry skier Noah Howell has been cracking jokes in the mountains for decades. These days, he's finding out who he really is—and it isn't always funny.

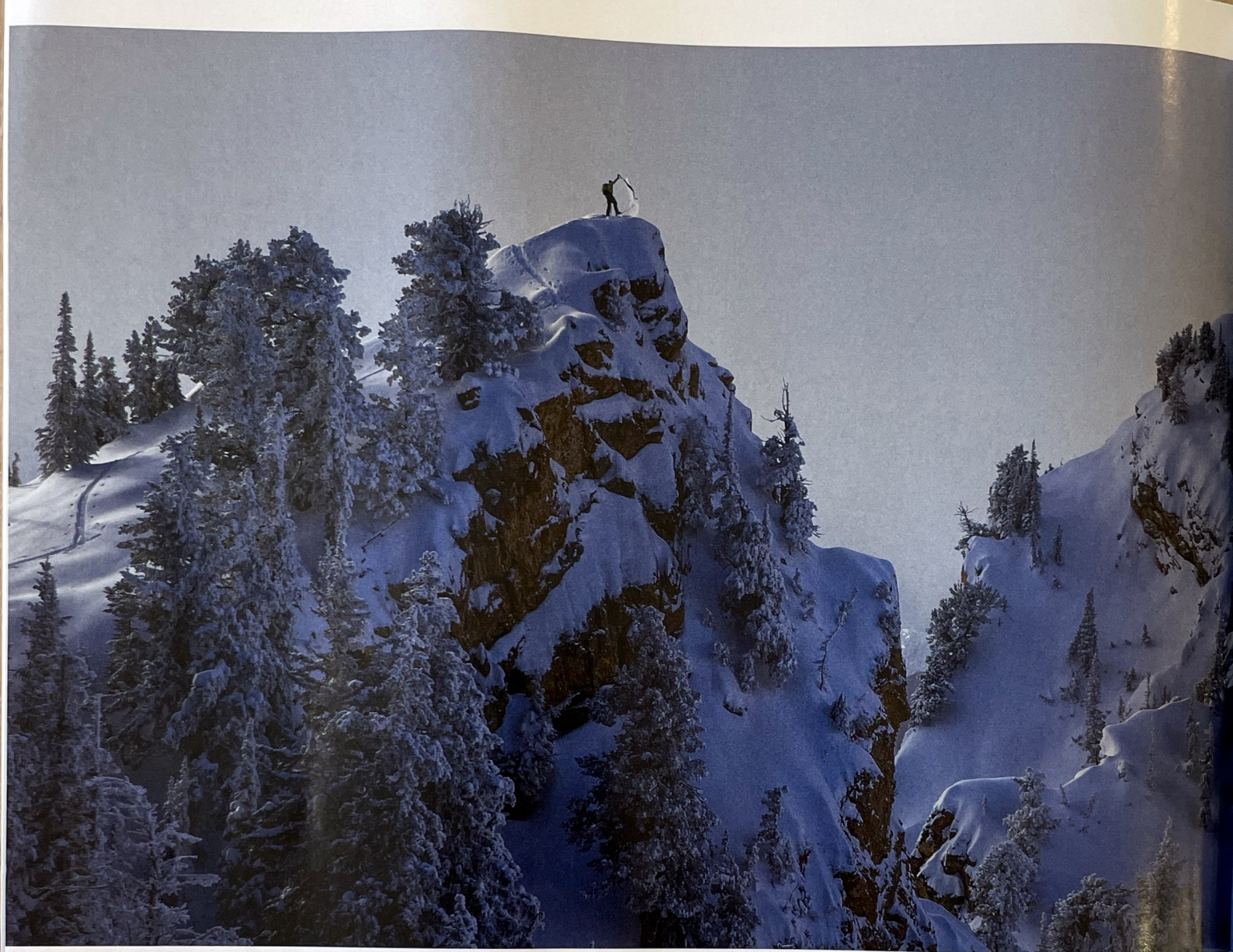
*by Megan Michelson*

Noah Howell was avoiding my calls. “Was hoping you’d found another story idea,” he texted, in jest, when I inquired about setting up a time for this interview. Weeks later, when we still hadn’t scheduled a chat, he wrote, “I could get you Cody’s contact. Do a story folks want to hear.” He was talking about pro skier Cody Townsend. Again, with the jokes.

