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'Steep' skiing far cry from Aspen; critics narrow race

By Martin A. Grove

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"Steep" slopes: Just as half of Hollywood is preparing to spend the holidays skiing in Aspen, there's a terrific new film opening that presents a side of skiing most people never have or will experience.

"Steep," a documentary about "extreme skiing," unveils a death-defying version of the sport that's nothing like what people encounter while vacationing in places like Aspen. Indeed, not everyone comes back who goes out on "Steep's" remote and highly dangerous slopes. The closest most people will ever come to this kind of skiing is seeing the dazzling images that writer-director Mark Obenhaus and his team have put on the screen in "Steep."

Opening Dec. 21 in New York, L.A. and about 15 other markets via Sony Pictures Classics, which picked it up after its premiere last April at the Tribeca Film Festival, "Steep" will widen to about 20 more markets Dec. 25. It will continue expanding through next March. The film was executive produced by Obenhaus and Tom Yellin and produced by Gabrielle Tenenbaum and Jordan Kronick.

Obenhaus has been associated with ABC News since 1991 when he joined the network as senior producer of the primetime magazine show "Day One." Over the years he's worked on numerous ABC documentaries and news programs, including as senior producer of the twelve-hour 1998 series "The Century" with Peter Jennings and as producer of two primetime hours for the 2002 series "In Search of America." In 2003 he executive produced, directed and wrote the two-hour ABC-BBC co-production "The Kennedy Assassination: Beyond Conspiracy" and in 2005

was executive producer, director and writer of the two-hour primetime special "UFOs: Seeing Is Believing" with Peter Jennings.

The film is dedicated to Jennings, who embraced the idea of making "Steep," which got under way in March 2005, a month before he was diagnosed with lung cancer. Jennings died that September. High Ground Prods., the film's production company, is a subsidiary of The Documentary Group, the successor company to Peter Jennings Prods., and is headed by Tom Yellin. Jennings and Yellin formed Peter Jennings Prods. in 2002 to produce the series "Peter Jennings Reporting" and to make documentary projects for television or theatrical release.



An early look at "Steep" left me marveling at its ski footage and I was happy to have an opportunity to talk to Obenhaus about how the movie got made. "It's been a long process," he told

me. "We've been working at it for more than two and a half years now. It started with an idea that there was a film to be made on skiing. It was a very, very broad idea that was presented to us by a fellow named Bill Kerig. This is when Peter Jennings was still alive. He responded to the idea in principal of doing a film about skiing being a skier (himself) and interested in it. He thought there were multiple potential story lines in it.

"I got involved after an initial shoot took place which didn't go very well for a whole host of reasons. My focus was to narrow the ambitions of the film - - the scale of the film in terms of its narrative. The previous concept was really a much broader history of all skiing from the Vikings to the present or whatever and it was too big. I make documentary films and try to always at the onset narrow the focus and find the narrative and a set of characters in a bigger story, perhaps. And that's what we did. It didn't take long to determine that something interesting had begun to change the sport of skiing back around 1970 in that a cast of characters, some of whom are in our film, started to think about taking skiing out into the wild and into the world and using it to explore, basically. That idea was not shared by very many people here in the States, but a few more in Europe, particularly around Chamonix (in France)."

What Obenhaus realized, he continued, was "that there was a narrative

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found this cast, some of whom are just essential to the storylines and some of whom are people who are emblematic of others. Particularly in the movie skiing section there are quite a few really remarkable young skiers, but there is only one Bill Briggs, who was the first guy to climb and ski down the Grand Teton and he did it with a surgically fused hip. And then there's a character like Doug Coombs, who because of his age really spanned this entire narrative that I was trying to tell. He was 14 when Bill climbed and skied the Grand and he (Coombs) died just right after one of our filming sessions in La Grave, France. He really was the one responsible for discovering Alaska as a ski place where you could really challenge yourself.

"I think the moment when we really knew there was a film to be made here was when I was in Jackson Hole with the two producers I worked with, Jordan Kronick and Gabrielle Tenenbaum, and we met Bill Briggs in the morning and spent the afternoon with Doug Coombs. It just was very clear that these people were the kind of people we could make a film about."

