

SNOWBOARD CANADA WOMEN'S ANNUAL

**PREMIER
ISSUE**

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IN COLLINGWOOD, ON.
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A person wearing a bright red jacket, a white helmet, and goggles is performing a tail stall on a sled. The sled is positioned on a snowy slope, and the person is leaning back, with their feet on the sled's runners. The background is dark, suggesting a night setting, with a warm, orange light source visible in the upper right corner. The sled's runners are visible, showing a series of dark, curved lines. The snow on the slope is textured and appears to be disturbed by the sled's movement.

Getting the speed right from the sled tow-in is hard, but after a few tries, Hight nails it with a Tail Stall into the night. Barker photo

HURLEY NITELINE CREEK

THREE DAYS OF POW WITH BACKCOUNTRY SNOWCATS
WORDS BY NATALIE LANGMANN | PHOTOS BY ASHLEY BARKER AND SHAUN HUGHES

This winter has been insane. So much snow—dump after dump. Now that we're well into spring, the sun is starting to crack through the stormy winter clouds. This is perfect catskiing weather, and just in time, as we've wrangled a crew to head north of Pemberton, BC, into the Southern Chilcotins, for a week-long catboarding odyssey. Backcountry Snowcats, off the Hurley logging road in the Grouty Creek area, is in its inaugural year with Reg and Kathy Milne at the helm. These operators ski-toured the entire area for 20 years, fought for tenure for over 13 years, and we will be the first all-girl crew to shred the valley and enjoy the proverbial fruits of their labour.

The girls coming have spun a twist on their usual scene of halfpipe riding and competitions to ride unknown terrain. The crew includes Mercedes Nicoll, Elena Hight, Helen Schettini and Dom Vallée. *Snowboard Canada Women's Annual* creative director Roberta Rodger also jumped at the opportunity to get out of her office and shred lines with two of her athletes from Infamous Management, Nicoll and Hight. To top it off, longtime Whistler local Jennifer "Jibber Jen" Godbout is onboard as our tail guide. This will be some serious girl time.

The first photographer to arrive is Ashley Barker, weighed down with bags of camera gear. Shaun Hughes, who's also shooting, drives up with Schettini. Jibber is already there loading her gear into the back of Kathy's truck.

"Once we get to the Hurley," Kathy tells us, "you will have to park in a farmer's field before a bridge. From there, I will drive the crew up to the snow line. When you come out, the bridge that we cross will be under reconstruction." She teases that we may not be able to get back across. "I'm sure forestry will have something rigged up, maybe a tow line."

That night Kathy charges her truck up the Hurley, regaling us with stories of her operating snowcats since the late '80s. She explains that it was mostly guys on the grooming crew back then, so she had to learn fast and be tough enough to endure the night shifts all winter.

"Driving a cat on flat ground is easy," she says. "Learning to groom the steeper runs, like Tokum or Bearpaw [Whistler Mountain], after a two-to-three-foot dump meant sliding down the run trying to control the cat using the blade, filler and tracks, and still leaving a decent pass for the skiers the next day. That was both fun and exhilarating, and since then I was hooked on cats."

Upon reaching the snow line, we are met with a line of brand-new sleds. We load up the machines with coolers of food, donated by the Brewhouse in Whistler, and start the late-night ride up to the Hurley Mountain Lodge, two double-wide trailers with full amenities. Even though a trailer lacks the lustre of an alpine chalet, these operators aren't messing around. They chose to break into the industry with a beefy

fleet of six cats, new sleds, and 15,000 acres of land usage. We'll only be sampling a small taste of this.

Morning comes early, and Reg is picking up Rodger and the rest of the riders. Hight just wrapped up her last major contest of the year, the U.S. Open, and Vallée and Nicoll flew in from Japan overnight. For these three girls it's been a season of contest after contest after contest, not to mention the Olympics, so this trip is a much-needed break.

