



BACKTRACKS

THE HISTORY OF SPLITBOARDING

Convergent Tracks

— by Drew Zieff —



Taylor Carlton slashes the turn of every splitboarder's dreams in Lake Tahoe, California.  **Andrew Miller**

In 2020, splitboarding is easy to pick up. Thanks to the leaps in board, boot and binding technology over the past 30-plus years and the growing popularity of leaving resort boundaries, the sport is now accepted—even celebrated—by the snowboard community.

But in its infancy and adolescence, splitboarding existed at the fringe. In the late 1980s and early '90s, pioneers from Europe to Utah, sick of snowshoeing to their lines, asked the same question: "How do I efficiently snowboard in the backcountry?" Separately, they gravitated toward similar solutions, and a few invented passable prototypes that morphed into some of the first

commercial splitboards. But it would take these innovators and their contemporaries decades of experimenting and evangelizing to achieve widespread acceptance of a board that breaks in two. Now, a sport with murky origin stories and diverging opinions on who did what and when has become a stalwart niche heralded by professional riders and the everyperson alike.

FOLLOWING BUFF'S LEAD

February 2020

INTO THE SELKIRKS

"SKINNING IS LIKE TAI CHI," says John "Buff" Buffery, as he guides a small crew of splitboarders on a Saturday morning beyond the boundaries of British Columbia's Whitewater Ski Resort. The metaphor is apt, and not simply because Buff's strides are graceful and deliberate. With owlsh eyes and a trim, gray beard flecked in snow, he exudes the vigilant serenity of a martial arts master. His four pupils, myself included, are attendees of Whitewater's 2020 Kootenay Coldsmoke Powder Festival and well aware of Buff's storied career as a splitboard pioneer. I try to mirror Buff's smooth strides and hang on his every word.

"After millions of vertical feet of riding powder," Buff admits, almost sheepishly, "I get more satisfaction from a well-set skintrack." A proper skinner, according to Buff, is a steady eight degrees, avoids unnecessary switchbacks and kickturns and never obliges the highest heel riser. If ascending is a dance, an efficient splitboarder lets terrain take the lead.

A week prior, I was back home in Utah's Wasatch Mountains, where zigzagging thoroughfares, steep as staircases, are commonplace. On rare occasions, I, too, enjoy the up, but namely for the endorphin fix and anticipation of the descent. And yet, as I watch Buff set a track like a monk raking sand in a rock garden, responding to minute contours of the gently sloped terrain that I might have otherwise ignored, I realize that his technique necessitates a rare brand of presence.

Behind Buff, there is no room to chew on the past or fret about the future. There is only the misty, snow-swathed forest and the skintrack that snakes through it. The metaphorical mountain I'm climbing to examine splitboarding's hazy past, like all mountains, will not be scaled at once, but step by step. I breathe deep, ground myself through the satisfying swish of my skins and direct my full attention to Buff's consciously charted course.

SPLITBOARDING EMERGES

1988 – 1999

TRAILHEADS

SPLITBOARDING FEELS DECEPTIVELY YOUNG. TODAY, trailheads buzz with splitboarders who discovered the sport in the last decade, a boom largely triggered by the trailblazing *Deeper* trilogy of professional rider and founder of Jones Snowboards Jeremy Jones and a binding revolution helmed by companies Spark R&D and Karakoram. But splitboarding's roots run deep. The sport has existed for more than 30 years—it just wasn't cool, let alone easy or popular.

In the 1990s, pioneering brands began to pop up in garages and gear shops alike. But early gear was just that; board interfaces were clunky and split-specific softboot bindings were nonexistent. Throughout those fledgling years, some snowboarders considered approach skis and snowshoes—commonly called "misery slippers"—as preferable modes of transportation. Tempted by the efficiency of telemark and AT setups, many traded boards for skis. Who could blame them?

Skis were (and, let's be honest, still are) more efficient touring tools. But particularly during the era of skinny skis, snowboards had one thing going for them in the backcountry: float. As Swiss inventor Ueli Bettenmann penned in the first two-piece splitboard patent in 1988, "Due to the more



and more frequented ski slopes, which are known to be used almost exclusively by skiers, there is an increasing desire to whiz down to the valley off the slopes in deep snow. In contrast to skiing, which places high demands on the skill of the skier in deep snow, especially in heavy and wet snow, [the] snowboard in deep snow is the ideal device for downhill skiing."

As modern snowboarding exploded, thanks to companies like Winterstick, Burton, Sims and Barfoot, and ski touring gear simultaneously improved in the late 1980s and early '90s, splitboarding naturally developed. Stubborn snowboarders, privy to the sensation of floating in deep snow, didn't want to learn how to ski. They wanted to surf untracked powder, sans slippers.

INNOVATORS AND INVENTORS

THERE IS NO ALREADY-EXISTING HISTORICAL account of splitboarding, at least not one readily available in English. As such, incongruities between accounts are extensive: rumors and opinions masquerade as facts, memories are foggy, and some players have been vocal about their contributions while others are content to watch the sport run on without them. Regardless of the history's murkiness, a handful of heavy hitters left an indelible mark.

Between 1988 and 1995, inventors from Europe's Bavarian, Austrian and Swiss Alps, Utah's Wasatch Mountains and British Columbia's Selkirks were cobbling together splitboards. A common perspective, one popular in the Americanized storyline of split invention, is that Brett "Cowboy" Kobernik and Mark "Wally" Wariako of Voilé developed the world's first splitboard in the early '90s in the Wasatch. While Cowboy constructed what is possibly North America's first splitboard and Wally refined Cowboy's idea into a game-changing, commercially viable system by 1995, several European companies debuted hardboot splits before Voilé.

Without Cowboy and Wally, splitboarding might very well have died, as European interest in hardboot systems dropped off in the late '90s. The first splitboards, however, were born in Europe.



POWDER WINGS

LONG BEFORE BUFF OR Kowboy hacked boards in half, Ueli Bettenmann applied for the first patent of a snowboard split down the middle in 1988 in Thalwil, Switzerland, a town 10 miles from Zurich. “I dreamt all the time of surfing snow,” Bettenmann says in a July 2020 interview. Bettenmann had been snowboarding since the mid-1980s and was a skintrack regular, albeit on skis. He’d followed his father’s footsteps into the family carpentry trade and, in the woodshop attached to the home in which he was born, built what many consider to be the first two-piece snowboard in the winter of 1986/87.

Bettenmann constructed his first boards using air-plywood before switching to fiberglass and P-tex, deeming his early prototypes “too heavy and too stiff—nothing special.” He built his interface around a hardboot binding from Fritschi, a Swiss ski binding manufacturer, and would “have to go on the very first splitboard tours with an electric screwdriver to pull the binding off and put the binding in the other position,” he remembers. Eventually, he abandoned building boards and focused on the interface. “I was interested in building the perfect binding,” he says. “Cutting the board, that’s easy.” He contacted Fritschi, who agreed to a partnership and began producing bindings and hardware to Bettenmann’s specs.

Bettenmann pursued legal protection for his “SnowHow” system as soon as he realized that his prototypes outperformed snowshoes on the uphill. A cursory search revealed no related patents, so he applied for a Swiss patent in October 1988 and upgraded to a European patent a year later. Bettenmann claims that while his patent included a cut down the middle of the board, an inventor named Angelo Piana had patented a split monoski for Tua Skis just months earlier. This was considered “prior art,” which, in the patent world, means that similar inventions existed before Bettenmann’s priority date, nullifying that aspect of Bettenmann’s patent. So instead, he patented the binding system.

As Bettenmann worked with Fritschi to produce a modified hardboot touring-binding setup, he partnered with Fanatic, a windsurf and snowboard



[Far Left] John “Buff” Buffery transcends his way back into Whitewater Ski Resort during the 2020 Kootenay Coldsmoke Powder Fest. **Drew Zieff**

[Left, Above] The man, the meditator, the legend: Buff mid-clinic at the Powder Fest. **Drew Zieff**

[Left, Below] Ueli Bettenmann hones his craft in his woodshop. Three generations of Bettenmanns became carpenters, and their family woodshop, where Bettenmann crafted some of the first splitboards, will turn 100 in 2021. **Ueli Bettenmann**

[Below] After experimenting with various board-building techniques and testing and improving the Fritschi interface, Bettenmann says he realized he had “no more time to build boards on my own.” He reclaims his time on his first Nidecker split. **Ruedi Homberger**



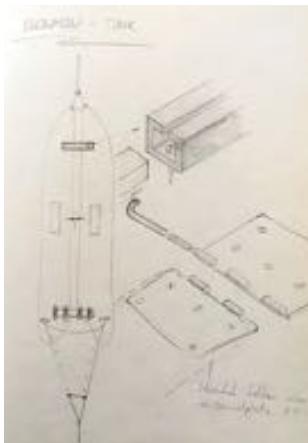
company based in the Erbacher ski factory in Ulm, Germany, to build boards. The resulting first-of-its-kind design debuted in 1991, a hulking, purple 177-centimeter swallowtail called “Powder Wings.”

The Powder Wings’ flight was short-lived. According to Bettenmann, Fanatic refused to pay him for his intellectual property, playing what he calls a “cat-and-mouse game,” from which he “didn’t earn one dollar.” When Fanatic wouldn’t pay, he asked Fritschi to not fill Fanatic’s next order for bindings. They obliged, and Bettenmann went on the hunt for another board builder.

Nitro Snowboards, familiar with the Fanatic split and Fritschi binding system, was interested. Nitro cofounder Tommy Delago licensed Bettenmann’s patent, and Nitro’s first split, the Tour—a directional board with the same binding system as Fanatic’s but with improved, active-tensioning forebody clips—debuted in 1992 and hit shops by fall ’93. A handful of these boards reached the United States and even graced the pages of *Transworld Snowboarding*, where they caught the eyes of American snowboarders like Jeremy Jones and Tom Burt.

Bettenmann, however, wasn’t the sole splitboard inventor in Europe, and, according to an objection to his patent, he wasn’t even the first. His European patent gained approval in 1992 but was promptly disputed by Erbacher, the German factory that was making Fanatic’s boards, in 1993, based on evidence provided by two men. In a formal objection to Bettenmann’s patent, Gerhard Zauner and Stefan Schiele signed affidavits claiming they had built splitboards and ridden them publicly before the priority date outlined by Bettenmann’s patent.

