

King of the

Mountain endurance races were made for the speed and stamina of Greg Hill.

BY MARTY McLENNAN // PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN GOLDSTONE

It's midnight when Greg Hill wrestles beetle-like out of his frozen cocoon. The north-facing glaciated bowl to his right sparkles in the folds of a lost corner of B.C.'s Columbia range. It's a cloudless, nippy, -15-degree night, and he shakes the cold from his shoulders and snaps

into his bindings. Then he begins the long hike up alone through the eerie moonlit darkness. Forty-five minutes later, at the peak of the cirque, his altimeter marks a gain of 520 metres. He yanks off his skins, and for the first time he actually stops to gaze over the fairy-tale scene: a sparkling oasis of untracked Selkirk powder—all his for the

Hill



taking. "Breathe and believe," he whispers to himself as he launches off the cornice.

The planets have aligned on this full-moon night, and he whistles down the knee-deep run with a series of graceful yet speedy GS turns. While the thrill of throttling through virgin pow is the medium, for Hill the vertical is the message; for the skier

isn't satisfied with a single run, or a single day. His mind is constantly crunching the numbers, racing over the probabilities of each turn. By the time he cranks his momentum to a stop, he checks his watch, and, in a ritualized, continual motion, throws his skins back on and climbs on at even a brisker pace—at this rate, he thinks,

he might just make a personal record.

He summits again. And again. And again—for 21 solid hours. By then, just after 9:00 p.m. the next evening, he finally reaches the goal: 12,200 metres of climbed vertical. He ascends another 52 for good measure, then cruises back to his campsite, crawls into his bivouac and finally gets some rest. ►



This is just another day at the office for Greg Hill, one of the country's most passionate backcountry skiers. Digging deep into a seemingly endless well of endurance and energy, last year the B.C.-based athlete humbly went about his business, skinning up a record that for just about anyone with lifts or helicopters has ever hoped to achieve in a season—one million feet (or 300 km) of pure vertical, roughly the accumulated plumb of a dozen or so round trips to the planet's ozone layer.

At rest in his humble living room, just outside the town centre of Revelstoke, B.C., the 30-year-old is surrounded by the symbols of his love and the lines of his success. His girlfriend, Tracey, is feeding their newborn, while Mia, their fluffy tabby cat, stretches out underneath Hill's Kingdom—a wall plastered with a collage of a dozen dog-eared topo maps of the mountains in his backyard. Etched with loving patience and scaled with monumental perseverance are the zigzagging lines of hundreds of ascents (and, of course, heart-pounding descents) through the tightly woven contours of the hanging pages.

Last year's tally stretches the imagination: 40 different summits—18 of them new to Greg, 37 days with more than 3,000 metres of vertical and first descents on eight different peaks. Flip through his logbook and you'll find the details of his prophet-like fervour: an average of 2,000 metres per outing, six days a week, for 145 colossal days on snow.



Born in the mountain town of Sutton, Quebec, Hill's appetite for huge vertical came

straight from the womb. "He was always dragging me on his leash straight downhill, while I screamed TURN! TURN!" recalls his mother, Deane, a diehard skier who, with the help of Greg's dad, put him and his five siblings on boards from the moment they could walk. After graduating from Bishops College School, an English boarding-school in Quebec, Deane introduced him to Rocky Mountain skiing with Selkirk Mountain Experience's head guide Ruedi Beglinger.

Two years into his biology degree in Halifax, the call of the high peaks still kept him awake at night, and he dropped everything, never to return to the flat East. But his unwieldy zeal for the alpine was quickly sobered while taking an avalanche course in Rogers Pass. Unwittingly, friends set off a massive slide above Hill and his classmates. Five were caught and one killed. "I swore from that moment on I would do as much as I could to learn the ways of the mountain," he says.

So he went back to the books. Since then, he has spent years studying, graduating from the nation's most important outdoor institutions: the Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA), the Canadian Ski Guide Association (CSGA) and the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG). "Out there," he points to the peaks through the window, "your mind is occupied keeping your body and friends safe."

But more than pushing superhuman limits, or perhaps because of this, Hill has surged to the cusp of adventure racing. When describing it to the uninitiated, the wiry, six-foot-tall skier says, "Take your best day of backcountry and turn it into a run." It's the essence of off-piste skiing and it's been around since before lifts,

resorts and time-shares. Practised mostly by the Europeans, it's beginning to take hold of the Americas.

Whistler jumped onto the bandwagon three years ago, initiating their annual Arc'teryx Randonnée Rally, which takes place the first weekend of January. Boasting a 1,500- to 1,800-metre vertical climb, the two-hour endurance race has been equated to running a half marathon, but with the benefit of a hair-raising, last-one-down-is-a-dirty-rotten-egg finish. For Hill, who regularly logs eight hours on his own in the backcountry, the race is more of an appetizer. In his first year, showing up on a last-minute dare, he arrived in a leather jacket sporting a Canadian-styled mullet. While his professionally trained competitors were laughing at the get-up, he was gone like a shot. His legendary straight-lined tuck to the finish line was more than enough to silence his peers. In a world where competitions are measured by milliseconds, he won by more than half a minute. The following year, he decided to train. He won by a full 10 minutes.

And he's never looked back since.

Hill, now a three-time champ, reigns supreme at Whistler. His next goal is a February world record for the most vertical at the first-ever 24 Hours of Sunlight, the backcountry brother to 24 Hours of Aspen. Then he's off to represent Canada at the Ski Mountaineering World Championships in Italy.

But despite the glamour of the international race scene, Hill has set his sights away from himself. Instead, he's focusing on bringing out the local talent from the Calgary and Canmore area to create a new Canadian team. His initial step is organizing the first-ever Sunshine 5,000 in Banff, on January 28. "There's a ton of great skiers out there," he muses. "I've just got to find them."

As the snow falls outside, Hill ponders his personal goals. Sitting quietly, rocking his daughter to sleep, he scans the contours of his seven-digit season, "The mountains have taught me," he says, shrugging his shoulders in an understated way, "that if you can relax and be confident in whatever you do, you can achieve anything." ■



Want to race the Sunshine 5,000?
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