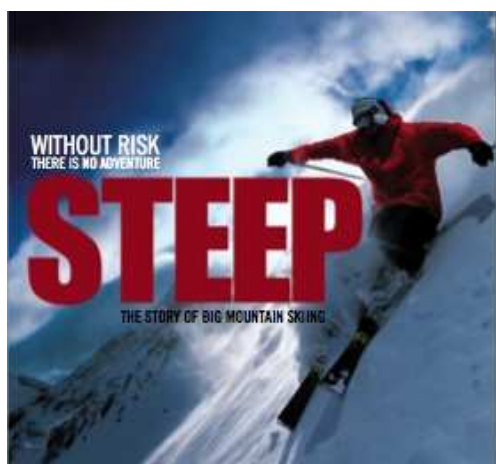


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QUESTIONS FOR KAYCE JENNINGS (PETER'S WIDOW) ON HER NEW SKI FILM, *STEEP*, AND WHY GLEN PLAKE'S HAIR IS STILL THE BIGGEST PRODUCTION OF ALL

BY TIM NEVILLE



The AMC Village VII Theater in Tribeca was a packed house April 28, when The Documentary Group, the film crew of the late Peter Jennings, screened the premiere of *Steep: The Story of Big Mountain Skiing*. The film cost millions to make (producers aren't yet sure just how many millions) and includes stunning footage made possible by incredibly complex rigging techniques never seen before in ski movies. A far cry from hair-on-fire ski porn, *Steep* takes an ABC News-like perspective to bring the sport and athletes

to a decidedly non-skiing audience. Peppered throughout are interviews with old-schoolers like Bill Briggs, the first to ski the Grand Teton, as well as young ripper-snappers like Chris Davenport, Ingrid Backstrom, and Shane McConkey. The star, whose story carried the film, however, was the one who wasn't there, Doug Coombs, who died last year skiing in La Grave, France, just 18 days after the crew captured him on film. TIM NEVILLE spoke with producers Kayce Jennings, Jordan Kronick, and Gabrielle Tenenbaum, about the challenges of bringing a steady documentary eye to a sport as unpredictable as big mountain skiing. If all goes well, *Steep* will be in theaters this fall.

Those Responsible: The Documentary Group, a group of filmmakers who worked closely with Peter Jennings before he died, has made movies on heavy topics like the Iraq War and AIDS. Now skiing. How did the group get the idea to tackle a subject like that?

Kayce Jennings: First, we're all skiers. But Bill Kerig, a former professional skier and filmmaker, came to Tom Yellin, an executive producer, with this idea of making a movie about big mountain skiers and what makes them tick. We started looking into it and in early 2005 or so Bill and Tom and a couple of others all sat down with my husband to convince him that this was something we ought to do and that Peter should attach his name to it. It wasn't a hard sell but Peter approached this like he did with everything: He made you work to really

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understand why you were doing it. Once we had a fairly good idea of how we wanted this to go, he became very excited about it. But a lot happened almost immediately to set us back.

TR: What do you mean?

KJ: We went to Chamonix in March 2005 to begin filming and right off the bat we had our first tragedy. Our guide Stéphane Fanfan Dan fell into a crevasse and broke his back. He's fine now, but that was hugely frightening for all of us. Suddenly we were thinking, 'What have we done? What are we doing? Do we want to do this?' Then when we got back, and within two weeks if not less, Peter was diagnosed with [lung] cancer.

TR: And then Doug Coombs died just days after filming. What effect did that have on the storyline?

KJ: That happened toward the end of filming the movie and for the people who got to know Doug it was very painful; they'd lost a friend. On the other hand, as a storyteller and a documentary filmmaker, one realizes that death is very much a part of the story of big mountain skiing. All the skiers talk about it, all the skiers acknowledge it. You have a sense that even as they see this happening to their friends they somehow figure it won't happen to them. Yet they also acknowledge that it might. So that would have had to be part of the story regardless. One of the big things we try to do in the movie is to show the human side of the sport, the characters, and how they are compelled to do what they do despite the danger. Even if you don't ski you can feel that passion. It's infectious. You begin to feel what they're feeling even if you don't understand it.

TR: Clearly you had to go to Chamonix to start the story. Where else did you go?

Gabrielle Tenenbaum: We wanted to do a lot of filming with folks in the off season because a lot of times you can't see a person's face to see who's skiing, and we really wanted you to get to know the characters. So we went water skiing with Glen Plake in Reno and BASE jumping with Shane McConkey in Twin Falls, Idaho. We went rock climbing with Doug Coombs near Jackson and mountain unicycling with Andrew McLean in Utah, (but that unfortunately didn't make it into the movie). We flew Andrew to Iceland where an avalanche nearly took him out along with two buddies.

TR: What about ski footage?

GT: We shot in Chamonix, La Grave, Bella Coola, Whistler, Alaska. And then we got quite a bit of footage from Matchstick Productions as they had archival footage of a lot of the skiers we were using. Some of the most beautiful footage of Doug Coombs came from Mike Hatchett of Standard Films.

TR: Chris Davenport said you spent days rigging cables across mountains that allowed a camera to spin and float right in front of skiers as they came down a line. How'd that work?

Jordan Kronick: There's a company that does rigging for sporting events (like football games) and we used them in Bella Coola. They took helicopters to erect two towers on opposing ridgelines. Everything had to be flown in. They then strung cable between the towers and installed all sorts of anchors and spools and electronics. The camera can then travel along that cable as well as up and down. In the end the cables spanned probably 2,000 feet. You had a guy controlling the camera angles with a pair of joysticks, another making sure the remote controls worked properly, another to make sure the camera stayed in focus, and then another to make sure you didn't send the camera into a tree or the ground. It took us eight days before we could get the first shot.

TR: And the weather cooperated?

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~~...and the weather cooperated.~~

JK: I think I can fairly say for all of us that we didn't anticipate how frustrating it would be. If you have a cloudy day, you're down. If you have a sunny day but it's windy, you're down. If you have a sunny day, no wind, but avalanche conditions are bad, you're down. Of the 21 days we were in Bella Coola we could only fly into the high alpine for four. That gave us just enough time to rig and quickly get a couple of shots off in the Mad Dog couloir. But we did end up getting our signature shot with the film's signature character—Coombs—skiing through the trees. So from that perspective it was a success.

TR: Any disappointments?

JK: We didn't get to see Glen Plake put up his mohawk. Apparently it's a production that involves an ironing board and wax.

Tim Neville is a freelance writer based in Bend, Oregon.

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