Despite the controversy, Bettenmann had made an undeniable impact on the sport in Europe. “Ueli Bettenmann’s SnowHow system was the first splitboard to be available in shops,” explains Peter “Pez” Radacher, owner of The Snowboard Museum in Salzburg, Austria, and author of the forthcom-



[Top] Brett "Kowboy" Kobernick perfects his non-conformist style with his customized dirt bike and a swallowtail board complete with a posie-posito stance. **Chris Gallardo**

[Above, Left] A page out of Ueli Bettenmann's notebook from the late 1980s. **Ueli Bettenmann**

[Above, Right] Right to Left: Max Kreuzberger's two- and four-part splits (1988 and '89); the Fanatic Powder Wing, the first commercial split (likely from '91); the Nitro Tour, the first split to make an impact in the U.S. (circa '93); Voilé's Split Decision, which evolved from a Hooger Booger zipped in half into the gap-sporting split shown here (circa '96); and Stefan Schiele's Jester Trip (1997). **Courtesy Peter Radacher, The Snowboard Museum**

[Right] Bob Athey dons his best Splitfest formalwear. **Chris Gallardo**



ing book *Boards—A Brief History of The Snowboard*. "Ueli continued to innovate but became confronted with both legal battles and industrial espionage. After the turn of the millennium, he sold his patents to Burton Snowboards."

Will Ritter, founder of Spark R&D, calls Bettenmann the "even quieter Dimitrije Milovich of splitboarding" in a May 2020 interview—high praise, as many credit Milovich, the brains behind Winterstick, as the creator of the modern snowboard. Nitro's Delago also gives Bettenmann the nod as the inventor of splitboarding. "At least," he says, "he made it commercially available with that binding and board system."

Pez points out that "a lot of boarders around the globe had similar intentions around the same time," citing his friend Max Kreuzberger as one such individual who "built a two-part splitty in '88 and four-part in '89." Schiele, who signed off on the objection against Bettenmann, developed three- and four-piece splits, first with Jester and later with his own brand, T3. The boards were briefly popular in Europe in the '90s as they fit in the skinny skintracks of the day. Regardless, former Burton designer Paul Maravetz explains that Kowboy and Wally "truly are the guys. Similar to what Tom Sims and Jake Burton did for snowboarding—there were people that predated them, for sure—but they're the ones that gelled it and brought it to market and were persistent in an efficient, effective way."

KOWBOY AND WALLY

BRETT "KOWBOY" KOBERNIK WAS A SKI BUM AT SNOWBIRD, UTAH, NOT LONG OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL—"Just freakin' winging it," he says—when he built arguably the most impactful splitboard of all time. Kowboy had grown up a skier but fell in love with the float of a snowboard beginning in the late 1980s. Then, in what Kowboy recalls as the winter of 1993 or possibly '92 and Mark "Wally" Wariako is remembers as '91—an example of the foginess of the early days—an injury sidelined him for roughly a month. "I had time on my hands," he says. "And I was like, 'You know what? I'm gonna split one of these boards and figure out how to piece it back together.'"

He cut that first "primitive garage model" in half with a hacksaw, then outfitted it with hardware-store accoutrements, a door-hinge touring bracket and bindings fashioned from milk-crates plastic, castoff snowboard straps and miscellaneous pieces of aluminum. Two sections of old skis bridged the board halves, and wing nuts kept the spanners locked tight. "I knew the thing was going to ride OK," Kowboy says. "It was just a matter of getting it to split in two to walk uphill. Once I was walking, I was like, 'Oh yeah, I'm golden now.'"

Bob Athey, a telemarker and snowboarder known as the "Wizard of the Wasatch"—and "a character of his own right," according to Kowboy—played a critical role in splitboarding's history: matchmaker. "He saw me out on the board and started pestering me to go and talk to Wally," Kowboy says. "He's like, 'Oh, I'd like to have one of those



The Chameleon strides past unsuspecting skiers on his way to the chairlift at Taos, New Mexico, in 1997. The mountain opened to snowboarders 11 years later, on March 19, 2008. □ **Mark Gallup**

THE CHAMELEON

BY DREW ZIEFF

Jibbing was hot as hellfire when Eric Blehm became editor of *Transworld Snowboarding* in 1995. Most snowboard media focused heavily on freestyle, but Blehm was more fascinated by the Nitro Tour than the glut of twins that graced the 501 pages of the magazine's 1995 gear guide.

Blehm's tenure at *Transworld* stretched through 1998, a period during which he fought hard to shine the spotlight on backcountry boarding. "I loved to include a backcountry feature, or at least an adventure-based article, in every issue," he says. He nixed photos of backcountry riders without backpacks since it suggested they weren't carrying avalanche gear, and the *Transworld* staff subsequently nicknamed him "Backpack Blehm." It was both an insult and a badge of honor.

Blehm took off-piste protocol seriously, penning several stories on avalanche safety for *Transworld*. "I was always pushing to keep the magazine real for the everyday rider who just wants to freeride," he says. He wrote a hard-hitting story on snowboard incidents in the backcountry in 1995. That same year, he attended a seven-day avalanche boot camp in pursuit of his Canadian Avalanche Association Level One

certification, which he covered in a 1996 issue. Both articles alerted freeriders to the dangers of following a bootpack beyond resort boundaries. But his most impactful work was arguably a satirical series for the magazine on "the Chameleon," a covert, unidentified splitboarder who camouflages himself as a skier to infiltrate resorts that didn't allow snowboarders.

In a 1995 article "Live and Let It Ride," Blehm put out a call for a special agent, specifically a "007-type who could snowboard." Blehm writes, "We took out a classified ad in *Spy Magazine* and another in *Soldier of Fortune*, reading: 'Wanted: spy specializing in reconnaissance skills, enemy evasion, driving in snowy-mountainous terrain and snowboarding.'" Candidates were to send resumes to *Transworld's* Oceanside, Calif. office. Blehm describes the operative's equipment as such: "We had already ordered a special snowboard for the mission and shipped it to Salty Peaks Snowboard Shop in Salt Lake City. The board, made by Nitro, splits into two separate skis for backcountry travel, but it would work nicely for upward mobility on chairlifts at places like Alta. Since no tools are required to change the board from skis into board, it was a perfect disguise element for the Chameleon. Ride up the lift as a skier, duck into trees and emerge as a snowboarder. It seemed so simple..."

Soon after, the position was filled and

the Chameleon targeted Alta, Utah, and Keystone and Aspen, Colorado, in 1995; Park City, Utah, in 1996; and Taos, New Mexico, in 1997. Accompanied by photos of operatives, their faces blurred, charging hard and beefing with tightwad ski patrollers, the series did more than elicit chuckles from *Transworld's* readers. "It was the first time that I had seen splitboarding in a magazine," says professional rider Jeremy Jones. "That was my introduction to splitboarding."

After three years as editor, Blehm left *Transworld*, but he continued to freelance for snowboard magazines. He featured Craig Kelly, Tom Burt and John Buffery in *Snowboard Life* and represented splitboarders in the pages of *Couloir*, including a feature about joining Jim Zellers and Tom Burt on a grueling midwinter traverse across the Sierra Nevada in 2002, likely a splitboard first, which helped validate the sport in the eyes of hardcore backcountry users. Publications like *Couloir*, *Snowboard Life*, *Backcountry* and *The Snowboarder's Journal* all gave coveted space to splitboarding in the sport's adolescence. *Kronicle*, a backcountry snowboarding magazine and sister publication to *Backcountry*, even launched in 2011, although it only held on for two seasons. But in the '90s, *Transworld* was the ultimate stage for such a young sport.

After 32 years, *Transworld* folded in 2019. In a farewell letter to the magazine, Blehm wrote, "there is one thing I'm most proud of from my era at the magazine, it's instilling the importance of avalanche awareness and safety to our readers." While he handled those heavy topics with grace, no piece tickled him more than the lighthearted debut of the Chameleon. "It was probably my favorite story to sit down and write," says Blehm of "Live and Let It Ride." "I felt like it was me versus the evil elitist ski resorts."

In a sense, it was: As many have guessed over the years, Blehm was the Chameleon all along.



things. Why don't you go and talk to my buddy?"

Wally, owner of Voilé, was a telemarker and avid windsurfer, and he immediately recognized the potential of Kowboy's board. "I saw Brett's idea, and I was like, 'Oh yeah, man. We gotta make this thing so that we can produce it,'" Wally says. "Make it lighter, make it so that you don't need to bring wrenches and bolts with you."

The two began prototyping in earnest. "We built a jig that you could clamp down a snowboard in. Then we'd take a carbide bit on a circular saw and just zip it right in half and then sand the edges and put some varnish on the inside edges," Wally continues. "We pretty much invented the word 'splitboard,' because we were taking snowboards and splitting them in two."

Progress came quickly. Using shop tools—as well as Wally's network of industry contacts—the two worked side by side. "Without him there, I don't know if it ever would have really come to fruition. I was just a punk. I didn't have as many tools. I had a hacksaw and some pliers and shit at my house," Kowboy admits. "I didn't have access to end mills and lathes and presses. I don't think I would've been able to come up with a refined enough prototype to make the thing fly without him being there."

Ultimately, the two developed split-specific skins. "It didn't take a genius to make a wider version of ski skins," Wally says.

"It just took Voilé to source it and make it happen." But their principal contribution was the DIY Split Kit, which included pucks, a slider track with four holes that was designed to be compatible with traditional softboot bindings, as well as hooks and hardware. The kit hit the market in 1995, and Voilé applied for a patent on August 14, 1997—one that only recently expired in 2017.

Voilé's Split Kit was revolutionary. It reduced barriers to entry—anyone with an old board, a saw and a few bucks could try splitboarding. And while the early components weren't particularly sexy or streamlined, they worked. Kowboy's garage-built board ended up in the right hands—Wally's—and received what the owner of Voilé calls the "Wally touch" of lassoing a far-out idea, wrangling it back to Earth and engineering a path forward.

JOHN "BUFF" BUFFERY

IN THE LATE 1980S, JOHN "BUFF" BUFFERY was guiding in British Columbia's Monashee Mountains with Canadian Mountain Holidays on skinny 210-centimeter skis. On one outing, a group of French snowboarders wanted to ride the open, glaciated terrain of the McBride Range, and as they surfed down lightly wind-scoured faces, Buff was, he remembers, "sweating bullets." The snowboarders were "smoking Gauloises, drinking wine at lunch and loving it," he says. "At the end of that trip, I figured I've got to learn how to snowboard."

Buff taught himself to ride the next year and immediately wanted to bring his board into the backcountry. "I was also doing some ski-tour-lodge guiding in the [Canadian] Rockies at a place called Mistaya. I couldn't bring myself to strap a snowboard to the pack and walk up or skin up with skis," he continues. "And I certainly couldn't snowshoe; it was just too far. So I just said, 'What the hell, man? I bet you could just cut a board in half and rig it so that you could snowboard back down.'"

His buddy Keith Berens owned a metal studio in Nelson, B.C., so Buff brought him a Burton Air to rip in half in 1992. The cut was jagged, though whether that zigzag was intentional or not is lost to history. "We put a little jog in it, thinking lateral stability," Buff says of the board that's now a prized wall piece in his office.