The initial crew heads out to the cat to get a feel for the terrain, where we'll be spending the next three days. When Vallée, Nicoll, and Rodger pull up on sleds to our cat, the scene erupts into a girls' squawkfest. We take the cat up to the peak and do a run down the backside of the valley; Jibber Jen takes notes for her guide books. We keep on the lookout for jibs, drops, tree lines, and any other feature we can ride and shoot. Without hesitation, Schettini bombs a sketchy 15-foot drop landing on shralped snow. Unfortunately, we are heading into the last couple weeks of March and the snow is turning into soup.

Our guide, Bryce Cox, pushes us to do more runs. In his perfect world everyone is keen on powder runs, yet our crew is more interested in scoping lines, hitting them, and getting in solid shots. The runs continue, we shoot and hit some drops, the gossip enthralls, and we call it a day. Then Barker brings up the idea of building a night jib.

Helen Schettini will hit anything to get the shot, even if the landing is windblown. Lucky for her, there is lots of powder on this one. Barker photo



THE QUARTERPIPE

Unanimously, we vote Rodger in as the foreman of the project, and she sets out designing a quarterpipe. Halfway through our dig, we spot a massive tube buried deep into the snow. We all look at each other with knowing glances on what we will do next: dig that puppy out and drag it to the top of the quarterpipe so we can jib the crap out of it.

As we push the tubing up the wall of the pipe, Reg hollers, "Girls, let me fire up the cat. What you're building isn't big enough."

Everyone stops and looks at each other as Reg hops in the cat and pushes a mound of snow toward us.

"Hey, girls," he yells. "Don't worry, I built Superpipe, and this is what I do best."

Needless to say, we're all stoked that our tour operator is building us a massive quarterpipe while laughing his head off. When he's finished, we're left with a behemoth of a pipe, our tubing in place at the top, and a smooth run-in for the girls to be towed by sleds. The end result gleams vividly in the dim light. Yeah, tomorrow night's session will be sick.

Better than a chairlift. Barker photo



THE BOMB DROPS

I had an amazing time because of the company, the gossip sessions, and the enjoyment of laughing at and with our guide, Bryce Cox. The cat company was so amazing to us. They did comment on how they've never had an all-chicks stint and how we were the most determined and driven crew that they had to have fun, find lines, get good pics and all that other shit. Man, I want to go back next year. —Helen Schettini

It was so nice to have this opportunity to go ride powder with a bunch of cool girls after a long contest season. There is nothing like a good powder day to get your mind off of everything. While we were in BC, hanging out with all the girls was really fun. I'm not used to being on trips like that without a competition. And it was so relaxed and mellow, everyone was there really just to have a good time, which was awesome. This was my first time catboarding, it's a pretty crazy experience. Going into it, I didn't really know what to expect, but it definitely exceeded all my expectations. There is nothing like waking up for a full day of just riding lines and dropping pillows. The last day we were there was sad; it's hard to leave perfect powder, but hopefully I will get to go back next year. —Elena Hight

It was cool to teach Elena how to ride the backcountry and communicate with the photographer and guide. She was pretty nervous about going out there without any experience, but I think she'll feel a lot more confident on her next trip. When you grow up in South Lake Tahoe riding pipe and park, the backcountry seems scary. She did a good job, and I was stoked to help give her the confidence to go off things she might not have. —Roberta Rodger

We are up at the crack of dawn making breakfast and packing lunch. The crew is obsessed with Happy Planet smoothies, and everyone is chugging them back to no end. The plan is to hit a few lines we spotted yesterday and look out for other fun stashes. It snowed 10 centimetres overnight, so there should be better coverage today.

