



POWDER NEXUS

When there's nowhere
else in the world you'd
rather be

By Porter Fox



THE STORM IS COMING.

IT HAS BEEN TWO WEEKS SINCE THE LAST ONE. The jet stream drifted north in January, and powder has been hit or miss since. Winter doesn't treat everyone the same. It dealt us an average hand. More than 100 major blizzards will hit America this year. We will get five of them. The base is over 50 inches. Everyone in town has been waiting for the big one, and every indicator says this is it.

I can see the front coming from the west. It started 1,500 miles away in the Gulf of Alaska. It began with a low-pressure system that spun south and east in a long arc. It looked like a psychedelic Frisbee wheeling through the weather radar on TV. The weatherman coaxed it forward with his long, skinny fingers. Every storm that runs the 42nd parallel stalls out in this valley and pukes for days.

I have been here for more winters than I thought I would. I have seen it snow so hard people are afraid to go outside. I have missed first tracks because it took two hours to dig out my car. The snow can get so deep on the hill you have to push yourself down the steepest run. Ten-foot snowbanks on either side of the road, telephone poles that look like tree stumps. If the storm comes in fast, the wind will ruin the powder. You don't want it to leave warm either. Cold and calm is the best. Small flakes, no wind.

The foothills are already getting snow. The frilly bottoms of the clouds drag across them 20 miles away. NOAA says we will get two feet tonight, 10 inches tomorrow, then five inches a day for a week. It's late in the season for the big one. Grass in the valley turned green a week ago. The dark months are lightening up. There's no one in the fancy mountainside condos; the city folks are done for the year. The access road runs past them up the side of the ski hill. The higher you get, the bigger the houses are. There are mansions at the top and modern glass-walled homes above that. Elevation seems to matter to the owners. It is important to be higher and bigger. It is a mystery to the rest of us. It is a child's game. The snow doesn't care. It'll bury them all.

The bars in town are packed the night before the storm. A college kid plays live music at one of them. He sits next to me for a half hour before he goes on stage. He talks about how he cannot stop talking. He says people think he's a prima donna. He is young and on tour for the first time. He's staying with a fraternity brother and is dying to get laid. He starts playing and he is terrific on guitar. But his voice is thin and he bounces up and down like a 4-year-old at a birthday party. I will give him credit for the most insightful line at happy hour: "When you don't know where to go, you go to Applebee's."

I was at Applebee's the night before. It was glorious. All ram-

blers and loiterers. Not a single person I knew. I had the Weather Channel and a dozen wings to myself. The Frisbee flew across the screen. The storm was farther away then, deciding where to go. The weather wizard's fingers brushed it along. Our town was marked by a bubble that read 24 inches.

The kid finishes his act and I head out. I am on a vision quest for the next 72 hours. Every skier in a 50-mile radius is waiting for the white dragon. Nothing else matters. I have chased storms my entire life. I don't have to chase this one. It's coming right at us and I am going to drink \$2 Bud Lights until it gets here.

The skiing life is a life of pleasure. It is important to recognize that. The pursuit, the grind, the payoff—it is all about pleasure. It is a worthy endeavor. It is the most joyful and decadent life you can lead, and skiers must remember that. They must remember that there are people starving in the world. Literally dying because there is no food. This is not a downer. This is reality, and it is vital. There are daughters who disappear. There are people who will take a pound of your flesh because of your bloodline. There is nothing wrong with being a ski bum. Nothing wrong with living in an idyllic mountain town. It is divine—every single day you are on the hill. It is a gift and a privilege. If you take it for granted, you are missing everything.



PHOTO (ABOVE): Ryan Creary
PHOTO (RIGHT): Alessandro Belluscio
PHOTO (PREVIOUS SPREAD): Ryan Creary





PHOTO (BELOW): Steve Ogle

PHOTO (RIGHT): Doug LePage
SKIER: Stu LePage

I RODE THE LIFT WITH A YOUNG KID YESTERDAY.



HE WAS *EIGHTY* YEAR OLD. He said his family was from Pennsylvania. They went snowmobiling all morning. He didn't like snowmobiling. He liked skiing because he could go wherever he wanted. I love this kid. He is my hero. He said he wanted to learn how to ski powder. I asked if he knew the secret. "No," he said.

"Go fast."

That's the beauty of powder skiing. It is the opposite. Your mind wants low-angle, slow, and steady. But steeper and faster make it easier to ski deep snow. We engineered this just a few generations ago. Skiers around the world were flopping around on 10-foot hickory boards, stem-christie-ing with leather boots and bindings, trying to figure it out. Finally a ski instructor at Alta named Dick Durrance did the Dipsy Doodle, stepping through a turn one ski at a time. Then he linked a few together. The technique worked in steep powder and Junior Bounous improved it with the Double Dipsy. Dolores LaChapelle picked up the torch next, pioneering Baldy Chute at Alta with Jim Shane and later showing the boys in Europe how to ski powder.