The skiing footage we see in "Steep" is positively breathtaking. "I want to give some credit to the people who came before us," Obenhaus noted when I asked how he managed to film these scenes. "There's some wonderful archival material in the film, as well, and some of it is quite spectacular -- particularly the Italian skier Stefano De Benedetti's contribution to the film. We used a film that was made about his descent of a portion of the Mont Blanc Massif, which has not been skied again since then.

"We took skiing photography very seriously. We were pretty ambitious. For example, we brought this Cablecam technology, which is normally used in football stadiums. It's the camera that you see kind of roving around above the huddle. We brought the Cablecam system into this area of British Columbia around a town called Bella Coola. It's very difficult because you have to rig these things. In a football stadium you use big trusses and towers and we had to helicopter all this stuff in to the mountain. So we set some ambitious visual goals for ourselves and brought that kind of pretty high-level technology to bear on a sport that's typically shot rather simply."

Describing the way skiing has traditionally been filmed, he added, "In other words, you have a helicopter and you have a couple of ground positions and, 'One, two three -- action. Go.' This is not something that we invented in any way, shape or form. The typical ski movie that we show in the latter part of our film when we talk about ski movies (has a) camera package, if

you will, (that is) usually a helicopter -- one, at least, and sometimes two -- and then stationary cameras somewhere that cover the action.

"We did that same strategy in France, in British Columbia, in Alaska. Wherever we went, we operated basically that way. In that sense, we didn't reinvent the wheel. But we brought the kind of shooters that we'd been working with on other documentaries and they found (this) very challenging and rose to the occasion and brought their skills to bear. We were fortunate in the kind of quality of people we worked with on this. There were a lot of different eyes that went to work."

Other approaches Obenhaus and his team took included, he said, deploying "a lot of small cameras in the hands of very skilled Alpinists. By that I mean climbers. Some of the climbing sequences that are in the early parts of the film were shot by Jim Surette, who is a consummate climber. He would climb into places (where) you couldn't really get a bigger camera and felt so confident in his climbing abilities that he was able to get some really wonderful footage, particularly of Doug Coombs.

Helicopters, of course, cast shadows when they're hovering over snow covered ski slopes and while viewing "Steep" I told Obenhaus I'd only noticed one very brief glimpse of such a shadow. "You're absolutely right," he agreed. "It's not easy, particularly if you value what we call 'bluebird days,' in other words, days where the sun's out and the sky's blue. You have a shadow (in those circumstances), there's no question about it. That is one of the realities of this kind of photography. You're constantly dealing with that.

"I would also say that the biggest challenge you face in any kind of outdoor photography of any kind of extreme sport is weather. We were pretty fortunate, but there were other ski projects that have gone out for three weeks to Alaska to shoot and have come back having only shot a day or two. That to some degree happened to us, but not to the (extent) it could have. We were fortunate in that regard. But the weather is always against you. It's always the obstacle that you're fighting or the thing you're praying for to be in your favor. But helicopters are just an integral part of this kind of filmmaking. It isn't only the shooting, it's also the positioning of both skiers and crew into places where they can ski and shoot. So it's also a logistical aid because the areas we were in and (with) the kind of distances we were traveling it was only possible to accomplish anything by using helicopters."

Was there a danger of the helicopters prompting avalanches because of the noise and vibrations they generate? "Well, wherever we are we are enormously cautious," he replied. "As a matter of fact, we never operate without a professional guide of some sort who assesses the snow pack

and determines the safety or lack of safety and really has the final say as to what we do. That, in fact, is institutionalized in British Columbia where you're mandated if you are with a crew of a certain (size) to have a safety person who you pay and is licensed by the government there. They really have the final say on all matters regarding the safety of both the skiers and the crew. I don't think it's terribly dangerous, honestly. I don't want to overstate that because of the level of caution that is just built into the process right from the get-go. The people who are taking risks are the skiers."

The consistent theme in all the film's extreme skier interviews is that they recognize the risk, but they're completely happy taking it when they consider what they might be doing with their lives if they weren't skiing. As one skier points out, if he weren't skiing he'd be working at some desk job and he'd rather be out there risking death on the slopes than be sitting behind a desk.