Buff outfitted the board with a set of Emery hardboot race bindings, which came with toe and heel pucks that he drilled into place with P-tex T-bolts. He used a three-pin telemark boot and binding for touring, slapped on some heel risers and sewed together skins to make a set wide enough for the Air.

"I knew something had to span the two skis to give [it] rigidity as a snowboard," Buff says. He settled on plastic cutting boards, which he tested for brittleness by putting in the freezer for a couple days, and bolted cut-up segments of the boards to each ski. When transitioning into ride mode, he used wing nuts to secure them, a fiddly process he doesn't miss—though he fondly recalls using the cutting boards to offer hors d'oeuvres to guests. He began guiding on the contraption he called Splitfire in 1993 and toured on it for several years.

One client on a hut trip, a doctor and a member of an amateur inventor's club, was so impressed by Buff's functional

[Above] Buff pauses in his office to reflect on whether the zigzag in Splitfire's base was purposeful or a slip of the saw.  **Drew Zieff**

[Facing Page, Left] Dave Downing, left, and Craig Kelly both rode for Burton and, in the '90s, began to embrace splitboarding. The pair were part of a larger return to snowboarding's roots—freeriding in powder.  **Jeff Curtes**

[Facing Page, Right] Craig Kelly blasts a masterful method in his Nelson, B.C., backyard.  **Dan Hudson**

prototype that he promised to send Buff information on how to patent his board. "It was back in the day of fax machines," Buff says. "And I get back home the week after, and my floor is covered with fax paper on how to patent, but it's strewn all over the floor. There's no rhyme or reason or page numbers. Anyways, I looked at it all and went, 'Oh, sheesh. Yeah, forget it."

Though Buff recalls discussing the possibility of going the commercial route with Berens, he never did. But Splitfire *did* lead to Buff becoming a friend, guide and mentor to Craig Kelly, the don of backcountry snowboarding.

That Buff's homemade split was an Air is a striking coincidence. One of the most influential snowboards of all time, the Mystery Air (which would later become the Craig Kelly Air) was Kelly's first unofficial Burton pro model after he notoriously ditched Sims and signed with Burton in 1988. The proceeding contractual clash meant Kelly had to ride a logo-less board for his early days with the company. Burton's marketing department flipped the script on Sims with the 1989 Mystery Air, which propelled both Burton and Kelly to new heights. Years later, Buff's one-of-a-kind Air, a softer spin-off of the popular Mystery Air, forever altered the course of freeriding.



CRAIG KELLY AND DAVE DOWNING

BY THE MID- TO LATE '90s, Craig Kelly had famously transitioned from racking up hardware at halfpipe and banked slalom events to out-of-the-limelight freeriding. Kelly had Jake Burton's ear and unquestionable star power, but he was also interested in snowboarding more "quietly," as he explained in Jacques Russo's biography, *Let It Ride: The Craig Kelly Story*. Regardless, his transition to freeriding, and later his adoption of the split, made waves. "Everybody saw that whatever Craig Kelly did was *the* thing," says Buff, whom Kelly hired as his personal splitboard guide in 1998. "And Jake believed that."

There is, however, a misguided belief that Kelly was the sole impetus behind Burton's ingress into splitboarding. Kelly's cajoling and stamp of approval was critical, but a key proponent was Kelly's teammate, Dave Downing, who, following Kelly's advice, settled in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1994. The following year, Downing was getting a board tuned at the shop Salty Peaks when he spotted a DIY Voilé split. He borrowed it and, "was tripping out," he says. Downing described the riding as "surviving," but he was won over by uphill efficiency: "I got like six runs in when normally I would have gotten one or two."



Downing recalls begging Burton board designers, namely John "JG" Gerndt, for boards over the next couple years, and claims he presented Kelly with his first splitboard in 1997 or '98 on a Washington hut trip with North Cascade Heli Skiing. Kelly had already seen Buff's Splitfire and had read *Transworld* editor Eric Blehm's splitboarding stories, so he was familiar with the concept. But Kelly was famously fond of softboots, and hardboots were requisite for Buff's homemade Splitfire and the Nitro Tour. At one point, Maravetz, who also recounts prototyping splits for Kelly and Downing in the mid-'90s, says, "Early on, Jake felt the future of snowboard interfaces was hardboots and bindings, as it seemed to be headed in Europe at the time. Fortunately, Craig convinced him otherwise, that softboots were the way snowboarding needed to go. God bless him for that one." The Burton prototype that Downing brought Kelly used Voilé's softboot-compatible slider tracks, and, in the North Cascades, Kelly became hooked.

With his adoption of the splitboard, Kelly became "the North Star" of the sport, according to Jeremy Jones. "Word was spreading among those in the know that Craig was working on a split for Burton," Blehm says. "And that alone was enough to perk the interest of other brands."

NOW AND THEN: A LINEAGE OF WOMEN IN SPLITBOARDING

BY HEATHER HENDRICKS

IN THE EARLY 1990s, splitboarding was conducted on primitive gear and by only a handful of trailblazers. What developed was a sector of the outdoor industry that, even as it evolved, retained a niche, individualistic essence. And within that small subset, women have made up an even smaller group, though their impact in developing the sport into an inclusive, vibrant community has been anything but minor. Now, there's a myriad of female-specific products, clinics, safety courses, demo-fests and online communities—a testament to decades of work and progress.

THE PIONEERS

In 1993, Bonnie Zellers of Lake Tahoe, California, made a significant decision in her riding career. After a decade of snowboarding, including professionally, she turned to splitboarding for better uphill utility and to challenge herself on new terrain. Her husband, Jim, helped hand-split her Rossignol board, and the two dialed it in with first-generation Voilé bindings.

"Boards were long, heavy and really stiff for the most part in those days," Zellers says. "There weren't many women [splitboarding] then, so everything was geared toward men."

Despite the clunky equipment, she persevered. "In the '90s everything was just fun," Zellers recalls. "Companies were spending a lot of money to get involved in snowboarding, so trips could be sponsored pretty easily."

With the Sierra Nevada starting to see an uprising of split-savvy travelers, it wasn't long before the trend made its way elsewhere, including to Bozeman, Montana. Having moved west for college, professional rider Annie Fast took up a job at World Boards snowboard shop in 1993. Owner Jay Moore, a longtime gear guru and industry figure, stocked his shop with Voilé Split Kits and a Burton split demo fleet, which served as Fast's introduction to the split side of things.

"It was a very utilitarian piece of equipment back then," Fast says of the splitboard. "It wasn't a lifestyle or anything. It was more like, what's the right equipment for the job? If [we were going] somewhere we needed to split to, then I'd borrow a setup from the shop."

By 2001, Fast and her cohorts were established splitters and pitched Arc'teryx on a month-long trip to Alaska. The caveat: the trip would consist of all splitboarding and no heli time. What transpired was one of the first splitboard print features ever published, released in the inaugural issue of *frequency: The Snowboarder's Journal* in 2001.

Quickly after, the industry latched onto the urban and contest scenes, and big-mountain

exploits became overshadowed. "Freeriding couldn't have been any less cool in 2002," Fast admitted of the trend that occurred shortly after she became editor of *Transworld* that year. "I realized [splitboarding] wasn't even something they wanted me to write about."

As fervor for human-powered missions dwindled, so did female-specific split lines, and the women's scene remained relatively underground until 2010.

THE RESURGENCE

With a new decade came a revival of splitboarding, as brands started making more efficient, female-forward gear. In 2013, Stephanie Nitsch recognized a hole in splitboard design and support for female riders and created Pallas Snowboards, a Salt Lake City, Utah-based company that makes boards and splits specifically for women. "We wanted to build really cool stuff and elevate the integrity of women's splitboard construction and design," Nitsch says. Beyond her boards, Nitsch fosters the split community through hosting meetups, clinics and demos.

At the same time, professional climber and rider Liz Daley was splitboarding big lines in Chamonix, France, including the Y Couloir of the Aiguille de Argentière and the West Couloir of the Aiguille du Chardonnet, as well as in Alaska and South America. Daley had signed up for her first course to work toward International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) certification, but before taking the course died in an avalanche on Argentina's Fitz Roy Massif in September 2014. Her passing sent shockwaves across the sport and spurred renewed focus on avalanche education and safety.



THE NEW MOVE

Daley's legacy and the improvement in split technology—both female-focused and more broadly—has led the charge for a new crop of women. Elena Hight—the first snowboarder to land a double backside alley-oop rodeo during a half-pipe competition at the 2013 Winter X-Games—debuted her split skills in Teton Gravity Research's 2018 film *Ode to Muir*. "Elena is someone to watch for," professional splitboarder Robin Van Gyn says. "She has made herself a force quickly."

Professional rider Laura Hadar has also made the switch from the street scene to the depths of the backcountry as a splitboard mountaineer. After spending time in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Alaska, she's now based in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley and is focused on Shred the 14ers—a project to ride all 58 (including four unofficial) of the state's 14,000-foot peaks. After four years, Hadar has five peaks left, and she's realistic about what she's been able to accomplish.

"I knew if I didn't ride them," she says, "it might be a long time until some other girl did."

As the editor of Jackson Hole Snowboarder Magazine, Heather Hendricks is an avid splitboarder who bases her vagabond lifestyle out of Aspen, Colorado.



[Left] Liz Daley embraces a deep sunset in Alaska's Tordrillo Mountains. ☐ **Jay Beyer**
[Above] Tom Routh, on K2 Approach Skis, and Annie Fast, on a Burton splitboard, leave base camp high in Alaska's Takshanuk Mountains in 2001. ☐ **Chris Ankeny**
[Right] Ruedi Beglinger slides through the seracs of Needle Ice Fall on the Durrand Glacier in British Columbia's Selkirk Mountains. ☐ **Nicoline Beglinger, Selkirk Mountain Experience**



Kelly possessed an unprecedented level of celebrity, which Downing did not, but Downing sweated to legitimize splitboarding. His part in Standard Films' 1999 *Totally Board 9* helped silence the cynics. "I just set out with a goal: I'm going to film my whole part on a splitboard," he says. Downing requested that Burton designers craft a split with one ski base red and the other yellow, so viewers could grasp that the board was split. And despite the risk to Downing's career, the segment propelled splitboarding forward. "I set out to prove a point," he says. "That you can go off jumps on it, you can hit cliffs on it, you can snowboard at a high level, and [splitboards] work."