“You know, you dodging the interview is going to be part of the story now,” I shot back. Besides, I’d already written a Cody Townsend profile. I wanted to write a Noah Howell one—even if my subject was less willing.

Finally, we set a time to talk. Howell texted, “As long as I get to choose the title. The GnarciSSist.” Dang, I thought. That just might work.

If you’re not familiar with his accomplishments, Howell is one of the greatest ski mountaineers of our time. He has the second descent of the Archangel Ridge on Alaska’s 17,400-foot Mt. Foraker and first descents all over the Alaska Range, Wyoming’s Wind River Range and Utah’s Wasatch Range. In 2011, he >>



became the second person to complete all 90 lines in Andrew McLean's 1998 Wasatch classics guidebook, *The Chuting Gallery*, after McLean himself. But Howell will be the last person to tell you any of that.

"He's not out there thumping his chest, proclaiming how badass he is," says Salt Lake City-based photographer Louis Arévalo, a close friend of Howell's. "We're all a little narcissistic, trying to fight that 'me, me, me, I'm the center of the universe.'"

The first time Arévalo shot with Howell was on a fall trail run on Utah's Mt. Raymond with brothers Andy and Jason Dorais. Howell suggested a bend in the trail as a good spot for Arévalo to set up a shot. "It didn't look like much, but I thought, sure, we can do

that," Arévalo says. He set up and hollered to the runners, who were around the corner, to go. When they appeared, all three were stark naked and laughing.

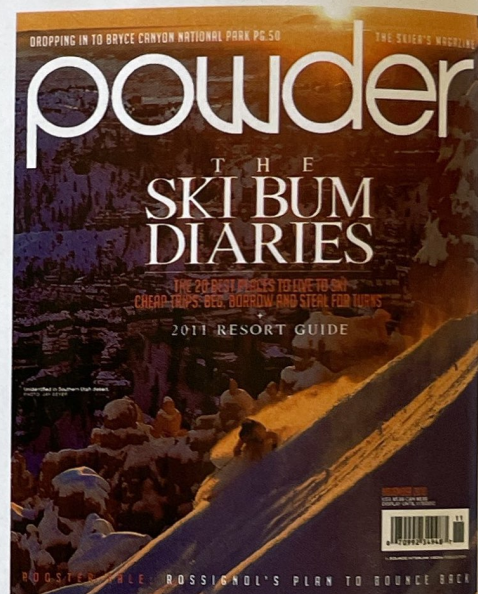
I've known Howell since the 2000s, when he was a telemarker with a camcorder. Howell and his little brother, Jonah, were touring shops with backcountry ski movies dubbed under the regrettable moniker Powderwhore Productions. "Telemarking was seen as this tree-hugging, granola-eating, low-angle sport," McLean recalls. "Noah showed that you could ski steep terrain on telemark gear."

The Howell brothers shuttered Powderwhore in 2015 after a decade of making beloved, low-budget movies. Howell maintained sponsorships from brands like Black

Diamond Equipment, Scarpa and Mountain Hardwear. He lived cheaply—spending years holed up in his brother's basement—and picked up odd jobs, like driving shuttles for a property management company.

For one side gig, which was partly a joke and mostly because he wanted the T-shirts to wear for himself, Howell got a graphic designer to make him spoof T-shirts with slogans like "Alta is for Side Steppers," "Aspen: Keep Skiing Wealthy," or "Vail: Ruining Skiing Since 1962." He sells them online for \$34 each. "I've never been afraid to make a joke, even if it doesn't land," Howell says.

But it turns out, his signature sarcasm and wit are just covers, well-worn disguises for a deep-seated insecurity that's plagued >>



much of his ski career and his personal life. The only person who's stood in Howell's way is Howell himself.

THE SECOND OLDEST of four kids from Salt Lake City, Howell grew up Mormon, but he left partway through his mission at age 19, excommunicating himself from the church. As a kid, he was more into drama and making his friends laugh than athletics. After high school, he discovered skiing and got a job bumping chairs at Deer Valley Resort in Park City. Not long after, he started tromping his way into the backcountry on telemark gear. This was the late '90s, when the Wasatch was still relatively deserted.

Backcountry skiing was the antithesis of everything he detested about society. "I hated the rules, that someone else could tell you what to do," Howell says. "The freedom I felt in the backcountry was different. I loved

the challenges, the consequences. You could go where you wanted to go. This practice of being aware, tuning into yourself, into the mountains, that's what I wanted to be feeling."

