

Extreme

Chris Davenport sees a mountain and wants to climb it. When he gets to the top he wants to ski back down it. **Rachael Oakes-Ash** speaks to the world's leading big mountain skier about life, death and risk in the wilderness.





RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

Chris Davenport, the all-American 38-year-old boy with the picture perfect smile from Aspen, Colorado, loves a challenge. He climbed and ski descended all 54 of Colorado’s 14,000 plus foot peaks (4,200 metres) in under a year in 2006 and 2007, becoming only the second person in world history to do so (it took Lou Dawson, the first, 12 years to complete the task).

I had heard about Chris long before we first met in Portillo, Chile, in 2008 where he hosts big mountain ski camps every August for cashed-up Americans wanting to boast they skied with him. He had won the World Extreme Championships in Alaska in 1996 and again in 2001 and he had podiumed on every Free Skiing World Tour event in 2000.

I had also marvelled at his skiing prowess on the big screen in Warren Miller productions where he eats mammoth cliffs for breakfast with a side order of over the head powder skiing most of us can only dream of. Put simply, in the world of skiing ‘Dav’ is the man.


“My success as a pro skier is not because I am the best, but I am one of the best businessmen who is a pro skier because I create opportunities,” Dav says.

He’s not lying either. In his 15 years of pro skiing he’s created sponsorship deals with Kastle Skis, Spyder outerwear, backcountry.com, Clif Bar, Smith Optics and Helmets, Black Diamond, Aspen Snowmass, Sole Footbeds, and Garmont

Add a publishing company that prints his *Ski the 14ers* coffee table book and a new volume titled *Fifty Classic Ski Descents of North America* (out this autumn) and his own distribution company, Davenport Mountain Sports, with the exclusive rights to Kask hats in the USA and you can see why he is in demand on the corporate speaking circuit.

Starting life as a ski racer in New Hampshire, Dav moved to Colorado in 1989, enrolled at the University of Colorado in Boulder and made a bid to join his two sisters on the US team. “I was partying like a rock star and free skiing by day and I eventually resigned myself that I was never going to make it in ski racing,” he says.

Above: Thanks to a good business plan and major sponsors, such as Kastle Skis, Davenport has turned his big mountain passion into a profession.



I am competitive by nature. I've been in the starting gate, I know the emotional and psychological ways to deal with fear and I know how to overcome confidence issues.

Below: Davenport on top of the world at the 14,058 feet (4,285 metre) summit of California's Split Mountain. Davenport knows that his big mountain passion is risky, but he believes risk is inherent in life.

"I got a call from Shane McConkey (fellow big mountain skier) who I knew from ski racing and he said you have to come down to this new Extreme skiing thing in Crested Butte. It was 1994 and this was all new to me and so new in the ski world too so I went, competed and made it to the finals," says Dav.

The rest, they say, is history. Dav competed in the South American Extreme the following year in Las Leñas and came from behind to win it.

With the smell of podium success he caught the big mountain bug, sold his pickup truck and bought tickets to Alaska and Europe where the biggest mountains were calling. In Alaska in 1996 he won the holy grail of big mountain skiing, the World Extreme Skiing Championships.

"They announced the top five and then they said first place, Aspen, Colorado and it was me. It was the most emotional moment up to that point of my life," says Dav who tears over at the memory. "I had no sponsors so I wrote a business plan on the plane back home about how I was going to turn this into a profession. I thought about what the skills were I needed to make it as a pro and who the ultimate list of sponsors were and I just went for it.

"I am competitive by nature. I've been in the starting gate, I know the emotional and psychological ways to deal with fear and I know how to overcome confidence issues. I loved this whole sub culture of free skiers and I met the greats including the pioneer of extreme skiing, Doug Coombs, who became my mentor and helped me achieve what I have today."

Coombs was twice world champion and founder of steep skiing camps in La Grave, France, a lift accessed backcountry mountain where he later died trying to rescue a friend from a couloir (fissure) in 2006.

By 2005, Dav had accomplished what most free skiers dream about. He had won world championships, starred in ski movies and secured sponsorship. What was there left to do?

"Climbing and skiing the Colorado 14ers felt like

a natural progression. The project would keep me in Colorado close to my wife and kids and the more I thought about it the more excited I got.

“The hardest part of my year long challenge was staying focused on the task at hand. It would have been so easy to just give up on the final day when I completed the last of the 54 peaks with only forty-eight hours to go to make it in a year. I felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and learned so much about what I am truly capable of. I am passing that spirit on to my kids.”

In the world of extreme skiing where the mountain demands respect the elements can be life threatening. Extreme skiers test their physical, mental and emotional limits on a daily basis and some sadly lose their lives in the quest for powder perfection.

“I haven’t had terrifying moments, I have had sad moments,” says Dav who is married to ski patroller Jesse, the mother of his three children. “In 2006 I was climbing and skiing the Colorado 14ers when Doug Coombs, my inspiration and mentor died. When he was killed I had to look inside myself and ask if I should be doing it.

“People perceive what I do as extremely risky and it is a numbers game, you can have a PhD in snow science but the more days you spend in the back country you’re upping your chances of something going wrong. When bad things happen it happens.”

Bad things happened again in 2009 when Dav lost one of his best mates, the pioneer of ski base jumping, Shane McConkey, to a ski accident in Italy.

Dav’s most recent project was to conquer the California 14,000-plus foot peaks. Together with renowned photographer Christian Pondella, he completed the 13 in short order.

As if that isn’t enough, he also just returned from a month- long ski trip to the Antarctic Peninsula where he and his team climbed and skied never before skied peaks in one of the world’s most beautiful environs. The film documenting this trip, *Australis: An Antarctic Ski Odyssey* is out this month.

“There will always be beautiful mountains to climb and ski,” says Dav who openly admits he is a perfectionist. “The beauty of my work is it can be translated into the every day. Whether you’re a skier or a billion dollar hedge fund manager you have to deal with risk.

“I tell corporations there are five ways to deal with risk – eliminate it by not skiing the line because the consequence is death, tolerate it and ski it because you can see a way out, mitigate it by bombing the snow to reduce avalanche, bring in other partners to help you, or transfer the risk and let someone else go first.”

Something tells me it would take a lot for Dav to let someone else go first. ❖