SPLIT KITS, STAGNANCY AND SHARING THE SKINTRACK 1992 – 2005

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

Before Voilé released their interface in 1995, a quality system simply didn't exist—even those using Bettenmann's Fritschis were forced to make modifications. Norbert Kindl, a Bavarian splitboard outfitter, recalls stumbling across Fanatic's Powder Wings circa 1995. Norbert claims he bought a split, and, despite breaking it three days later, acquired Fanatic's remaining stock of approximately 50 boards before he "redesigned the board connectors, improved the Fritschis binding systems and built new heel risers." He then hawked the updated wares across the Alps.

Others, like Ruedi Beglinger—ski guide and owner of Revelstoke, B.C.'s Selkirk Mountain Experience—rigged setups from scratch. "In 1994, the only

way was snowshoes," he says. "So, I took some old skis, cut them to 120 centimeters, glued skins on and carried my board up." Beglinger's homemade approach skis had their limitations, however, so, in 1995, he asked a bewildered carpenter in Revelstoke to cut a brand-new deck in half. From there, he MacGyvered an interface using plate bindings, aluminum bars and bolts. Though time consuming in transitions and with a significant binding height, the board allowed Beglinger to guide clients on the Yukon's Mt. Logan (19,551 ft.) in 1995.

A year later, he purchased a Voilé DIY Split Kit and put it to the test on the south face of the Yukon's Tumbledown Mountain (9,045 ft.), a 3,100-vertical-foot line that maxes out at 55 degrees. He guided guests, including three splitboarders, on Mts. Steel (16,644 ft.) and Lucania (17,257 ft.) in 1996, also in the Yukon, and became the first person to attempt to snowboard off an 8,000-meter peak on Nepal's Manaslu (26,759 ft.) in 1997, an objective he didn't complete due to poor weather and a realization that, he says, "such expeditions are not my cup of tea."

"Today, these traverses are not a big deal anymore," Beglinger says. "However, those days, mid- to late '90s and early 2000s, there definitely was a certain level of unknown involved. Can it be efficiently done while guiding ski clients, will the gear stand up to the test, how will the ski guests accept a mountain guide on a splitboard?"

THE KIT

IN THE 1990S AND EARLY 2000S, VOILÉ'S Split Kit was groundbreaking. But, as with any new gear, the kit, however revolutionary, posed problems. The



first was cutting a board in half, which required power tools, a steady hand and the conviction that the fledgling sport was a worthwhile pursuit. Slicing boards also led to performance and durability issues. "As soon as you cut that board, you expose the core," says Joey Vosburgh, a Canadian splitboard guide, split-mountaineer and early adopter of the Split Kit. "And, no matter what—even if you seal that edge—there's still water getting in. When it warms up, it soaks in, then when it freezes, it expands, and the boards just blow apart over time."

The Split Kit also wasn't adjustable, which made installation tricky. Of course, solid boards don't have splitboard insert patterns, but such patterns didn't even exist at the time. Instead of the adjustable pucks that modern splitboarders are accustomed to fiddling with on factory splits, the DIY Split Kit included rectangular nylon blocks that were hard-mounted to each half. "You had to make sure that your stance was right, because there was no changing your stance angles and width," Vosburgh says. Voilé attempted to

[Left] "This board was one of the first DIY splitboards we made, in 2001, in Hillsboro, Oregon," says Dean Whitehead, owner of The Splitboard Shop. "We have refined the cutting method many times since!" **Dean Whitehead**

[Below] Burton's Solid State Interface: Clever in theory, hopeless in the field. After its lackluster launch, it was never given the time and tweaks it needed to be successful. **Paul Maravetz, both photos**

ease the installation with a sticker to help the mounting process, but once holes were drilled and pucks were screwed down, Wally says, "the board was made basically just for you."

The final and most egregious issue was ride quality. The kit removed barriers to entry, but that didn't translate to a smooth ride. James Oda, a team rider for Prior Snowboards who convinced Chris Prior to split the brand's first board in 1997, recognized the beauty of the Voilé system. He'd been using snowshoes to tick off snowboarding first descents, but the DIY Kit dramatically improved efficiency. In 1999, he spontaneously soloed the Spearhead Traverse—the 25-mile route between Blackcomb and Whistler—in around 11 hours. Even on a splitboard, Oda struggled on the descents, noting the high slider tracks that "just rolled back and forth...there was no precision to it at all."

Wally and Kowboy recognized the DIY route wasn't for everyone and subsequently took the idea further. "After I got someone to make me boards, we came up with the idea of the puck with the disc in the center, and all of the inserts where you could move the puck back and forth or change the angles. You didn't have to drill and screw into the board," Wally says. "That insert pattern—the touring bracket, the heel piece, the two screws and then the spread of the inserts on the board and everything—that was my design that got incorporated to every splitboard in the world now."

BURTON'S INTERFACE

WITH CRAIG KELLY'S ADOPTION OF the split and Dave Downing's insistence, cogs began to shift at Burton, particularly when snowboard design engineer Paul Maravetz's role changed to director of advanced research and development in the late 1990s. Suddenly, Maravetz had the freedom "to really start taking a look at splitboarding," he says, which he did in 1998 when he began working in earnest on a split-binding interface.

"We were used to building boards and building bindings," John "JG" Gerndt says. "But that interface was something completely new for us." Maravetz, along with Black Diamond Equipment engineer Dave Narajowski, went back to square one—they didn't want to "piggyback" on Voilé's system, instead hoping to reduce binding height, unify board halves, solidly connect the rider to the board, allow for stance adjustability and eliminate loose parts at risk of being lost in an unforgiving environment.

Burton designed their "Solid State Interface" around their normal bindings, relying on two semi-circular discs on each half of the board, which joined together by throwing a lever. Stance width was adjustable, and the system shaved a couple millimeters of stack height off Voilé's interface. The commercialized Burton system lacked Voilé's durability, though. "Voilé's puck system is like a Toyota Camry," compliments Maravetz. "It's not flashy and it's not particularly tech, but it will almost always get you where you need to go." Burton's design, while functional in their Vermont factory, broke as reliably as a '71 Ford Pinto in backcountry scenarios.

Burton's interface, which was released alongside Burton's first splitboard, the Split 66, in 2001, was ahead of its time in many ways. They'd integrated heel risers, for example, into the interface—an innovation that Will Ritter of Spark R&D would later incorporate into his Whammy Bars. (Ritter actually called Maravetz and told him they borrowed the idea). But with Mara-

vetz leaving Burton in 2000 to cofound Rome, Kelly passing away in a 2003 avalanche and an overall stagnancy of splitboarding in the early aughts, the project was doomed. "It didn't make sense anymore for anybody at Burton to champion it and evolve it and improve upon it," Maravetz says. "It was just dead on arrival." The project was binned in 2004.

Burton continued to make at least one splitboard a season, but Downing says it was not profitable by itself. "But it's part of the whole brand," he says. "Backcountry snowboarding was the beginning of snowboarding. There was no resort riding until Jake drove around a station wagon and convinced people to open up their ski resorts to snowboarding—it was all backcountry. That's what snowboarding was. So it's been a part of Burton's DNA from the beginning."

SPLIT DECISIONS

BEFORE VOILÉ WOULD GO ON to develop insert-equipped boards, they sold a run of Split Decisions in what Wally remembers as 1996. To do so, they bought a stack of alpine carving boards for \$50 apiece from now-defunct Hooger Booger, split them, installed permanent hardware and slapped Voilé decals on the decks. Later that year, Wally contracted a factory to build boards before buying a press to do it in house in 1997.

Voilé's early splits were clearly designed by a skier: They had sidecut on both the outer and inner edges, which left a gap in the middle of the board. "That's where the Split Decision name came from," says David Grissom, a Voilé employee since the late '90s and now the sales and marketing manager. "You choose to ride it or ski it."

The inner sidecut marginally improved skinning and skiing, but diminished downhill performance. Kowboy laments, "While I agreed with [Wally] on the concept of it, because they'd walk and ski better, I was like, 'Man, people are not going to be able to fucking digest that gap.'" Unsurprisingly, when Voilé showcased the board at the SnowSports Industries America trade show, they were met with crickets, if not outright incredulity.

Wally's telemark background, however, inarguably drove splitboarding forward. "Basically, we invented the sport," he says. And while Voilé's been committed to splitboarding since its birth, some feel the company's early direction demonstrated an ideological divergence from that of core snowboarders.

"Voilé was a powder system," says Jim Zellers, a freeride forefather who notched first snowboard descents with partner Tom Burt on Denali's Orient Express, as well as on Nepal's Pumori (23,494 ft.) and New Zealand's Aoraki/Mt. Cook (12,218 ft.). "In the end, while Voilé was so awesome to get this thing going, nobody held splitboarding back more than Voilé," he says. "They owned the patent and wouldn't let anybody do anything with it to progress it. You had to work within this patent system."

Voilé's 1997 patent—a \$50,000 endeavor, according to Grissom—covered pucks, slider tracks and hardware, which gave them a hold on the market for years. Brands looking to make splitboards had to pay Voilé a licensing fee for hardware, risk infringing on the patent or embark on the pricey endeavor of inventing a new system from scratch.

For their part, Voilé continued to improve their boards, interface and bindings. They designed the Mountain Plate binding for hardbooters and step-in bindings in partnership with Shimano, which Wally describes as "clean" and "simple," but recognized it "wasn't something that the mainstream snowboarders were interested in."

For outsiders like Zellers, Voilé's pace felt akin to post-holing, as splitboarding took the backseat to the brand's developments in telemark and alpine touring equipment. Spark R&D's 2006 arrival finally pushed Voilé to develop the Light Rail softboot binding system, which was released in



[Above] Brett "Kowboy" Kobernik makes the case that, despite a gap between the skis, the Voilé Split Decision prototype still rips. Courtesy Voilé

2009. "We saw [Spark's] binding, and we were like, 'Well shit. We gotta put some soft straps on this thing and just make it work with a soft snowboard boot,'" Wally says. Spark's binding—released over a decade after the Split Kit—essentially proved Zellers's point, as an integrated binding was a natural progression from the slider track system.

Voilé may have effectively had a monopoly on hardware, but freeriders like Zellers wanted a different direction when it came to boards. "We were so hungry for the right board. It was as if we were in some sort of famine," he says. "We just couldn't even exist without this board that can do what we wanted it to do."

Zeller recounts that his dream board was more than "just a powder tool. I wanted to start doing things that were steeper and hardpacked." After going back and forth with Voilé, he began working with Stuart Knowles at Duotone, who came closer to satiating Zellers's appetite. "Stuart built this carbon board with the sidecut that Tom [Burt] and I loved riding and the shape that we really loved," Zellers says. "And he built it with metal edges all the way around. It was a big deal in 1996/97."

On a later version of that board, Zellers made the first snowboard descent of the Yosemite Valley's Half Dome (8,842 ft.) in 2000. Duotone, meanwhile, relied on Voilé for hardware and pucks but was forced to close its doors soon thereafter due to a lack of profits, a demise symptomatic of a larger problem: Until better bindings came into the picture and more splitboarders were on the skintrack, how could board builders justify expenditure on splitboard development?