We run a few laps and then come across what would come to be known to us as the "Bomb Drops." Off the side of the cat track stands a row of 15- to 20-footers. The photographers set up their cameras as the rest of us ride in overtop to scope out the situation. Jibber leads us in as Cox skis off to the side to watch over the landings. He's starting to get the picture of what our mission is all about, but he still looks nervous. The girls check it out from the top, and Rodger gives Hight some coaching. This is when the humour steps in. All four girls have to go to the bathroom, and they are each waiting for their turn to drop their lines before they drop their pants. It seems like forever as we wait for them to drop, but finally, one by one, the girls bust off it and shots are fired. We are bent over busting a gut as Vallée explains what was taking them so long to drop.

"No, no, we were definitely not nervous," she bursts out with laughter. "We were going to the bathroom."

"It's a good thing I brought toilet paper," Nicoll adds. "Yeah, these lines are sweet."

Hidden behind a section of trees, just down from the Bomb Drops, the crew is pumped to find a row of pillow lines. Vallée proves no stranger to the backcountry as she steps up and fires off a lofty Method. Nicoll then starts to run a solid line down the pillows when all of a sudden—*bam!*—she smokes her knee into her face. We run over only to find her shaking off a concussion and hiking back up to make another attempt. She rides her line with incredible style and finds another pillow. Unfortunately, she knees her head *again* and calls time-out. Meanwhile, Rodger's words of wisdom on riding pillows has paid off as Hight flows over them effortlessly. Schettini stomps the landing on a huge cliff drop but bangs up her knee in the process. Stoked to have those solid lines, we take it mellow for a while. Cox takes us into an area called the Burnt Forest—ghostly trees and amazing snow.

Upon nightfall we head back to the cabin for our first quarterpipe session. With Schettini's knee down and Nicoll's head still making her nauseous, Vallée and Hight are the only two hitting it. After Reg gives us the liability spiel, Vallée sails to the top and goes straight over. We work on the speed issues and the run-in, and by the end of the night the two girls are seriously throwing down.



Elena Hight had never been on a backcountry trip but proves her skills carry over just fine. By Day 2 she is taming pillow lines like this. Barker photo

We really didn't shut up the whole time. Just trying to do a line and jump something was a gong show: "So we go on three, right? You're going to drop right here, and me right there? Are you sure you're going to drop there? Can you see your landing? How is the snow? So we go on three, right?" I haven't been in Whistler much the past few months, but now I feel like I know everything that happened.

—Dom Vallée

The terrain up there is amazing. The ridge is 15 kilometres long, with tons of north-facing terrain, steep alpine, and long tree runs. There is so much of it left to explore. It's cool nobody's really shot up there before; they just started doing tours this winter. The lodge has hot showers and indoor plumbing in the middle of nowhere, and the snowcat is like being on a luxury cruise ship. I think once the word gets out, they are going to be fully booked. Kathy and Reg, from Backcountry Snowcats, are amazing. —Jibber Jen



Reg Milne built pipes at Superpipe camp, so building this quarterpipe is all in a day's work. Barker photo

HOT PANTS

It's morning, and it snowed again. It's our last day, and we're keen to shred more pow. Suddenly, we hear a massive crashing noise come from the bathroom. We run in to find Nicoll flat out on the floor. The poor girl is suffering from a concussed head from yesterday. We are bummed as Rodger and Nicoll pack up and sled out.

It's colder out this morning, so Vallée decides to wear two pairs of long johns. We ride all day and lose track of why we came out. It isn't about work anymore; it's about the shred. We hit up more features, but nothing is as sweet as yesterday's pillows and drops.

We follow Cox through the Burnt Forest only to find out we are lost. Mild hysteria sets in. We know we're not severely lost, but our poor guide is sweating and telling us not to follow him anymore. We finally find our way down, and at the bottom, Vallée proceeds to strip down and take off a pair of long johns. We proclaim that run "Hot Pants." We really hope that Reg and Kathy keep the names from our trip. We can see it now: Bomb Drops, uh, that's where those girls dropped a doozy.