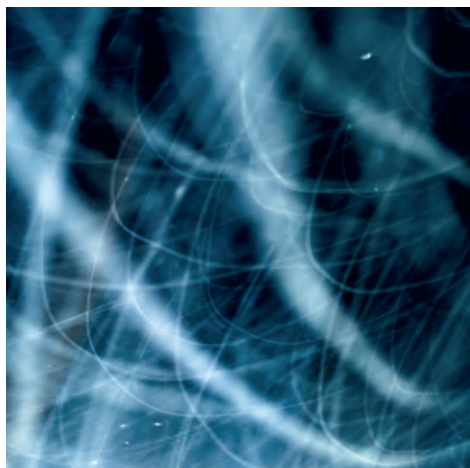
Short, fat Miller Softs arrived in 1972 and everyone headed off-piste. Dick Barrymore's narrated film tours ritualized cold smoke in America and Warren Miller's *Deep and Light* brought it to the mainstream. What they learned was that to float in the ether you have to let reason and caution wash away. You have to commit to the fall line, do the thing your mind tells you not to do, which is to point your skis straight downhill and go fast.

I met LaChapelle once. She was a cagey old woman in her final years. She wasn't happy about having a visitor, but I think my torn-up jacket and greasy jeans disarmed her. We sat in a little alcove by a window and she told me about how things had changed. We both knew that things always change but she also knew that something had been lost. What LaChapelle wrote about was what she found the first day she skied powder:

My experiences with powder snow gave me the first glimmerings of the further possibilities of the mind. Because of a snowfall so heavy that I could not see the steep angle of the slope, I learned to ski powder snow quite suddenly, when I discovered that I was not turning the skis, but that the snow was—or rather the snow and gravity together were turning the skis. I then quit trying to control the skis and turned them over to these forces. Now, to begin a run all I need do is point the skis downhill. As they begin moving, I push down with my heels so that the tips can rise just enough for the snow to lift them. As I feel this lift, I respond as I come up by turning the tips ever so slightly out of the fall line to the right. Immediately I feel the snow turning them and then gravity takes over and finishes the turn. At a certain point in this process, I am totally airborne, but then, as I feel myself being pulled down, I cooperate with gravity and again push down on my heels and feel the snow lift the skis once again. This time I begin to move the skis to the left and once more the snow and gravity finish the turn. Once this rhythmic relationship to snow and gravity is established on a steep slope, there is no longer an "I" and snow and the mountain, but a continuous flowing interaction. I know this flowing process has no boundaries. My actions form a continuum with the actions of the snow and gravity. I cannot tell exactly where my actions end and the snow takes over, or where or when gravity takes over.



PHOTO (BELOW): Reuben Krabbe
PHOTO (RIGHT): Bruno Long
SKIER: Sean Cochrane





THE SNOW STARTS IN EARNEST AT 10 P.M.

THE FIRST FLAKES LOOK LIKE DIAMOND CHIPS. They sparkle in the light of the streetlamp as they fall. A mile overhead, water vapor freezes onto suspended dust particles. Hydrogen-bonded crystals take shape as prisms with six sides, a top, and a bottom. Snow itself is classified as a mineral because it is composed inorganically with an ordered atomic arrangement. Because ice grows faster at the edges of the prism, a depression forms in each face and six branches grow from the corners. As the flakes fall to the ground, more water vapor freezes to the surface and the flakes grow.

The thermometer reads 22 degrees Fahrenheit and the flakes are still small. The frat singer is a distant memory. I'm at the real bar in town now. The one with cobwebs in the rafters and people wearing rooster hats. Groups of skiers chat at lacquered pine tables. There's a lot to talk about. Whether the first day of the storm will be the best or if it will take two days to cover the boilerplate on the hill. The final days will be the deepest, so you have to conserve leg strength and sick days.

Draft-beer handles dangle from the ceiling. Black-and-white photos of loggers, a speedboat on a lake, a man and a woman digging out of a storm hang behind the bar. The images are reminders of the past. The best winters were always back then. No matter how much it snows, the old-timers always saw it deeper. The myth has proven true recently—thanks to a few dozen billionaires who are performing a chemistry experiment on the atmosphere.

Things were simpler in the old days. There were fewer people, fewer lifts. There was one café. You could order steak or chicken. Every restaurant served French fries three meals a day. Italian was another continent. “There is no more skiing,” LaChapelle told me the day we met. I believed her, at least the uncrowded, non-commercialized skiing she knew.