"That's very much the ethic of this group of people," Obenhaus noted. "They gain such great satisfaction from the activity that they weigh the dangers and come to the conclusion that they can't live without the activity. I think that's one of the things that people outside the sport respond to in the film -- this notion that this is a cast of characters who are following their passions and committing themselves to something that gives them tremendous satisfaction and tremendous pleasure even in the face of risk and some sacrifice, too. I mean, there's nobody getting rich from this sport. They're doing it because they love to ski."

With all that filming of extreme skiers in action, there was a ton of footage to deal with in the editing room: "We also benefited tremendously from the footage that already existed that we could acquire and purchase. For example, I knew from the very beginning that we would probably never shoot an avalanche the way in which it is (seen) in the film -- (and certainly) not the avalanche that Andrew McLean gets caught in. That is a total accident that happened before our cameras. But in the very beginning (of the movie) there's a wonderful shot of an avalanche just coming down on to the camera and covering it. That's done by a fellow named Steve Kroschel who has shot avalanches (for many years). That's what he does. He's sold them, to my knowledge, to all manner of movies. He's quite well known and he shoots them in 35mm. I knew right from the beginning we weren't going to do that. He sets them off. It's a whole elaborate thing. So I knew we would purchase some of that."

Looking back at the avalanche in which extreme skier Andrew McLean is caught near the film's end, Obenhaus pointed out, "Andrew and his two partners, Matt Turley and Dylan Freed, were just climbing up towards the camera. The camera operator, John Armstrong, and the soundman and

another person had climbed all the way up around the back of the mountain to get to the top to look down on the skiers as they climbed up towards them. They had positioned themselves on top of the mountain and the skiers, themselves, were about halfway down the mountain having lunch. When everything was all set up top, they indicated via walkie talkie to the skiers that everything was ready to go. They started rolling and Andrew and Dylan and Matt started hiking up towards the camera and the whole face of the mountain let go.

"It's deceptive in the film because it's foreshortened by the telephoto lens, but it really was a very, very large avalanche and they were just enormously lucky to have survived. There was a cliff that you can see in the film right behind them and if they had gone over that, that's hundreds of feet straight down. And just the sheer volume of snow was amazing. That the three of them made it out is just miraculous. I think it would have been likely that at least one of them would have gone over and taken the full ride, if you will, down to the base of the mountain, which was thousands of feet. But I want to just tip my hat to the camera operator, John Armstrong, in that regard because here he is on the top of the mountain, there's nothing he can do to save these people and he keeps rolling, which is, of course, what you do. And, of course, he's thrilled that his images record them surviving. But he really kept his wits about him and got an amazing shot."

As for postproduction, he said, "We had a long editing schedule. I find the editing process always the most-interesting and the most-challenging part of filmmaking ultimately because what comes out of that room is it. So the pressure's on, so to speak. We had a lot of material and I will say that there's quite a lot of material that didn't make it into the film, including some characters who just didn't fit when it became a leaner film. But it was always a pleasure for myself and the editor, Peter Livingston, because you're in a room watching an environment that's so beautiful. It's a nice place to be as opposed to some other places I've been in films when I'm sitting in an editing room for months and months and months. Here we were out, at least, in some absolutely beautiful country and with some very interesting people. So it was not onerous, but it was long and pretty difficult."

As good as the film is, don't look for "Steep" to be competing in this year's best documentary Oscar race because, unfortunately, it's not eligible for consideration. "Not for '07," Obenhaus explained. "I suppose it would be for '08. The rules this year were changed for documentaries (so they) had to have been shown X number of times in X number of cities by Sept. 14 or some arbitrary date. They've since abandoned this year's requirements. It was somehow an attempt, as I understand it, to discourage TV productions that were masquerading as films and just getting a showing in

New York and Los Angeles and (meeting) whatever the minimum requirements were before (for) being eligible. We did not open theatrically (in time to meet this year's requirements)."

Critics consensus: With key critics groups and the National Board of Review having given top honors to Miramax and Paramount Vantage's "No Country for Old Men" and Paramount Vantage and Miramax's "There Will Be Blood" -- producer Scott Rudin is the connecting link between these two highly acclaimed films, by the way -- Hollywood handicappers are buzzing about how two-sided this Oscar race is looking.