In 2006, he went to Alaska's 20,310-foot Denali, his first real expedition, to ski the Orient Express. He called his group Team Whiskey. After summiting, one of his ski partners took a 3,000-foot fall on the descent, which he miraculously survived. "You get away with stuff," Howell says. "You say it's because you weren't prepared."

He feverishly pushed on: a dozen first descents on Baffin Island, expeditions to Patagonia, Svalbard and Antarctica. Escalating his tolerance for risk and suffering, he kept skiing more and more harrowing lines.

"Looking back, I realize I was chasing something I was never going to get," Howell says. "I loved skiing and exploring, but I got hooked on the promotion and the identity of

[Left] Howell decides the top of California's Split Couloir is for the birds, quite literally. The upper portion would require wings due to poor conditions. **Louis Arévalo**

[Right] Tired of skiing in the Wasatch, Howell finds rare powder in the southern Utah desert in this *Powder* magazine cover. **Jay Beyer**

being the skier who does cool stuff. My self-worth was aligned with my skiing." He focused on the gnarliest lines year after exhausting, exhilarating year. "When I'd come back from a trip, it was like I'd fed the beast, but then the beast would get hungry again."

For years, Howell had been quietly ticking away at skiing all the lines in the 2011 book, *Fifty Classic Ski Descents of North America*. He had half in the bag when, in January 2019, Cody Townsend launched his high-profile, »



Photographer Jim Harris says he and Howell went straight from this mission in Antarctica to a cruise ship with waiters serving dinner in cummerbunds. We're sure they fit right in. **Jim Harris**

Looking back now, Howell realizes he was experiencing low-grade depression. "This need for adrenaline was giving me boosts," he says. "I was always planning the next trip. You're not present, you're not creating a balanced life. You're projecting into the future."

Howell started seeing a therapist after his expeditions were canceled due to the pandemic in 2020. He skied only a handful of days that winter. He bought land in a canyon in Utah, accessible only via snowmobile in the winter, and built himself a yurt with a cave-like sauna. He got into psychedelic therapy and spent hours meditating.

"I didn't stop skiing, but I pulled back. That was a huge shift. It wasn't about doing cool things anymore," he says. A therapist told him, "How about you start showing up instead of showing off?"

Now 46, Howell has put skiing the 50 Classics on hold. Instead, he's skiing for himself and having a blast. "It's taken me a couple of years, but I've found the fire for skiing again," he says. "I've had some incredible backcountry days. It's not my top priority. It's a bonus."

He has his first desk job as Flylow's team manager. Simply going for a walk or a bike ride can be enough, he's learning. "If that can't be enough, then I have to ask, 'What's going on?'" he says. "Instead of chasing the external, I need to slow down and ask, 'What's chasing you?'"

He thinks more about his intentions. "I still might go climb a mountain, but what is my motivation?" he says. "I wouldn't change any of this. I love where I'm at now, and I couldn't have gotten here without this path."

His friends have noticed the shift. "Over the years that I've known him, he's ebbed and flowed into darker spaces and been more focused on himself," Arévalo says. "In the last few years, he's let go of that. He's come to this point of 'I'm going to do my thing and not worry about expectations.'"

Maybe it's the breath work and cold showers, or the hallucinogens and therapy, but Howell seems like a different person these days—more sensitive, more aware. "We all walk around with these inner worlds, masks of pretending everything is OK," he says. "Instead, let's start with where we really are, then we can move toward where we want to be."

Still, the jokes inevitably return. At the end of our call, we're back where we started: "So," he says, "is the story called Noah the Narcissist or what?" ❄️

well-supported video project, "The Fifty," to tackle the same lines at a quicker pace. Suddenly, Howell was in a race he never meant to sign up for. "It felt like an affront to my ego," he says. "I didn't want to make it a competition."

This is a guy who came into being an athlete based on his physical achievements, not his ability to promote himself. "Noah was doing things other people weren't doing, all before social media," Arévalo says. "Then you add social media and suddenly, you're comparing yourself to other people and wondering, 'Why am I struggling?'"

Howell spiraled into depressive spells. During summers, he'd be in a dark place without skiing to hold him up. Come winter, he'd feed his beast. In 2019, he sustained a high-altitude pulmonary edema on Denali, the closest he's come to dying on a mountain. "I was behind, trying to keep up," he says. "I wasn't having fun." He was able to ski off the mountain, but it wasn't pretty.