

# HIGHER EARNING

GREG HILL NETS MILLION VERTICAL SEASON

BY ANDREW McLEAN



GREG HILL

LORNE GLICK

There are few millionaires in backcountry skiing, let alone those who have earned it all in one season. But last winter, Canadian skier Greg Hill ascended a total of one million vertical feet—banking it all in 145 days.

The rules for Big Leg Greg's quest, code-named "The Odyssey," were simple. Count only the ascent, reach the million mark in one year, and do it the old-fashioned way—fully self-propelled. By the end of the winter, Hill averaged over 7,000 feet

per day, mostly in British Columbia's Monashee, Purcell and Selkirk ranges. For motivation, he invented projects like skiing ten new areas in ten consecutive days with 10,000 feet per day, or busting out a potential world record just to keep it interesting.

On February 25, he and his brother-in-law set up a backcountry camp in the Selkirks. Starting at midnight under a full moon, Greg soloed twenty-five 1,600' laps in just over 21 hours for a staggering total of 40,160'. Hungry for more, he has already figured out the logistics of a 50,000' day—2,500 feet of vertical, 20 runs, one lap every hour and 12 minutes. This vertical obsession has literally made him a walking user's manual for Suunto altimeter watches and has attracted sponsorships from Arc'teryx and Life-Link.

Hill's compulsion is driven in part by his highly numerical mind—one geared for calculating time, distance, weight and fuel estimates (as well as adding up his crushing cribbage scores). He's also got an immense threshold for pain and cold, which he controls through sheer willpower.

According to Hill, this is also the key to achieving big vertical. "What a strong mind commands, the weak legs must obey," he says.

But his exceptional physical and mental talents are eclipsed by an even greater human spirit—a rare quality that makes it hard not to like the guy, even if you can't keep up with him. He is the "Greg" in gregarious, exuding a calm, capable demeanor unfazed by barfing tent partners, crushing loads and huge vertical.

"The Odyssey" marks not only a milestone in Hill's skiing career, which began with ski racing in Quebec at an early age, but in his personal life as well. Recently retired from his summer position as manager of a roving reforestation crew, he plans to continue similar work much closer to home—a decision he made in January upon learning that he would soon be a father. While this spurred him to make sure he finished his quest on time, he is looking forward to child rearing as an "interesting science experiment."

"You can't work and ski a million vertical feet," he says. Last year

skiing was "a full time job."

Anticipating that 2004/05 might be his last season to be a professional ski bum, Greg got his priorities in order. Last April, he passed the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides Assistant Ski Guide exam. He will be putting his new certificate to use in the future by guiding around his hometown of Revelstoke.

Over the years, he has meticulously penciled in the hundreds of lines (many first descents) that he has skied in the region, spanning across five topo maps. Beyond pushing the limits of the human body, he's also pushing his mind, racking up first aid, avalanche and guiding credentials all before he turns 30 this December.

Although it might seem intimidating, skiing with Greg Hill is easy. Since you'll never catch him, you'll never break trail. If you packed too much gear, he'll carry it for you. If you didn't pack enough Ritter Sport chocolate, he'll give you some of his. All of this frees you up to do the one thing that everyone, including Hill, wants most—to make more turns.



PHOTO BY BRIAN GOLDSTONE

## THE ODYSSEY BY ALISON PERRY

**145:** The number of days Greg took to finish "The Odyssey," beginning at midnight on October 29th and finishing on May 19th. (This total does not include Greg's rest and travel days).

**10:** The number of years it took Odysseus to complete his own journey home to Ithaca after the Trojan War in Homer's *The Odyssey*.

**2:** Greg: "I used two pairs of skis—my big powder skis almost everyday, and then my race skis for fast, light days and larger vertical days."

**15:** The average daily weight of Greg's pack (in pounds).

**0:** Breakdowns. Greg made it through the season without breaking his bindings or having to re-glue his skins.

**21:** The number of continuous hours Greg skied on his longest day.

**40:** The average annual snowfall in Greg's hometown of Revelstoke, British Columbia (in feet).

**28:** Greg's highest cribbage score.

**10,000:** The approximate total kilometers Greg drove to and from the different ski touring destinations during "The Odyssey."

**145:** Bars of Ritter Sport Chocolate consumed during "The Odyssey." However, Greg notes, "Ahh...it may have been more. Yeah, I'd say at least one everyday. Maybe two."

**34.44:** To put the sheer vertical of Greg's million-foot march in perspective, this figure denotes an equivalent number of ascents of Everest (29,035') from sea level.