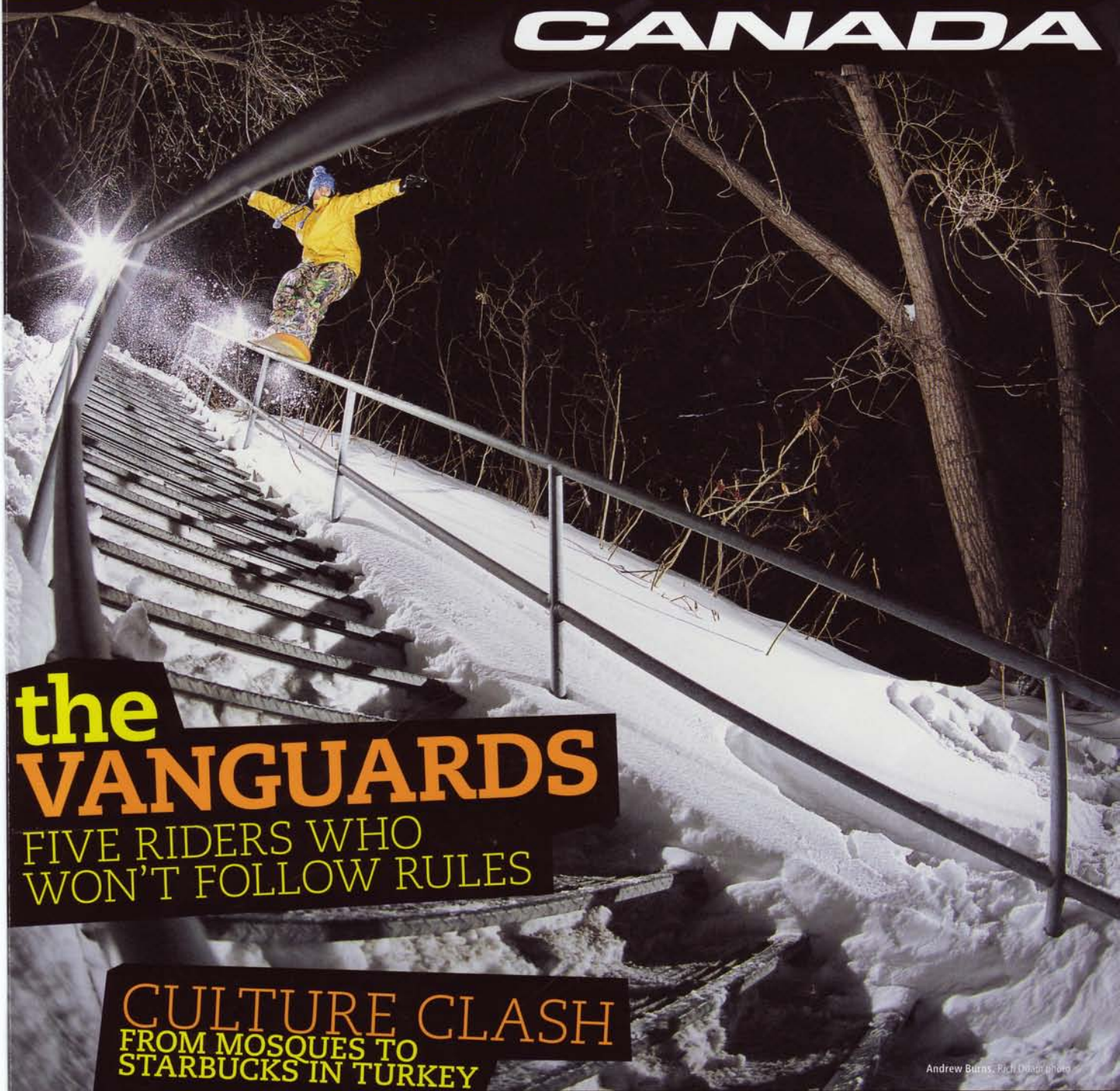


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“SHE CAN RIDE WITH THE BEST OF THEM. SHE KNOWS WHEN TO LAY DOWN THE LAW TO KEEP EVERYONE SAFE, AND WHEN SHE ANSWERS PEOPLE’S QUESTIONS, SHE DOES IT IN A WAY THAT LEAVES THE PERSON FEELING SMART FOR HAVING ASKED INSTEAD OF FEELING STUPID BECAUSE THEY WERE GIVEN THE ANSWER IN A CONDESCENDING WAY.”