I remember sitting at a pizza parlor during an epic storm. It was the mid-90s, and it felt like

every day was a powder day. Our friends worked there and every other beer was free. There was a hole in the wall where they slid the pizza through. It never made it to a table before it was half gone. I don't know if I ever bought a pizza there. I must have eaten 20.

The pool table was the center of action. We stacked dollar bills on the rail and played three-ball for hours. One night things got rowdy. Beers flew; dollar bills flew. Then someone looked outside and said, “It's snowing!” Half the room went to the window to see how fast it was coming down. I still have never seen anything like it. The flakes were the size of silver dollars. They fell so fast my truck was covered in 10 minutes. One by one, without saying goodbye, people left. It was my first season out West, and I was still figuring out how things worked. I ordered more beers, threw dollar bills on the pool table. I wanted to keep playing, but when I looked around again only a handful of my friends were still there. My roommate handed me my jacket. The next morning at 6 a.m. the whole crew stood on the tram dock, bagels in pockets, coffees in hand.

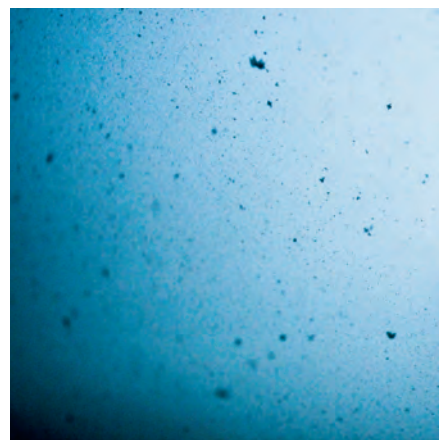


PHOTO (ABOVE): Bruno Long

PHOTO (RIGHT): Scott Markewitz
SKIER: Mark Abma





I CAN'T SLEEP.

TOO MUCH BUD LIGHT. Frisbees fly through my dreams. The snow is coming down in sheets, not flakes, a solid white veil, falling and falling from the sky to the earth. It falls at a 45-degree angle. Then the wind stops and the flakes float in circles. They make double helixes around each other.

I make coffee at 7 a.m., put my boots by the heater, pack the car. I melt blue wax on my bases in the basement, spread it with an iron, then scrape it off. No need for edges today. I throw everything in the back of the car and head out.

The lifts won't open for 30 minutes and there are already 200 people in line. An old guy wearing a one-piece and racing boots is first. I don't know his name but I recognize him. He's always first on a powder day. First tracks are another beast. It's beyond flying. It's like walking into a forest with no trail or driving a car onto a frozen lake. It is transcendental, no matter where you are. First tracks at Mad River Glen in Vermont make General Stark Mountain seem three times bigger than it is. First tracks in the Alps can be overwhelming, with so many ways down. I got first tracks in New York City once. I woke up early after a 24-inch storm and drove my pickup truck down Madison Avenue. The roads had not been plowed. A state of emergency had been declared. I drove 40 mph down the middle of the street, past the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center, snow billowing over the windshield.

The lifts finally open, and we shuffle through the maze. When I finally get a chair, the old man is already skiing down. He disappears at the bottom of each turn. His body and head are white, caked with snow. His style is smooth, like a wave rolling over the sea. He is expending zero effort, just rippling with the mountain. Behind him a pack of college kids race under the lift. They look serious. I can see them grimacing, forcing a perfect turn, working on their form, glancing at the lift to see who is watching. They are performing; they are not yet enlightened. They will be some day if they stick with it. They will stop worrying so much.

Skiers in the old days had less ego and vanity. They leaned back, swung their arms to the side, and swept up the snow with big bushy beards. They smiled when they skied. They were gleeful, ecstatic. They were touching the ether, living beyond their means. Skiers today make it look like something is at stake. Modern skiing is a competition. How much vert did you ski? How many trams? Were you first? Second? Skiers should want to fall. That is how you learn and experience. It doesn't hurt to fall, especially in three feet of fluff.

We get off the lift at the summit and scatter. Everyone knows their run. I branch off to the right to a line in the trees. They are my trees, a forgotten pocket between two trails. At least three feet drifted in there. I follow someone's track off the summit, gain speed, then dive into the woods. I'm not even close to touching the base. I can't feel my edges, can't feel the bottom. The trees are tight at first and I have to force two turns to get through a notch. Then there is an opening. My instinct is to throw my skis sideways and slow down, but I know what to do. Tips downhill, chest square to the fall line. Gravity swirls around me. There are more openings below and I gently lean toward them. Eventually, there are no trees. There is no mountain and no snow. No other skiers or lifts or base lodge. There is only the force tugging at me. My skis rise over a rollover and break into an open field. Powder swoops over my chest and head. I can't see anything. I can't feel anything, so I submit and let the mountain pull me down. *

PHOTO: Cam McLeod
SKIER: Chris Cardello