Voilé continued to invest in splitboarding throughout the '90s and 2000s and, from its headquarters in Salt Lake City, pressed splits with inserts, sold adjustable pucks and DIY Split Kits, licensed hardware and did their best to market a young, niche sport. The gear might not have been perfect, but it was better than a likely alternative: nothing.

“THE MOST CRITICAL THING HOLDING US BACK”

TO GROW, SPLITBOARDING DESPERATELY NEEDED a backcountry-proof, split-specific binding that rode like a typical snowboard binding. Thankfully, Will Ritter, a Montana State University graduate with a master’s degree in mechanical engineering and a soft spot for Bridger Bowl’s sidecountry, discovered splitboarding in 2004. “I was out with friends of mine who were on tele and AT gear,” he remembers. “And they were just cruising up the magic carpet, chatting away. And I’m sweating like a hog, snowshoeing, breaking my own trail and knocking snow off trees with my board.”

A friend lent Ritter a split and he was sold, but, from the jump, Ritter keyed in on the deficiencies of Voilé’s slider track system. “Even that first day, I was like, ‘Well, this is super sweet, but I do feel like I’ve got a binding on top of a binding.’ And so that was what got my gears turning.”

Ritter ignited a revolution when he launched his aptly named company, Spark R&D, and debuted the Ignition binding in 2006. “The biggest step for us was the first one,” Ritter says, referencing how the Ignition was an integrated binding—there was no slider track or adapter; just a binding baseplate directly compatible with Voilé pucks. The resulting binding wasn’t just lighter but also significantly reduced stack height and rode more responsively than anything else.

In 2007, Bryce Kloster, a mechanical engineer who designed hydraulic boat lifts for a living, was introduced to splitboarding in the Wasatch. He, too, saw an opportunity to improve upon the slider tracks. Wanting to mesh his knack for industrial design with his longtime love of snowboarding, Bryce called his twin brother, Tyler, who shared his affinity for standing sideways and engineering, and said, “I don’t know how we’re going to do it, but I know we can make this way better.”

The twins founded Karakoram, and the brand’s impact was immediate.

Karakoram’s first Split30 Interface, released in 2010, relied on Voilé’s standard hole pattern but used a novel puck system and tension instead of a pin to hold the binding in place. “I remember the first 100 sets of Split30’s getting sold to customers nearly instantly,” says Russell Cunningham, a Mt. Baker, Washington, split-mountaineer and Karakoram’s communications director. “After that, we saw such an overwhelming demand that we simply couldn’t keep up with it.”

“Having the Karakoram guys come in with a fully contained interface with no pins on cables—that was certainly motivating for us to come up with the Tesla Interface,” Ritter says of their 2013 release that graces Spark’s current lineup of bindings and uses snapping toe ramps to lock in place. In turn, Karakoram launched their Prime Interface in 2014, which improved upon the Split30’s tensioning design and reduced likelihood of icing issues. Looking back, Cunningham agrees with Ritter: “Splitboarding wouldn’t be where it is today if there wasn’t competition. Just look at the weight of bindings these days and the fact that the entire experience of splitboarding is more refined than ever.”

Over a decade ago, Spark and later Karakoram’s bindings began to mollify the complaints of dedicated splitboarders; both brands simplified transitions, improved board feel and increased utility. In turn, new feats were possible. “I still remember the day when the first Spark R&D bindings showed up at the office,” says Backcountry Rider-in-Chief Mike Horn. “Props to Voilé for all the work they put into the system to get it to where it was, but once you had a dedicated binding, it made everything easier.” Jeremy Jones, now one of the most celebrated splitboard designers of all time, has no problem giving binding builders their roses. “I do think boards have gotten better,” he says. “But the binding interface was probably the most critical thing holding us back.”

[Left] Jim Zellers sheds his skins on Yosemite’s Half Dome before his first splitboard descent in March 2000. □ **Courtesy Jim Zellers**

[Above, Right] An anodized prototype of Spark R&D’s Ignition I (circa 2006) and an actual production Ignition II baseplate (circa 2007). □ **Dan Ventura**

[Bottom, Right] Tyler Kloster custom machines early Karakoram prototypes on his homemade CNC machine in his garage. □ **Russell Cunningham**



After scoring a first descent of Small Yahtzee (seen in the background) the afternoon before, 40 Tribes Lead Guide Ty Mills shows the Splitfest crew to the next line of the week in Kyrgyzstan. **Ryan Koupal**

A LONG, HARD ROAD

BY DREW ZIEFF

In April 2006, Scott Newsome broke some groundbreaking news on the splitboarding.com forum. "I have just passed the rigorous 14-day Association of Canadian Mountain Guides winter exam on my Prior splitboard," he wrote. "It has been a long, hard road to get to where I am now, and could not have been possible without the help of the late Craig Kelly."

For years, Newsome had dreamed of guiding on his splitboard at a backcountry hut or on British Columbia's Rogers Pass. To do so, he needed certification through the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG), which had become the first non-European member of the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) nearly 30 years earlier, in 1972.

In 1999, Newsome applied to the ACMG, hoping to take the Assistant Ski Guide exam on his board—only to be denied. Despite his experience tailguiding at his uncle's catskiing operation in Revelstoke, the ACMG told Newsome he'd have to take the test on skis. Splitboarding guides who'd earned their certification before Newsome—including John "Buff" Buffery, then head guide at Nelson's Baldface Lodge, and Ruedi Beglinger, owner of Selkirk Mountain Experience—had taken their exams on skis. Newsome, however, wasn't having it. A freerider who'd been pro since age 16, he began learning to splitski so sufficiently that, one day, he hoped to pass his exams on a split.

By 2000, the more mechanized-oriented Canadian Ski Guides Association, which had become incorporated in 1996, accepted Newsome as the first snowboarder in their

ski-guide program, and he put his splitskiing practice to work. "I just skied the whole time," he recalls of the exam, which he passed. "I didn't even put my snowboard together—just to prove that splitboarders can do it, too."

For three years, Newsome knocked on the ACMG's doors. Each year, they denied entry. Despite Newsome's persistence, he wouldn't become the first splitboarder to be accepted. "Craig really broke down those doors," Newsome says of Craig Kelly, who'd begun his guiding career at Baldface Lodge in 2000, working alongside Baldface cofounders Buff and Jeff Pensiero.

Kelly dreamed of becoming an ACMG-certified lead guide, and Buff, who'd toured with Kelly all over the world, took up his cause. "I took it forward to the ACMG," Buff says. "Why can't we have snowboarding as a mode of mountain travel in the quiver?"

With Buff's strong referral, the ACMG relented. Kelly scored top marks on the ski test, all while on his split. "He made it his mandate that he was going to be faster than anybody in the transition, and he was," Buff explains. "He would move through the mountains purposefully.... I bet you none of the other candidates had half the miles in the mountains that he had. And when somebody has a lot of miles in the mountains, you can tell."

Kelly died before completing his certification in an infamous avalanche at Selkirk Mountain Experience on January 20, 2003. His passing was felt across both the snowboarding and guiding communities, but his excellence in the field opened the door for Newsome.

"There was no reason that they could deny my application anymore," Newsome says. Finally, he was in; he passed his Assistant Guide Exam in 2005, then his Lead Guide Exam in 2008/09, becoming the first splitboarder to do so. Of the achievement, Newsome says he "took pride in trying to finish what Craig started."

In 2014, Ty Mills became the second fully certified ACMG lead splitboard guide, but many of the barriers Newsome faced still remained. After evaluators wouldn't allow Mills to take the week-long ski test on his board, he ultimately failed it. Then, his retest followed suit. But on the final week of the course, a week-long touring exam, "I had the technical director and the vice president of the ACMG as my instructors and examiners," Mills says. His proficiency on a split swayed the powers that be, and the ACMG voted to formally open courses to snowboarders.

Mills was allowed to send in video footage and letters of reference in lieu of retaking the ski test on a snowboard, although he was still held back a year. At the time, Mills was upset, but, looking back, he says he feels like a "splitboard martyr." Around the same time, after a few years of allowing snowboarders entry into its courses, the American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) began allowing individuals to take their Ski Guide Exam on a splitboard, and Eric Layton became among the first to successfully do so in 2015.

Today, the ACMG and AMGA readily welcome splitboarders, and Newsome, Mills and Layton all have successful guiding careers. In turn, they've become mentors for the next generation who aspire to venture down, as Newsome put it, "a long, hard road."

“BLACK INK ON RICE PAPER”

February 2020

“WE’D COME AROUND THE CORNER and see a beautiful face, and he would see his line instantaneously,” Buff recounts on our Sunday morning tour in the Selkirks, describing Craig Kelly’s expertise. “He would see the weakness in the mountain and ride the smoothest line you could.” Upon dropping in, Kelly was, in Buff’s words, “Super smooth, super fast, like Japanese black ink on rice paper.”

I imagine I speak for many millennials when I confess that I’ve skipped some classic snowboard movies—if it came out before Y2K, I likely never watched it, and much of Kelly’s catalog falls in that window. It seemed both riders and camera gear improved every year, so why sift through VHS from decades prior?

And yet, researching this story, I watched hours of old snowboard footage, including any Kelly segments I could find online. It turns out that my youthful stance was ass backward. Sure, the kits are goofy, you couldn’t sell the gear at a garage sale (collector’s items aside), and the pixels are few and proud. But it’s fascinating to watch tricks change season by season and, more impressively, to see what elements endure. Kelly’s style and vision—his slinky surfer’s crouch in powder, his tweaked airs, his engineer’s understanding of angles, his intimate communion with the mountain—remain timeless.

In the 2007 film *Let it Ride*, Kelly muses, “When I look down a run and it’s got some banks and jumps, I can just picture myself rolling a basketball down the hill. Maybe even having a little spin on it as it starts, and it starts corkscrewing down the hill and working its way and if it hits a jump and it’s got a natural tendency to spin, then that’s a good place to spin.”

Following Buff through the Whitewater sidecountry, at the top of each line, I try not to plan my descent based on a single feature—too often, I sacrifice flow for a few feet of airtime. Instead, I think of Kelly and his rolling basketball, of black ink on rice paper.

FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD 2005 – 2008

ALL TOGETHER NOW

“SPLITBOARD COMMUNITY” WAS ONCE an oxymoron. Through the turn of the millennium, splitboarders were lucky to have just one partner willing to wade into the waters of DIY decks and bulky interfaces, and many had more in common with telemarkers and AT skiers than snowshoeing snowboarders.