[Guiding with “Jibber” Jen Godbout]

BY NATALIE LANGMANN

Jennifer Godbout (a.k.a. “Jibber Jen”) has one of the sweetest jobs in the world of snowboarding: guiding with Powder Mountain Catboarding, which consists of riding deep Whistler snow all winter with snowboarding’s finest. Plus, her bosses aren’t the typical suit-and-tie operators; her paycheques come from the OGs of Canadian snowboarding, Doug Lundgren, Don Swartz and Ken Achenbach.

Her background in this line of work came from years of experience competing, coaching and pursuing her love of riding pow. When Godbout goes to work, the mountaintops are her office, and her field of expertise ranges from the legendary tree runs on Tricouni to the wide-open alpine bowls on Cypress.

“Jibber slays it,” says Achenbach. “She can ride with the best of them. She knows when to lay down the law to keep everyone safe, and when she answers people’s questions, she does it in a way that leaves the person feeling smart for having asked instead of feeling stupid because they were given the answer in a condescending way.

“She also has something which is a real plus for a guide: no ego. The day’s all about you and your riding. It’s not about her.”

Godbout insists there’s so much more to guiding than just being able to shred. While guides are responsible for safety first, the art is to become everything: gear tech, instructor, doctor, sports psychologist, naturalist, family counselor, entertainer, motivational speaker and diplomat.

“I’ve learned this through the many amazing people that have taken the time to teach me, and I’d like them all to know I really appreciate it,” Godbout says. “People are expecting you to make the right decision as far as snow stability, snow quality, and that it meets people’s expectations and their ability level.”

Before pursuing a career in guiding, Godbout helped select the Canadian national team, coached at the Junior Development Camp, and spent many summers coaching and doing first aid for Superpipe on Brohm Ridge. It was at Brohm that she first met Mercedes Nicoll. The following winter, the two rode together three days a week and traveled to as many events as possible. That year, Nicoll won the junior women’s nationals and came home from junior worlds with a gold medal.

“I, for sure, wouldn’t be where I am today if I weren’t friends with her,” Nicoll says. “Jibber taught me to snowboard, and that means she also has a lot of patience. When she puts her mind to do something, she does it. And she’s the best guide you could ask for; she knows her shit.”

Every job has its good and bad days. A typical day for Godbout consists of getting up at 6 a.m. for a morning guide meeting, then guest pickup, transceiver orientation and, finally, eight to 10 bottomless powder runs, as long as no one loses gear on the way down or gets lost or hurt, because then it becomes “work.” As a tail guide, an 80-hour first aid course and the Canadian Avalanche Association Level 1 are mandatory. The Canadian Ski Guide Association Level 1 exam tests on skiing ability and requires CASI or CSIA Level 1 instructors.

Godbout started to ski three years ago and sums it up: “In the end, I have to ski to snowboard.”

It all started when Godbout met Helene Steiner, the first women to become a fully certified guide, at Whistler’s old Snoboard Shop in the mid-’90s. Godbout says that in North America, if someone achieves one discipline in rock [climbing], alpine, or skiing, they become a guide. In Europe, you’re examined on everything at once, and Steiner got hers in the late ’80s.

“I have always admired her,” Godbout remarks. “I was lucky to ride with Helene back when she had learned to snowboard and was guiding on a snowboard for the first time.”

Godbout was so impressed with Steiner’s forward thinking that when asked to ski on her first guide exam with Steiner as one of the instructors, she couldn’t say no.

“She leads by example,” Godbout says. “It was raining out, and I rode mid-station down on Whistler Mountain in a snowplow. I didn’t ever need my goggles on, that’s how slow I was going.”

Godbout feels lucky with all the opportunities at Powder Mountain Catboarding, which is growing. She’s the only female snowboarder working there but insists that neither being a woman nor a snowboarder has held her back, despite the fact that snowboarders and skiers ride different lines and look at things differently.

“Most guides don’t snowboard and at least half of PMC’s clientele are snowboarding,” Godbout says. “Not to say one way is better than the other, but different lines are needed. If you can’t stay open-minded to recognizing the difference in the two activities, then you’re not doing your job properly.”

She adds that guides shouldn’t have to spend all their free time learning the other sport but at least be able to visualize or help someone ride down no matter what they’re on.

“As a snowboarder, I had to learn to ski,” Godbout says. “I also have to be a Level 2 ski instructor as part of my prerequisites because the teaching element is so important. I speak more than one language, so why shouldn’t I be expected to know how to get down the mountain more than one way?”

