

FOUR FACES OF SKIING

It takes a cast of characters to make an industry interesting. Meet Eddie the Eagle, Rudi Gertsch, Michael “Pops” Stockton and Mélanie Turgeon.

EDDIE THE EAGLE:

Jolly Jumper

BY MONICA ANDREEFF



Even with his feet planted firmly on the ground, “Eddie the Eagle” soars. An expert skier who is, well, infamous for his ski jumping exploits during the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, “Eddie” is cranking out high-speed, edge-arc-ing turns in Banff. And this skier can carve.

It may have been the Olympics that brought “Eddie the Eagle” his fame, but it’s Alberta’s dry snow that will keep him coming back. “The snow is fantastic, it’s light and there’s lots of it,” says the 44-year-old.

He first won the hearts of thousands of spectators and volunteers at the Olympics as the British jumper who was willing to risk the ignominy of last place for the thrill of

being in the biggest show on Earth. When high winds delayed his event for days during the Olympics, he drove out to the jump at Norquay for a little training on the side. Apparently he needed the practice. Ultimately, he finished next to last after a French skier broke his leg.

Michael Edwards of Cheltenham, England, first ventured out on a plastic or “dry” ski slope at the age of 13. Soon he was jumping over everything in sight—friends, cars, anything—and “skiing took over my life.” He spent his late teens in the Italian Alps honing his big-mountain skills while working as a ski technician at a private school and pursuing a dream to compete in the Olympics. He skied for Britain in the 1980s at the national team development level, but with no significant financial sponsor in sight and enormous expenses to travel and enter races around the world, Edwards took the less expensive route to glory through ski jumping. It was also something he could practice at home.

In February, at Calgary’s 20th-anniversary celebrations of the Olympic Winter Games, the “lovable loser” legend grew. Revisiting the scene of his greatest fame, Edwards is the consummate populist athlete, posing for hundreds of photos and signing everything that came his way. And that includes the helmets of kids who weren’t even born when he first arrived at the airport in 1988, with bottle-thick glasses and a suitcase that had spilled its contents all over the luggage carousel.

“I thought that the friendliness and the parties were just because it was the Olympics, but here we are again 20 years later and the people are just the same, so happy and proud,” he says.

After days of media interviews, a thrilling zipline descent at Canada Olympic Park, toting a ceremonial white cowboy hat from the Calgary mayor and a new ski suit, Edwards took a long-delayed road trip through the Banff and Jasper national parks, something he’s never had the chance to do. A life-long thrill seeker, he went dogsledding, donned crampons for a walk through an ice canyon, speed-hiked the trails around Lake Louise and downhill skied, even signing up for a team slalom race in Jasper where he finished a respectful 19th in a field of 140 locals.

“I would rather ski somewhere like Jasper, Sunshine Village or Norquay than anywhere in Italy, France or Germany,” says the father of two girls under four. “It’s the atmosphere of the friendly little towns and the picturesqueness. It’s not a concrete jungle like they have in France with the purpose-built resorts. There’s something for everyone here, nice little slopes for beginners, challenging black-diamond runs, steeps, moguls and tree-skiing. And the ski lessons are in English!”

Edwards completed law school but works as a builder and plasterer these days, with three home projects in development. Nearly everyone calls him “Eddie” except for his mum and dad and occasionally, when he’s in marital hot water, his wife, Samantha.

A chance on-slope meeting with Crazy Canuck Ken Read gave Edwards the opportunity to get his own souvenir photo taken and have a quick run with one of his boyhood heroes. He aggressively followed him down the mountain at high speed when Read slid to a whirling stop and turned to ask, “So you think I can still turn okay for an old guy?”

In the timber-framed lodge for a coffee

break, Edwards graciously poses for more photos with young ski racers and chats with admirers. All anyone can talk about was what an inspiration he has been for athletes, and seemingly continues to be.

"Who do you think will play me in the movie, Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise?" he asks later, with a self-deprecating grin. But in reality an "Eddie the Eagle" film with HBO is in the works. It's supposed to be the quintessential

story of dreams coming true—and after all, isn't that what the Olympics are supposed to be about?