While the critics' votes have narrowed the best picture race, they've also left enough room for other very different films to be nominated. Because the critics' best picture kudos are so limited, three Oscar nomination slots are still essentially up for grabs. That's not a bad deal when you consider that some films that are too mainstream in their appeal to have won in the critics' votes are likely to nab some prime Golden Globe noms Thursday morning from the Hollywood Foreign Press Assn.

A good Globes showing can put high-profile studio movies like Universal's "Charlie Wilson's War" or Universal and Imagine Entertainment's "American Gangster" or Warner Bros.' "Michael Clayton" or DreamWorks and Warner Bros.' "Sweeney Todd" (released domestically via Paramount) on Oscar's best picture nominations track.

The Globes could also help advance the Oscar nominations prospects for some independent films with appeal to a broader audience than "Country" or "Blood" -- like Focus Features' epic British romantic drama "Atonement" or THINKFilm's dark melodrama "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead" or Lionsgate's western drama "3:10 to Yuma" or Fox Searchlight's heartwarming comedy drama "Juno." And if the Globes embrace Miramax's uplifting French language drama "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," which did well with the critics groups but was overshadowed by "Country" and "Blood," that could give it a well deserved shot in the arm.

Tuesday's Broadcast Film Critics Assn. nominations clearly reflected that group's tendency to be more in tune with the mainstream taste of its TV audience than the print critics typically are with their readers. Of the BFCA's 10 best picture nominations, five were broader appeal films with good potential to get into Oscar's best picture race -- "American Gangster," "Atonement," "Juno," "Michael Clayton" and "Sweeney Todd." The other five BFCA noms went to more critics-friendly indie films -- "Diving Bell," "Into the Wild," "The Kite Runner," "No Country" and "Blood."

If the critics groups were all over the place in terms of their votes we'd be looking at a more muddled best picture race, but for now it looks like there

are two solid indie contenders and three noms remaining that will go to the Oscar marketers who make the most of what they have to work with.

And, by the way, it's worth remembering that the good ratings the Academy hopes to attract with its telecast generally hinge on there being some best picture nominees that viewers across the country have actually seen in their local theaters and can root for. Typically, these aren't the films that resonate with the critics groups.

Filmmaker flashbacks: From May 25, 1990's column: "Tri-Star, which under its previous ownership wasn't a heavy hitter in the summer of '89 boxoffice race, is back in action this summer as a high profile player with several potentially big pictures.

"I think Tri-Star has positioned its pictures in the proper place,' observes William Soady, Tri-Star executive vp domestic distribution. 'There's been a lot said this summer about people juggling their dates in order to either get away from the competition or, in some cases, taking the competition on head to head. I think being able to move 'Total Recall' up to June 1, a date when there are no (other) pictures opening, will give us the terrific advantage of being able to open a picture we have tremendous faith in at a time when there is essentially a hole in the marketplace. It's the first weekend following Memorial Day and we feel we will be able to open 'Total Recall' to phenomenal numbers.'

"Total,' which was directed by Paul Verhoeven and stars Arnold Schwarzenegger, is a Carolco film produced by Buzz Feitshans and Ronald Shusett. Earlier plans called for it to arrive June 15. The move to 2,000-plus screens on June 1 came, according to Soady, 'after talking to the filmmakers and them telling us that they could, in fact, have the picture ready for a June 1 release date. We're playing 9,000 trailers. The tracking study research is very strong and exhibitor reaction to the picture has been phenomenal.'

"Although this summer is heavy with action-adventure sequels, 'Total' will be the only classic sci-fi film in the marketplace. 'One thing that "Total Recall" has is that it is not a sequel,' says Soady. 'Everything that people see in this movie is fresh and new. They'll see things in 'Total Recall' that they've never seen before. Arnold Schwarzenegger is terrific in the lead part. The movie takes place in the future and on Mars.

"Soady credits Schwarzenegger with working hard to promote 'Total,' something of great importance to any film's success but not something that all stars are willing to do. 'Arnold is very much connected with this movie,' Soady told me. 'He feels very strongly about it and he's very supportive of it. He's very committed to the movie.'"

Update: "Total Recall" was a huge hit for Tri-Star, opening June 1, 1990 to \$25.5 million at 2,060 theaters (\$12,295 per theater). It went on to gross \$119.4 million domestically and was the year's seventh biggest film.

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