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MOVIE REVIEW

'Steep' (an extreme skiing history) -- 3 1/2 stars

'Steep' shares the spills and the thrills

By Scott Schueller

Tribune staff reporter

Few documentaries are able to isolate their purpose from an audience's craving for human interest stories. There always seems to be a character who leaves the lasting impression, rather than the film's subject matter. "Steep" is one of those rare endeavors able to touch on the human condition without neglecting the film's true star: big-mountain skiing.

Unless you are a fan of that endeavor or a similar extreme activity, the characters and their belief that cheating death is the only way to feel alive may be completely unrelatable. To director Mark D. Obenhaus' credit, this hazardous code becomes a highlight of the film; their blank faces and emotionless responses to the deaths of friends evidence this is a different breed. In fact, the most sobering reminder of this is delivered post-mortem by one of the central characters as he talks about death as an acceptable consequence of his way of life. Still, the participants command admiration and ooze inspiration.

Obenhaus bombards you with adrenaline-filled images of amazing feats, contrasted by the casual commentary on the death-defying visual. The characters' chronological introductions explain the evolution of big-mountain-skiing, the American history of which begins in 1971 with pioneer Bill Briggs, who became the first to ski the Grand Tetons, while the ski mercenaries of the French mountain region of Chamonix tested the limits halfway around the world. The sport's evolution from hiking to the peaks to heli-skiing mimics the enthusiasts' pursuit from 40-degree slopes in its infancy to the 55-degree variety the skiers seek today.

Obenhaus mixes archival footage with marvelous shots of his supporting characters zigzagging across his extreme-skiing canvas. Some of the images are technical marvels, shot from helicopters, aside cliffs and from the depths of mountain passes. Obenhaus and cinematographer Erich Roland have a flair worthy of an art film, and the stomach-dropping runs, jumps and spills pace the movie well between the historical markers.

For a niche movie, "Steep" is certain to appeal to the extreme sport enthusiast, but it also deserves a mass audience for its incredible imagery and window into a lifestyle most can't fathom; it's nearly impossible to walk away without a new motivation to find what can make you feel the way these characters do.

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MPAA rating: PG (for extreme sports and brief language).

Running time: 1:31.

Opening: Jan. 25 at the Music Box Theatre.

Written and directed by: Mark D. Obenhaus; photographed by Erich Roland; edited by Peter R. Livingston Jr. and Chris A. Peterson; music by Victor Magro and Anton Sanko; produced by Tom Yellin, Obenhaus and Bill Kerig. A Sony Pictures Classics release.

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