As for the jumping stunts, Edwards secretly hopes film producers pick him. They need a daredevil type who has never flung himself off a mammoth ski jump and, since he's rusty these days, he would be perfect. "I've had a few falls in my time, so that can be one of the times I go off to the hospital."



RUDI GERTSCH:

Frequent Flyer BY PAUL CUNNIUS

It's another gorgeous day in the pristine snowy Purcell Mountains and one heli-ski mountain guide in particular is smiling. Rudi Gertsch makes some final notes in his logbook before leading his group down the untouched snowfields. Today, like any other day, there is nowhere else he'd rather be.

In addition to guiding groups almost daily, Rudi is also the founder and owner of Purcell Helicopter Skiing based out of Golden, B.C. From a childhood upbringing entrenched in ski and mountaineering history to the realization of a modern heli-ski operation, Rudi Gertsch is regarded by many as a heli-ski legend and pioneer.

Skiing and mountain guiding are in Rudi's blood and heritage. Growing up in a skiing family in the Swiss mountain village of Wengen, he was introduced to guiding at an early age by his father, Oskar, who ran the ski school for many years in Wengen and was also

a guide. Wengen, of course, is home to the famous Lauberhorn World Cup race, where as a child Rudi remembers offering to help carry racers' skis up to the train station. Afterwards it was common to help set a practice course and try to follow the racers down. "This was coaching at a level very few kids ever had," said Rudi. In his teens, he was able to race the Lauberhorn, albeit with a start number somewhere around 165.

After receiving his instructor and mountain guide certificate, Rudi decided to take a year off to travel and wound up in Canada in 1966. Upon arriving in Banff in the summer, he met Hans Gmoser, founder of Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH). Hans had just returned from a climbing trip and his next trip had more guests than planned so Rudi was hired that same day.

That summer was spent guiding in the climbing school for Hans. In August they went

to the Bugaboos, and one night Hans told him about wanting to build a hut for heli-ski trips and asked Rudi if he would stay on for the winter. Rudi smiles, "Heli-skiing sounded like more fun than selling snowplow turns," so he stayed—and 40 years later he's still in the mountains.

For eight years Rudi worked with CMH, both summer and winter, spending time in the Bugaboos, Cariboos and Monashees. "Opening up these new heli-ski areas was definitely very interesting, very challenging," said Rudi. These early pioneers were opening up new mountain terrain and literally writing the book on heli-skiing.

Guiding during that era meant being away from home a lot. It was not unusual to spend a whole winter season up in the mountains with no days off. He started having thoughts of settling down and starting a family. "I was looking for a place where we could heli-ski and stay in town at night so I could be at home," said Rudi about his move to Golden.

At the time, daily heli-skiing didn't exist, so Rudi became the first to offer it. Still living in Banff, he would personally drive the bus with guests from Banff to Golden, guide them for the day and drive the guests back late afternoon to the Banff Springs Hotel. During the drive in the morning he would provide the safety talk, and on the way back he would teach everyone how to yodel.

After a few years, Purcell Helicopter Skiing began offering three- and five-day trips in addition to the day heli-skiing. A couple of years later he moved to Golden and has remained there ever since.

When asked how it feels to be regarded as a legend in the heli-ski industry, Rudi humbly replied, "There's nothing like being at the right place at the right time," and quickly credited Hans Gmoser for starting "all of this."

When starting out as a young guide, there were no books to read on where to go; he figured it out as he went. This was the last frontier. As Purcell got busier, it began running guiding courses at higher standards so the guides would be recognized internationally. Within the heli-ski industry, an association was formed so that all operators would meet the highest standards and new ones could benefit from the group's knowledge.

And just as his father passed along his love of the mountains to him early on in Switzerland, Rudi has further passed his passion on to his son, Jeff. Together the two

MICHAEL STOCKTON: Louise's Pops

BY RYAN STUART

of them work side-by-side. "It's nice to be able to share the same kind of love for what you are doing," said Jeff when asked what it's like working with his father. Together they conspire daily to avoid the office and be on skis in the field.

When I asked Rudi what the future holds, he laughed. "Jeff told me that as long as they can lift me out of the helicopter and put me on a pair of skis I should be okay." Just spend a few moments with Rudi and one can't help but feel his enthusiasm, love and passion for what he does. "A little air is good; big air is even better!" Here's to big air.