With improvements in technology, converts were able to keep up with their skiing counterparts, which came with its benefits. “We started to expand our territory in the backcountry, because we could go with skier friends,” says Jim Zellers. “They’d already been skinning to these areas. We’d only just been booting and snowshoeing. So that helped tremendously.”

Still, in the ‘90s and early 2000s, growth was gradual. “When it grows from one person to two people to four people to eight people, the first 10 years there’s not that many people doing it,” Tom Burt explains. “But then, at some point, it goes from 100 to 200, 200 to 400 and 400 to 800—that’s kind of what happened in the backcountry. That growth came about organically.”

Some early communities naturally formed around board builders. Bob Athey, the Wizard of the Wasatch, compares the early scene to telemarking in the mid-1970s. “You knew all the other splitters,” he says. “I mean, there were only 20 of us at the beginning.” James Oda remembers the winter of 1997, when he convinced Chris Prior to split a board in half. “There was one splitboarder in Whistler that year, and then the next year there were



[This Page, Above] John Griber prepares to transition on an early Nitro splitboard during the premiere splitboard expedition into Avalanche Canyon, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming. Greg Von Doersten

[This Page, Below] Godfathers of U.S. snowboard mountaineering Tom Burt and Jim Zellers enjoy the summit of the southwest ridge of Sajama (21,486 ft.), Bolivia, before embarking on the first snowboard descent of the peak. Greg Von Doersten

[Facing Page] Split or solid, skis or snowboard, who cares? Jonaven Moore happened to ride a split on a mind-blowing descent of Mt. Athabasca, Alberta (OK, we do care). His line was once featured as a poster in *Snowboarder*. Dan Hudson

two or three, then four or five, and then, all of a sudden, probably around ‘99/00, we made the first batch of maybe 15 boards,” he says. “From there, it just went nuts.”

As splitboarding grew slightly more commonplace, riders slowly shifted to incorporating splits into their big-mountain repertoires. From the mid-‘90s onward, Tom Burt and Jim Zellers, often accompanied by Jim’s wife, Bonnie, added splits to their toolkits, though they weren’t solely splitboarding as they ticked off technical lines in their home range of California’s Sierra Nevada and in destinations in Alaska, France, Nepal, South America and Japan.

John Griber, a big-mountain pioneer and North Face-sponsored rider who was actively pushing the limits of freeriding at the time, points out that the technology had a long way to go in steeper terrain. “I grew up in Jackson, Wyoming, so the Tetons were my backyard,” he says. “I did most of my splitboarding on the lesser peaks, just because I really didn’t trust my life on the boards I cut. I think the only major Teton peak I did with a splitboard was Buck Mountain.” Griber would go on to ride the Grand Teton (13,775 ft.) a whopping six times—never on a split.

Snowboard mountaineer Stephen Koch nearly completed the Seven Summits when he backed off Mt. Everest’s Hornbein Couloir in 2003. It

was the same line that had swallowed French snowboard mountaineering phenom Marco Siffredi only a year prior. "Splitboarding didn't really play much of a role in my Seven Summits quest," Koch admits, adding that he didn't use splitboards for "extreme descents, because I didn't want to compromise integrity of board and solid edge hold on icy terrain." Splitboards were better suited, he found, to "powder days in the Tetons with friends and clients."

Some tested the limits. A slip on Half Dome would've cost Zellers his life in 2000. British Columbia's Jonaven Moore blew minds when he sped down a sheer rock face on Alberta's Mt. Athabasca (11,453 ft.) in 2003—Dan Hudson's photo of the feat was later published as a poster in *Snowboarder*. In Canada, guides were integral in pushing the sport, from established professionals like Buff and Beglinger to the next generation of Scott Newsome, Joey Vosburgh and Ty Mills, a Rogers Pass regular who ticked off dozens of classic Canadian descents (some of which were first snowboard descents) preceding his Association of Canadian Mountain Guides exam, including the Selkirk Mountain's Swiss Peak (10,377 ft.) in 2007 and the Comstock Couloir of Mt. Hasler (11,079 ft.) in 2008.

But there were underground riders, too, known by names like "BCrider," "Karkis," "Barrows" and "Snowsavage," who rode lines and compiled trip reports on the online forums of splitboard.com. Their exploits, dating back 15 years, are frozen in time and remain a key resource for splitboarders today.

HOME SWEET HOME

AT FIRST, SPLITBOARDERS LURKED IN the forums of back-country-focused sites like TelemarkTips and Couloir. "That's how I found people," says Chris Gallardo, a former pro rider from California's Sierra who discovered splitboarding in 1998. "I would literally make a post, like, 'Hey! Does anyone want to go splitboarding? I live in Tahoe.'" Still, Gallardo felt out of place. Hoping to give fellow splitters a home, he bought the domain splitboard.com in 2004 and, he says, "I started my own party."

The first iteration of the site was basic—Gallardo built splitboard.com on iWeb, which he describes as "the shittiest Apple program for making websites ever." Nonetheless, traffic steadily grew. "My vision was to basically give splitboarding a face and unity and a forum, because I knew that splitters were spread out," he says. "I just got interested in kind of that community building aspect."

For Ty Mills, who was experimenting with hardboot setups at the time, splitboard.com meant a great deal. "There was a lot of us that spent most of our time going out with ski buddies," he says. "So it was super important and encouraging to see the stoke starting to build and see other people that did nerdy shit like drill holes in their splitboards and customize plastic boots."

One of the most impactful aspects of splitboard.com is how it gave product developers a direct line to their target market. Brands like Voilé and Prior realized this early on and became some of splitboard.com's first advertisers. And if a



A HISTORY OF SPLITBOARD HARDBOOTS

BY SCOTT YORKO

Early splitboard guides encountered their fair share of roadblocks while navigating unaccommodating certification curriculums, but clunky, resort-focused gear certainly didn't help them establish their legitimacy. Many individuals came from deep freestyle backgrounds, riding park with soft snowboard boots, before catching the wave of hardboots' re-emergence from the race board days of the early '90s. Then, in the mid 2000s, North America's alpine touring splitboard boot and binding innovation leveled up, thanks to a group of dedicated riders in Rogers Pass, British Columbia.

In 2005, aspiring splitboard guide Joey Vosburgh was on a trip to Japan when he bumped into Canadian splitboard pioneer John "Buff" Buffery, who was splitboarding in ski boots on a Frankenstein plate binding that sat several inches off his board and utilized Dynafit toepieces mounted for touring. The system looked janky, but it planted a seed in Vosburgh's head. That same season, Ty Mills—another Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) hopeful looking for an upgrade—heard a friend describe Buffery's setup and tried to recreate it using Scarpa T3 boots with a beveled toe. He asked Prior to make him a splitboard with metal plates in the top sheet for mounting Dynafit toepieces directly to the board.

"We all did burly stuff prior to hardboots, but I'd say our game stepped up big when we started using hardboots," Mills says. "We have big access places [around Rogers Pass], so [we needed] more efficient setups for going deep and big. We couldn't be using a shitty snowboard setup for any of that anymore."

In the U.S., meanwhile, Eric Layton was taking his first American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) course in 2006. He showed up with two other aspiring splitboard guides, only to be met by his instructor Vince Anderson's question: "Who the fuck let you in on those splitboards?" Anderson later suggested that Layton look into Voilé's hard-plate binding, which Layton did and continued to experiment with for several years.

In 2007, Vosburgh needed quick, efficient transitions to keep up with mega ski partners like David Sproule, Mark Hartley and Greg Hill while touring around Revelstoke, B.C. Hill bestowed his pair of Dynafit TLT5 boots upon Vosburgh, who modified the cuff so that it would offer a range of motion similar to that of a soft snowboard boot when locked.

"I was sold right away and knew it was going to be the way for me," he says. "No ratchets to break in the mountains, and I could ski out on



complex exits if I had to."

Like most early hardboot converts, Vosburgh felt a little embarrassed wearing ski boots around other longtime snowboarders who'd grown up on the counterculture side of the ski-versus-snowboard equation. But most hardboot-curious splitboarders found commonality on the early forum pages of splitboard.com. That's where Vosburgh noticed Colorado-based NASA rocket engineer John Keffler posting his own hardboot splitboard binding and AT boot modifications that looked exactly like his own. In 2012, Vosburgh began testing prototypes of Keffler's newly patented "Phantom" splitboard bindings and custom modifications to the Dynafit TLT5, moving the lower buckle into the cuff's pivot point, slotting out the locking mechanism for more forward flex and Dremeling some slits in the lower shell for more lateral movement. Back in B.C., other guides and splitboarders took note of Vosburgh's setup, along with similar modifications by Mills, whose friend Mark Hartley had turned him onto Phantom bindings.

Spark R&D released their own version of a hardboot binding compatible with their Tesla puck system in 2014. That was the same year John Keffler launched an official website for customers to buy his bindings, rather than the mail-in check system he'd been using. By 2015, Eric Layton's frequent guiding trips to B.C. had fully converted him to riding modified TLT6 boots, and he became the first splitboarder to achieve full AMGA guide certification. In 2018, Spark R&D collaborated with Phantom to make the first splitboard-specific tech toepiece, and 2020 saw Phantom's launch of the first-ever alpine touring splitboard boot, the Slipper—a modified and rebranded Atomic Backland.

"AT boots are so much better for being technical and moving through the mountains the way we want and need to," Vosburgh says. "It kind of blew me away at first to think that this could catch on, and it kind of did."

For Mills, he believes that fearless innovation has been the biggest driving force behind the hardboot resurgence over the last decade-plus. Says Mills, "Will [Ritter] from Spark collaborating on toepieces with John [Keffler] and working out of a garage—they're innovating because they're not afraid to."

Scott Yorko traveled around the world for seven weeks last season with three snowboards and a single hardboot/binding setup in one board bag. He did not incur any overweight baggage charges.



[Facing Page, Top] A pair of well-used and well-modified Scarpa F3s hold down camp on Mt. Steele in Canada's Yukon. ☐ **Joey Vosburgh**

[Facing Page, Middle and Below] A pair of Dynafit TLT6s undergo surgery to soften side flex; a Cinderella story, hardboot edition; and Phantom's first branded hardboot sample, which arrived in summer 2020. ☐ **John Keffler, all photos**

[This Page, Above] Mark "Wally" Wariakois, Bob Athey and two attendees of the Wasatch Splitfest hang loose. ☐ **Chris Gallardo**

[This Page, Below, Left] An unknown split-nerd shows off an early Frankenboot iteration. ☐ **Chris Gallardo**

[This Page, Below, Right] Splitfests offer a chance to unite offline and IRL. ☐ **Chris Gallardo**



brand wanted to test the market or gauge interest in a project, splitboard.com was a ready-made focus group.