We're back up and thinking it's about time to hit a tree jib. We are, after all, in the Burnt Forest—what else are a bunch of dead, charred trees good for? After finding nothing too significant, we build our own with a burnt log running up on top of a tall tree stump. We're cracking jokes like crazy, and even Cox is loosening up.

Back at the lodge, Reg is on the roof, and all he can hear is ridiculous giggles from miles away. *Do these girls ever stop?* he thinks to himself, and jumps on a sled to find out where all the entertainment is coming from. Schettini is the guinea pig; she rides in and cases herself on the first attempt. After she hits it and bails three times, we give up and ride out. It's time for dinner anyway and one last quarterpipe session.

Enough provisions for an army, or a crew of Happy Planet-loving girls. Barker photo





As evidenced here, Dominique Vallée has the best Methods on the trip. Hughes photo



Cat in the trees. Barker photo

JIBBER JEN

Jennifer Godbout, known to Whistler locals as Jibber Jen, is the best tail guide we could've asked for in the Grouty Peak backcountry. Her good humour, organizational skills and endless enthusiasm make you feel safe because you get a sense of how at home she is in the mountains. When Jibber is not working for specialized trips, she can be found sporting two pigtails and a big, beautiful smile tail-guiding for Whistler's Powder Mountain Catboarding.

Jibber rolled into Whistler in the early years of snowboarding and experienced everything from working at The Snowboard Shop to Allan Clark and Greg Tadds building the first Superpipe and coaching and traveling with Mercedes Nicoll on her way to becoming an Olympic athlete. She has combined all of her experiences from

being a competitive athlete and bagging peaks in the backcountry to create a niche for herself in the world of guiding.

Her plans to pursue a career in guiding solidified the need to strap on the planks when the Canadian Ski Guide Association rules changed, making skiing ability part of the exam. She had to put on skis for the first time in her life and start from scratch.

"It's very humbling when you're snowplowing and five-year-olds are passing you," she says.

Jibber Jen is now one course away of becoming a full guide working in the mechanized industry. If you would like to spend a day shredding with her, you can. Don Schwartz, owner and lead guide for Powder Mountain Catboarding, says she is the company's most requested guide.

CONTACT JIBBER:

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1-877-PWDR-FIX

They have so much sick terrain, and you couldn't be with nicer people that have so much knowledge of the mountains in the Grouty area. I recommend this cat operation to anyone. It made me miss home, with all the time I spend in Mammoth. I know I want to do more, for sure. Hopefully less contests and much more backcountry. I just had the time of my life at Grouty Creek, being with friends. Not so much smokin' myself in the head twice, but what can ya do? I couldn't have asked for a better trip and environment. Gossip at night, shredding the day away—a girl's dream. —Mercedes Nicoll

LAST CALL

Barker uses a three-light setup as the three girls—Vallée, Hight, and Schettini—destroy the night session shoot. Back in the main foyer of the lodge, we finish the trip off with some serious poker. Hight is a sniper of a card player, but it's Schettini who brings down the house.

We are up early to head out as everyone has commitments to make. We double-up on the sleds and cruise out, but when we arrive back at the snow line, Cox and Vallée are missing. When they finally pull up, Vallée whips off her helmet. She has tears in her eyes, a crazy grin on her face, and she's laughing hysterically; she manages to spit out that Cox had driven off the road. Yikes, he may be a solid backcountry guide, but we should've let Vallée drive out. She couldn't care less but adds that it's sure one hell of a way to end a trip.

It isn't over quite yet. We still have to make it across the bridge. Driving out to where the bridge once stood are a bunch of workers and a narrow plank leading across.

"There's only one way out," one of the workmen says, as they stare at a bunch of grease-stained girls loaded down with snowboard and photo gear. They look at each other and, without hesitation, start to carry our bags over.

"Would you like me to hold your hand?" one asks.

One by one, step by step, we enter back into reality.



Rider's point of view. Barker photo

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Mercedes Nicoll oozes style with this Ollie. Hughes photo