MÉLANIE TURGEON: Upwardly Mobile

BY MARIE-PIERE BELISLE-KENNEDY

Some people do crossword puzzles when they retire, others climb the Himalayas. Needless to say, former World Cup ski racer Mélanie Turgeon was looking for a new challenge after hanging up her skin-tight suit in 2005 and being inducted in the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame last spring. *Ski Canada* caught up with her in Tremblant and discovered this racehorse is not done inspiring others just yet.

SC: What gave you this crazy idea to go hiking to almost 6,000 metres last October?

MT: A friend of Jacko Gratton [ski racing coach with the Tremblant Ski Club] was organizing this trekking adventure to Nepal. In June he mentioned they were short one person so [after Kilimanjaro] I decided it was meant to be. I never had the time before to do these kinds of things.

SC: Was your team sponsored or were you affiliated with a charity?

MT: Not at all, this was for my own pleasure. I've done a lot of volunteer work, but this time I finally said, "Mel, you've got the time, go for it, make it your personal

Ask any long-time Lake Louise skier and they'll remember Pops, a.k.a. Michael Stockton. For two years in the early '90s, Pops's goatee-clad face, witty comments and faux Men At Work sign greeted the devoted at the Lake's Ptarmigan chairlift. Somehow, even when it was -40, he not only loaded lifts with a smile on his face, but he managed to put one on everyone else's. He put a name and a personality to a predominantly faceless vocation and the result is a legacy few former liftees can claim. Though his goatee has more salt and his eyes a few more crinkles, Pops is still recognized by veteran Lake skiers on a daily basis.

"Pops's loud voice and great attitude with the public make him memorable," says his boss, Michael Fraser. "For the long-time skiers, it's nice to know that when they come here they're going to recognize someone. It adds some continuity."

While Pops is now a Lake-lifer, it took him a while to find his calling. He grew up in southern Alberta, skiing at Westcastle, now known as Castle Mountain, and Fernie. After four years of university in London, Ontario—"I couldn't wait to get back," he says—he bounced around Alberta, managing a men's-wear store and then a hair-care wholesale company through his 20s. He skied as much as he could, often skipping work to poach midweek powder.

By 1992, Pops was sick of managing and hungry for some sun. He got a landscaping job for the summer. When September rolled around, he still didn't know what he was going to do when the ground froze. One weekend he drove through Lake Louise on the way to a weekend of hiking. He stopped in for an interview and was hired as a 34-year-old liftee.

"I thought I would do it for a year or two and get skiing out of my system," he laughs. He moved into one of the staff accommodations, where he was by far the oldest person. "They thought I was going to be an old grumpy guy and they wouldn't have any fun," he says. He changed their perceptions quickly and earned himself the nickname Pops for his over-the-hill, ski-bum age.

So he had his nickname, which became his only name soon after, thanks to his sign. He'd seen a guy



working with a Men At Work sign changed to Dan At Work. "I thought it was a really cool idea." So Pops made a Pops At Work sign. He'd prop it up on the in-run to whatever lift he worked, usually Ptarmigan on the Lake's backside.

"The sign made him more approachable and it told people that he was in charge," Fraser says. "People knew Pops's lift was the best one to go to." Fraser adds that Pops was the best liftee he's ever had and one of the best employees. He earned 40 excellence cards in one year, the second-most ever.

He put in another year on the lift before being promoted in the 1995-96 season to assistant lift foreman, ski-hill speak for second-in-charge of parking lots, lifts and on-hill services. Pops faded from the public view, but didn't disappear. In summer he still loads lifts, and on busy winter days he's often spotted teaching skiers in lift lines how to alternate or road-raged drivers how to park in straight lines—always with a laugh and a funny comment. He still works with the same keen enthusiasm and his Pops At Work sign.

"My dad was always jovial," is how he explains his constant positive mood. "I'm a people person. I like the interaction. And this lifestyle and job is so excellent. There's so much variety it's hard not to be in a good mood. And there's lots of perks. The skiing is definitely part of what keeps me around." When he's not landing heli-ski flights, he spends a good portion of his working day sliding around the mountain. He figures he skis 80 to 100 days a year—and is paid to do it.