Will Ritter was cobbling together early Spark R&D prototypes when he stumbled upon the forum. “It really helped me launch, because I could go there and see what everyone’s complaints were,” he says. “And, once I had prototypes, I started posting about them. I thought maybe I was going to make bindings for myself and a couple of buddies, and I put up the first pictures there and was just mobbed immediately. People were like, ‘Take my money. I want a set, right now.’”

Splitboard.com is somewhat of a living relic now, although the site still has its loyalists. Splitters, in line with contemporary trends, have gravitated away from forums and toward Facebook, Instagram and Reddit. But none of these online communities, as ubiquitous as ever in 2020, are as important to splitboard culture as splitboard.com was in its heyday. Gallardo’s baby was more than a forum for splitboarders to dissect gear, talk shit and keep the stoke alive—it was home.

FESTIVAL SEASON

AS COMMUNITY DEVELOPED ONLINE, real-life renaissance fairs emerged for backcountry boarders, where attendees brandish demos and microbrews instead of lances and turkey legs. The earliest splitboard festival likely occurred in 2004, when Voilé and employee DJ Barney hosted the Wasatch Splitfest at his home. Barney put out the invite in the forums, and 18 shredders attended the event in the powder-blessed Wasatch.

Chris Gallardo heeded Barney’s call, right around the time he started splitboard.com. “Up until that point, folks were just starting to use the internet to find other splitters and learn about the gear. Small clusters were forming organically: There were the Cali splitters, the Utah crew, [those in] Montana and our friends to the north,” Gallardo says. “The first Splitfest by Voilé gave splitters the perfect excuse to get out of their home ranges and explore new terrain with new friends.”

At that first Splitfest, Bob Athey talked avalanche safety, Kowboy discussed developing his invention and refining it with Voilé and, of course, lines were lapped. The event ran for a couple years and became a blue-

print for many to follow. The impact, Gallardo says, was profound: “Splitters returned to their local communities with stories to tell and more splitboard stoke to share.”

Jeramie Prine, a splitboard.com diehard based in Lander, Wyoming, organized another early festival on Togwotee Pass in 2005. “I decided to call it Scrub Fest due to the fact the first year we didn’t have sponsors or any form of lodging,” Prine says. “No T-shirts, no sponsors, no bullshit was the idea. The event was for the dirtbag scrub splitboarders that came to ride some wild snow in Wyoming without any hype or expectations.”

The event inevitably evolved, thanks to later help and sponsorship from Spark R&D and Voilé. Despite the transition to a more organized event, “the name stuck,” Prine says, “and [it] turned into a full-on backcountry and splitboarding festival that happened annually for seven years.”

John Keffler attended the last Scrub Fest, which inspired him to found Silverton Splitfest alongside Jason Bushey in 2011. Keffler and Bushey approached Klemmerns “Klem” and Lisa Branner of Silverton, Colorado’s Venture Snowboards to partner on the project. Originally, Klem voiced concern over hosting such an event in Silverton’s notoriously steep and avalanche-prone terrain. “The last thing I wanted was for a bunch of super stoked splitboarders to come here and centerpunch shit and someone gets killed,” Klem says, reflecting on the decision to run the event “as late in the season as possible to just let the snowpack stabilize.” Were it not for the coronavirus pandemic, Silverton Splitfest would’ve celebrated its ninth year in spring 2020.

For Klem, the best part of Silverton Splitfest lies in the evening talks, which focus on avalanche education, route-finding, rescue techniques and more. Says Klem, “Education, community and gear—that’s what Silverton Splitfest is all about.”

Many mountain communities have a splitboard festival these days. The Canuck Splitfest is held in Revelstoke, Canada, and celebrated a decade in the game last season. The latest installment brought in over 400 splitboarders, and a raffle procured \$13,200 for Avalanche Canada. There are far-flung events including Splitfest New Zealand, running since 2011 in Temple Basin, New Zealand, and more recent additions like Winter Park, Colorado’s Front Range Splitfest. The events range in scope, but all have a common core mission: to spread the stoke of splitboarding and bring together and grow the community.

THE NEW WAVE

2008 – 2020

A MAN, A MOVIE

WHEN JEREMY JONES FIRST SPLIT a snowboard in the mid-'90s, it collected dust. Back then, Jones was no splitboard evangelist—splits were sluggish at the time, and he required a precise big-mountain blade as he honed his craft in Wyoming’s Tetons, California’s Sierra Nevada and Alaska’s Chugach. But soon Jones discovered the limits of lifts, snowmobiles and helicopters, finding himself riding the same lines over and over. “Best day of the year,

I'm on a line I've already ridden before? That means I'm not moving forward," he says.

In 2008, Jones was at the top of his game. He'd already won the Big Mountain Rider of the Year award 10 times and starred in five movie segments that year, including the usual cuts for production companies Teton Gravity Research (TGR) and Absinthe, as well as for Travis Rice's blockbuster 2008 film, *That's It, That's All*. But it was a low-budget, under-the-radar 2008 flick entitled *My Own Two Feet*, directed by Chris Edmunds, that Jones calls the highlight of his winter. "As lame as it sounds, I was getting kind of burnt on the traditional moviemaking," he says. "I definitely was hitting a plateau. The only way to get better was to take more and more risks. And *My Own Two Feet* was, hands down, the coolest stuff that I was doing on a snowboard."

Jones had just founded Protect Our Winters—a nonprofit to help action-sports athletes advocate on behalf of the climate and environment—in 2007, around the time he began to value hiking over helicopters. *My Own Two Feet* was human-powered, shot in the Sierra Nevada and featured fellow freeriders like Dave Downing, Tom Burt and Jim Zellers. A crash course in winter camping, splitboarding and adventure, the project confirmed Jones's hypothesis that splitboarding was his new direction.

So, in May 2008, he decided to make his own film centered on human-powered riding. Together with TGR, cofounded by Jones's brothers Todd and Steve, and with cinematographer Chris Edmunds, Jones embarked on a six-year, three-film project that Todd only half-jokingly describes as "our *Lord of the Rings*."

Deeper, the first of the series, released in 2010, destroyed any argument that splits couldn't shred serious terrain. In Chamonix, France, Jones roped up with French speed demon Xavier de Le Rue and tackled sheer faces with ice axes in hand. In Alaska's Fairweather Range, Jones and Ryland Bell, an Alaskan commercial fisherman and soldier of the Sierra, among others, scorched spines, and Travis Rice, who hadn't spent much time on the skintrack, put on a big-mountain freestyle clinic. "Frankly, I was psyched," Rice says. "I brought up a bunch of backup parts, 'cause I planned on trying to hit some jumps and wasn't sure how the gear was going to hold up." Rice's gear *did* hold up, and, to this day, the riding does, too.

The film's impact was immediate. In *Deeper*'s trailer, accompanied by shots of skinning, rappelling, grandiose lines and a ski-in, ski-out tent city on an Alaskan glacier, Jones narrates, "Snowmobiles and helicopters have dictated where I've snowboarded. For years, I've been going, 'I think we can ride these things on foot if we set up camp.' And now, the opportunities are endless."

"I remember the first year we shot *Deeper*, you'd be excited if you saw a splitboarder," Jones says. Just after the trailer had been released in 2009, Jones was on an early season tour with Bell. "The only people we saw that day were four other people. And they're all new splitboarders," Jones says. "[Bell] was like '*Deeper* effect, dude."

THE SOLUTION

DEEPER DIDN'T JUST INTRODUCE SNOWBOARDERS to splitboarding—it was also a marketing vehicle for Jones's eponymous snowboard company. During the first year filming for *Deeper*, Jones used a DIY Rossignol split and had the same issues as with any self-made split: It was too soft, lacked metal edges for sidehilling and had connection issues. Rossignol, a longtime partner, was going through a change in ownership and subsequent financial distress and,



[Above, Left] Jeremy Jones keeps it chill at Refugio Frey, Argentina. Andrew Miller

[Above, Right] After filming a first descent in Alaska's Fairweather Range for *Deeper*, Xavier de Le Rue gives a two-poles-up review. Seth Lightcap

[Below] Skin hard, ride hard: Forrest Shearer, Mark Carter, an unknown splitboarder and Bryan Iguchi go the distance. Andrew Miller

[Facing Page] Jeremy Jones dances his way down the Free Fall Wall while shooting for his first splitboard film, *Deeper*, in Alaska's Fairweather Range. Seth Lightcap

despite Jones's requests, had no interest at the time in making a splitboard.

They parted ways, and Jones took meetings with other brands, but all refused to invest in splitboarding or give him free reign on design. In 2009, he realized that he would have to start his own brand if he wanted to design what he envisioned. "I want to do the best snowboarding of my life and do it on a splitboard," Jones says he told himself. "And I need to figure out how to make it a better splitboard."

By his second year of filming for *Deeper*, Jones was mainly on a Jones Solution, which would hit shops in 2010 and later become the best-selling splitboard of all time. In the film's Tahoe segment, he rode a solid prototype of the cult-classic Hovercraft, which helped set the stage for the shorter, fatter powder shapes that now flood the split and solid markets. "Jeremy went and built what we all wanted," declares Zellers, who sought after the perfect split for years.

With an evolving quiver and improved bindings underfoot, Jones was able to tackle heavier lines with confidence while filming *Further* and *Higher*, and their respective 2012 and 2014 releases continued to draw in new riders.



Despite riding what Jones deems the gnarliest line of his life—the Himalaya's Shangri-La Spine Wall—in *Higher* while not on a split, filming *Deeper* was, in many ways, the crux of Jones's career: He placed a risky bet on splitboarding, and it paid off. Jones Snowboards has grown at a steady clip of seven to 12 percent per year for the last decade.

Tom Burt, who helped run safety during the filming of the trilogy, jokes that the *Deeper* project was "pretty much a rehash of Jim and my career, as far as what places we went to and things we did." But he also explains the influence those films had on everyday snowboarders. "When splitboards first came out, people didn't believe that you could do things on them. But in the movies, starting with *My Own Two Feet* and then moving on to Jeremy's movies, they started seeing people doing freestyle and riding big lines, and, all of a sudden, everything was possible on a splitboard."

"[Jones] has been the marketing vessel by which splitboarding as a category became accepted by the mainstream media, general public and retail network worldwide," says Karakoram's Russell Cunningham. And while many rightfully attribute Jones as the reason behind the recent boom, Jones notes that, "I think that the growth that we see in splitboarding would have happened a lot sooner if Craig [Kelly] didn't pass." Zellers recognizes that both riders played key roles. "I'll give full credit to Craig and Jeremy," he says. "Craig legitimized it. Jeremy made it cool." And what happens after Jones made it cool? "It explodes," Zellers says.