"I live and work in the most beautiful place on Earth," he says, smiling even wider. "You can't beat that."

cause before life takes you on another course." So I went for it and started to prepare all summer.

SC: Any problems with your old injuries?

MT: Not too bad. Coming down was the worst for my beat-up knee though. Thankfully

it flared up only near the end of the trip.

SC: How far did you go?

MT: Our ultimate goal was to climb Ama Dablam at 6,800 metres. First we started out with a week of trekking to get used to the climate and warm up, and then our first

peak was Gokio Ri at 5,357. We moved on to Ama Dablam base camp at 4,600. We couldn't reach the summit since there was too much snow. The Sherpas and guides advised us to turn back, and we also witnessed avalanches near us, so the danger was very real. We made it all the way to 5,800 metres, while three teammates made it to 6,000.

SC: Which part was the most challenging for you?

MT: The altitude was really hard on me. I got to Camp 1 at 5,800 metres and got hit with altitude sickness. After taking in some oxygen, I came back down to base camp. I was fine within the hour. Although I skied all over the world on high peaks and never had a problem, this time the mountain had the final word.

SC: I heard you had a special 32nd birthday celebration on the trip.

MT: Picture getting your own cake prepared at 5,200 metres in the small village of Gora Shep. I don't know how they baked it with their rudimentary stoves and carriers, but I can tell you this, it was the best birthday cake of my life, and we even had a little drink that night! The next morning we climbed Kala Pattar (5,545) for a beautiful view of Everest.



SC: What were the breathtaking moments for you?

MT: The sunrise in Gokyo Valley was unbelievably beautiful. Once at the summit, we saw six sacred lakes and met fascinating people, so that was a life-changing experience. When you're going through a major transition in your career, you need moments to get away, to live new experiences, which make it easier to reorient your path after that. Now I'm filled with renewed energy. I would love to climb in Argentina, Ecuador, Peru... I have discovered a new passion, to climb uphill instead of racing downhill.

SC: A trip like this must teach you a lot about yourself and about life.

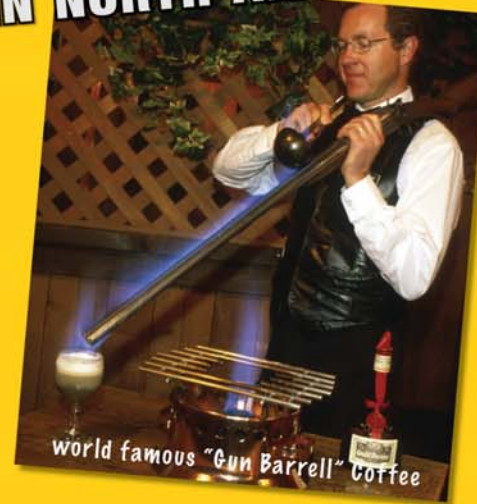
MT: I learned I could get up every day at 6:00 a.m. and be happy. I may not talk much for the first half hour, but that's okay! We really have nothing to complain about over here. We witnessed such poverty; some places just got electricity a year ago. I've learned to appreciate each moment and put my energy in the right place. Sometimes you have to step back, even turn around, to find something even better waiting around the corner. On the trail, I recall this perfect moment in time enjoying tea and cookies brought to us by the Sherpa all the way from base camp, admiring the nicest sunset followed by a starry sky with a full moon; the mountain had said no that day and you learn not to fight the mountain. So one step at a time you learn to enjoy life, without having to go full throttle at 100 miles an hour like I've done all my life.

SC: Any new projects on the go?

MT: I was the ambassador for the 24 Hours ski event at Tremblant to raise funds for children's charities. I work at Radio-Canada as a ski-racing commentator, and I'm coaching part-time for the Tremblant Ski Club and assist with the Quebec women's ski team. I'm glad I get to still work alongside my long-time coach, Piotr. On the home front, I'm building my dream log home in Tremblant, so I will finally be surrounded by my brother, Seb, and my dad in nearby St-Faustin. ❄️



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