The explosion in splitboarding is evident from sales numbers and traffic at trailheads to the droves of pro riders who've converted from one plank to two. Jackson Hole, Wyo. heavy-hitters Travis Rice and Bryan Iguchi are no strangers to the skintrack or Jones's film projects; most recently, the trio reunited for 2019's *Roadless*. Sierra powder hound Tim Eddy commented, "I swore off snowmobile travel about 12 years ago, only been in a helicopter once about eight years ago and haven't owned a pass in five years." Riders Forrest Shearer and Nick Russell have brought style into the backcountry. "He's got the combo of freestyle, big lines and a creative eye," Zellers says of Russell. "I'm not sure anyone is close to his level." Alongside moppy-haired megastar Danny Davis, pro surfer Ian Walsh and a handful of splitters, Russell, Shearer and the "Denali Surf Team" took on Alaska's tallest peak in 2019.

Laura Hadar, who tattooed her name in snowboard history throwing down in the streets and on technical Alaskan lines, is well on her way to become the first woman to splitboard all of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks. The current 14ers speed record holder—man or woman, splitboarder or skier—is Josh Jespersen, a former Navy SEAL who, in 2017, sprinted on his splitboard through the 54 peaks in four months and 21 days. Elena Hight, a household name for her performances at the Dew Tour, X Games and Olympics, has breathed a second life into her pro career as a splitboarder, starred alongside Jones in the 2018 film *Ode to Muir* and has a new split-heavy



film out this year called *Blank Canvas*. Since *Deeper*, Frenchman Xavier de Le Rue has continued to make splitters pucker the world over for his steep assaults—a tradition carried on by his brother, Victor, as well as Julien “Pica” Herry and a handful of hardcore Chamonix shredders. This list is hardly exhaustive and doesn’t include many international rippers and guides, who, in the splitboard community, are often equally revered. Nor does it touch on the countless under-the-radar individuals whose tracks cause run-of-the-mill riders to shake their heads and whistle. But it does hint at the scope of the sport’s growth—splitboarding may still be considered somewhat niche, but it’s solidified into a culture all its own.

THE BOOM

AS JONES SNOWBOARDS TOOK OFF, the TGR trilogy propelled demand and bindings developed, it suddenly became easier for brands to justify entering the fray. Burton, after slowing their splitboard production to a trickle, added more models to their line. After pausing splitboard production at the turn of the century, Nitro relaunched splits in 2013—as of 2020, they joined Burton and K2 as one of the few splitboard builders to complement their lineup with split-specific boots and bindings. Both Burton and Nitro collaborated with Spark R&D on their split bindings, while K2 did the same with Voilé. A few brave brands started building bindings from scratch: some failed, like Atomic and New Zealand-based Ranger, while others, like Phantom and Plum, now compete with the big dogs. Rossignol began building a lineup of

splits in 2013 around Xavier de Le Rue with the XV. Lib-Tech did the same with Travis Rice in 2012, who credits his time in Alaska filming *Deeper* with Jones as a catalyst for their split launch.

Arbor, Amplid, Capita, K2, Rome, Salomon and others all eventually added splits to their lines, too, joining brands who were producing splits ahead of Jones like Winterstick, Prior, Never Summer, Venture and Unity. Voilé, on the other hand, has watched their numbers dwindle. “We still have that black-sheep thing hanging over our heads,” Wally says, aware that Voilé’s reputation as a ski brand hasn’t helped business as splitboarding moved from fringe to core.

There has been a boom, however, for smaller, boutique builders. Venture saw splitboarding become a central part of their business, as they’ve become renowned for building durable, dependable, do-it-all boards. Likewise, Whistler-based Prior introduced splitboards in 1999, one decade after the brand’s founding by the late Chris Prior. Weston, based in Colorado, has seen sales nearly double each year since current owner Leo Tsuo assumed control in 2016. Weston attributes their growth to a fresh take on marketing. Rather than paying big bucks to top riders, the company donates proceeds to the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE), the National Forest Foundation and other nonprofits and supports a network of grassroots ambassadors. These guides, dirtbags and hometown heroes in turn help Weston host community-building events and seminars that introduce newbies to splitboarding and avalanche safety.

CLASS IS IN SESSION

AS THE DEMAND FOR SPLITBOARDS has grown, so too has the demand for split-specific education. Justin Ibarra, a Weston ambassador and founder of Colorado Snowboard Guides (CSG), worked with Weston to develop Splitboard 101 classes to help snowboarders make a smooth and safe entry into the backcountry.

“When I started splitboarding over 10 years ago, there was a lack of educational outlets for a snowboarder to learn the basics of splitboarding and getting into the backcountry,” Ibarra says. In addition to offering Splitboarding 101 at gear shops and split-specific AIARE 1 and 2 classes, Ibarra also teaches splitboard mountaineering courses, where students learn how to utilize technical gear and techniques to bring steeper lines within reach. “You get to meet like-minded individuals that will hopefully become new touring partners,” Ibarra adds, noting that CSG’s splitboard-specific avalanche courses filled up for the upcoming season well before the aspens changed in Colorado.

Ryan Koupal, founder of 40 Tribes, a tour operator that takes advanced skiers and riders on international off-the-beaten-skintrack adventures, also recognizes that “split-specific” sells. Koupal makes an effort to hire notable splitboard guides, like Ty Mills and Eric Layton. Doing so is “hugely important,” Koupal says, both to himself and “to 40 Tribes as a splitboarder-founded guiding business.”

In the upcoming season, 40 Tribes will be offering their seventh-annual Splitfest, located in Kyrgyzstan, an event that’s been “pretty much been booked full since year one,” Koupal says. 40 Tribes’ event differs from traditional splitfests in that it’s a “guided week by splitboarders, for splitboarders.” Riders who join 40 Tribes in Kyrgyzstan, says Koupal, will notice that “everyone is on the same page—on the skintrack, during transitions and especially in how we look at the mountains and the way they should be ridden.”

In 2020, the divide between skiers and snowboarders, particularly in the backcountry, is all but invisible—most of Koupal’s itinerary is open to both skiers and splitboarders, and rare are the splitboarders who tour

exclusively with fellow single-plankers. And yet Koupal's point is valid—from online forums to splitfests, avy classes to guided trips, there's something special about spending time with like-minded riders.

A COMMON THREAD

February 2020

CELEBRATING COLD SMOKE

THE COLD SMOKE POWDER FESTIVAL ISN'T a splitfest. Rather, it's an indiscriminate celebration of all things backcountry. Whitewater, B.C.'s humble base area bustles with a small cluster of booths open for demos. The festival's schedule is packed with inbounds and backcountry clinics and punctuated by a skimo race and a freeride competition. Before the lifts start to crank each morning, splitboarders and skiers mill about, prepping gear and breaking into groups.

Buff has a desk job these days, as the senior avalanche officer of British Columbia's Highways Avalanche Program. Still, he considers himself fortunate to guide on his days off, whether helping Travis Rice scout locations for his upcoming Natural Selection tour or teaching splitboard clinics here at Powder Fest.

On Saturday, Buff leads an all-day tour for advanced splitboarders and, on Sunday, the same offering for intermediates. I sign up for both and find the groups surprisingly small. Buff modestly suggests there's low attendance because event organizers billed his clinics as "Hero Tours." The designation is a compliment, meant to salute Buff's impressive résumé, but perhaps it comes off as intimidating. Either way, I don't mind. Nipping at Buff's heels in Whitewater's sidecountry with two or three other splitboarders is a dream come true.

The irony is that Buff isn't intimidating at all, and he quietly encourages our group to ask questions. We oblige, peppering him with queries about the snowpack, his first splitboard and what it's like working safety on a T. Rice shoot. On the Saturday tour, one splitter who is starting to enter big mountain competitions picks Buff's brain about gauging avalanche conditions before tackling serious terrain. The sole woman in the group is a strong snowboarder but hasn't spent much time off-piste. Before we drop into a steep pitch with a stand of tight trees mid-slope, Buff kindly checks in with her, asking "Do you see your line?"

That evening, over steaming bowls of ramen, Buff tells me about becoming a ski guide, discovering snowboarding and building his first split, how he ran safety for Craig Kelly and became his friend and mentor. He talks



[Facing Page] Surf the shadows, slash in the sun, stick the double drop, then let 'er rip. Laura Hadar shows how it's done in Haines, Alaska. ☐ **Andrew Miller**

[Above] 40 Tribes' Splitfest crew pauses to admire their earlier tracks on The Shrine—a 1,700-foot line that drops almost directly back to their yurt camp in Kyrgyzstan. ☐ **Ryan Koupal**

about cofounding Baldface Lodge with Kelly and Jeff Pensiero and convincing the ACMG to give Kelly, a splitboarder, a shot at a guiding certification. I ask questions, but, for the most part, I just soak it in.

The next day, our group of four hitches a ride on a rickety two-seat chairlift. We transition to split mode and follow Buff up and out of Whitewater. The pitches immediately adjacent to the resort are tracked, but Buff has a stash in mind, and we push on. At the ridgeline above our chosen line, a sustained, steeper-than-expected ribbon of white that cuts through the forest, Buff assesses a consolidating storm slab and has us drop one by one to the safety of the trees below. From there, he's satisfied that the slab is no longer a concern, and we take off in a party wave. Generously spaced old-growth trees are draped in scarves of moss, and their trunks and branches form corridors with pillows scattered between them. I catch glimpses of Buff and his split disciples darting between trees, hear their whoops and answer in kind, launching off any bump or stump I can find—momentarily forgetting Kelly and his rolling basketball.

Sunday night, Buff and I grab dinner with his friend Keith Berens, the metalworker who helped Buff split that old board all those years ago. Berens was also a good friend of Kelly's and built the iconic, curved cross that pays homage to the fallen father, friend and freerider that stands above Baldface Lodge.

After dinner, we walk to Buff's office, where Splitfire leans against a wall. Its topsheet is a swirl of color, and the hardware is primitive and rusty. I marvel at the T-nuts and bolts and plastic cutting-board struts and jerry-rigged hardboot bindings, imagining the exasperation Buff must've felt setting skintracks in 1992, when splitboarding wasn't even a word yet.

Like anyone who's had a binding break, it's no stretch to understand the irritation Buff experienced when his invention didn't function as envisioned. But I picture the joy he felt, too; I'd tapped into that euphoria that morning, slashing through the trees. And in that office, I feel a wave of gratitude for Buff and Craig, Kowboy and Wally, Ueli and Tommy; for Jeremy, Will and the Klosters and for every mind that contributed to the evolution of this sport. All of those engineers and tinkerers, riders and revolutionaries, committed to refining the simple yet bogglingly complex act of walking uphill and riding back down.

"Somebody offered me 10 grand for that," Buff says, his eyes twinkling, as I snap photos of Splitfire from every angle. There's no need to ask why he never sold it. ■