

INSPIRED MOUNTAIN LIVING

Eastside

WINTER 2009

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The SNOW ISSUE



Counting Snowflakes

The measure of winter

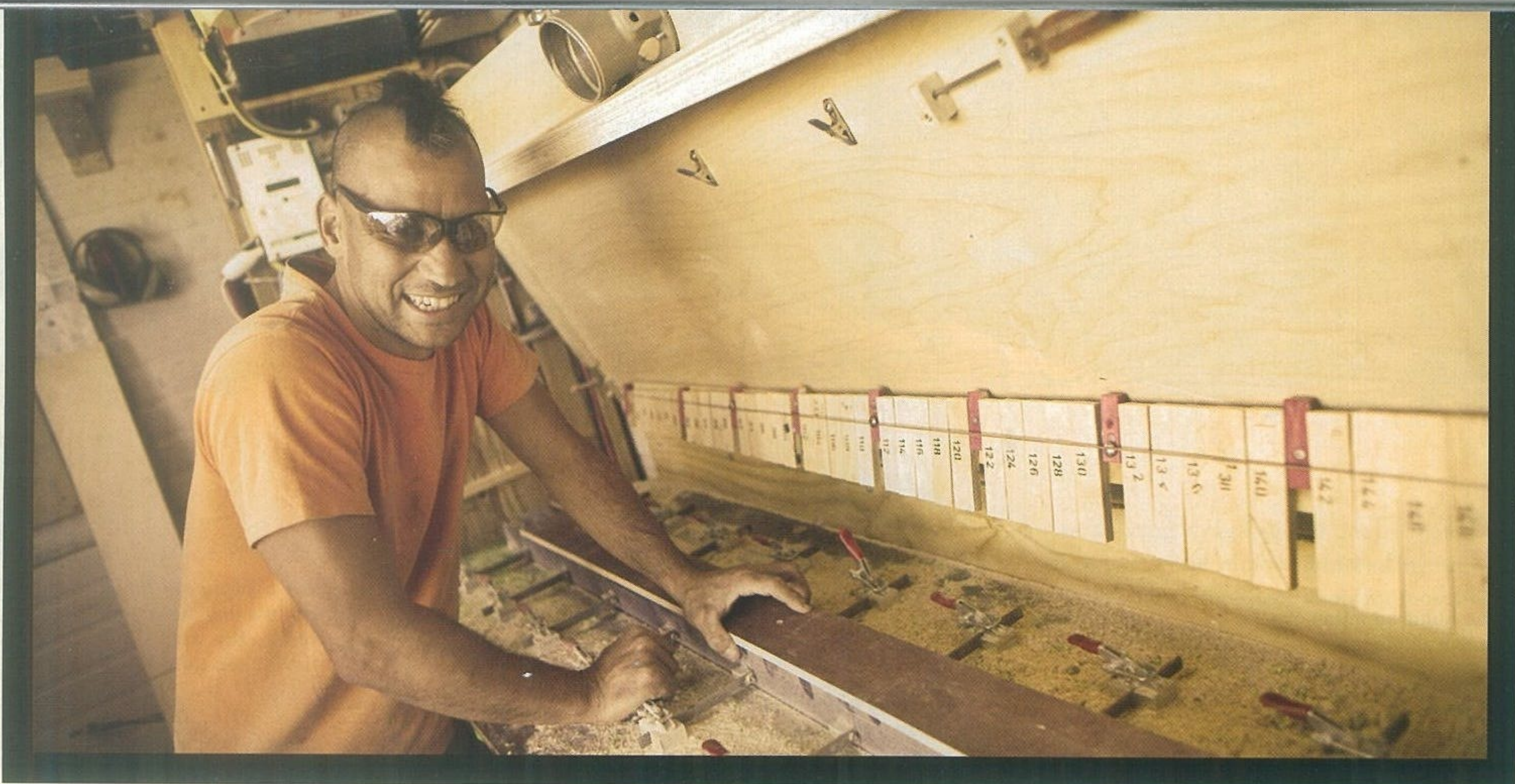
333 Skis

Trailer-made in Olancho

JUNE'S GEM
RUBY THE AVY DOG

LONNIE KAUK
THE NEW ERA

SNOMOBILES
WINTER TOURING



Trailer-made in Olancho

Custom Skis for a New Economy

I went down to the desert to see about making a pair of skis. I'd been hearing about Michael Lish, about the homemade solar-powered factory he hauled around behind his pickup, about how he could set up in the parking lot at Chair 2, or beside one of the tubs out in Long Valley, and crank out whatever kind of boards you wanted, with whatever graphics you could come up with, for \$333. It sounded too good to be true.

WORDS BY DAVID PAGE PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN PONDELLA

MY UNDERSTANDING HAD ALWAYS BEEN that custom skis were more expensive than what you could get off the line—two to three times more. And not necessarily worth it. But maybe it didn't have to be that way. I'd had a nice Italian wool suit made for me once, in Koreatown, years ago—for my wedding. It was less expensive and much higher quality than anything I could have bought at a mall. It's still the only suit I have. So without considering all possible ramifications for the global economy, American innovation and manufacturing, the shifting nature of retail, the environment, the way we, as consumers, understand and take responsibility for the things we consume, or whether I really needed a new pair of skis, I figured: shit, I should check this out.

The first indication that it might not be the easiest way to get my hands on a new pair of skis came at Step 1 on Michael's website: Order Sheet for Traditional Sidecut Skis. "Do not be daunted," it said. "Be interested." I skimmed through the first few of the forty or so questions, scrolled down to "dimensions" and "turn radius," looked ahead to "tip and tail profile" and "flex pattern," bookmarked the form, and went off to do something else for two weeks. I was reminded of my few brief tilts at Napster: here I could

have any song I wanted, any song in the world—and I couldn't think of one. I was nostalgic for the guy with the name tag who could tell me what I wanted.

I read the reviews in the ski mags. I was drawn to language like "stability at speed, maneuverability, energy and versatility." I noted the corresponding dimensions. I tried to describe the skiing I do, and where I'd found flaw with what I'd been skiing on. Or rather: where I'd run to the end of my ability to make the gear perform the way I wanted it to. When it came to camber, rocker, tip design, tail profile, and flex pattern, I chose one or another version of "I have no idea."

Four days later I got back an Excel spreadsheet and a description of what sounded like the perfect all-around pair of skis. It was like having my fortune read:

Ski is spec for quick across fall line sets off 22 avi chutes...pulled waist for strong on edge carve in groomers...slight tip rocker to float in pow and relax camber on fast set turns off Hangmans. Camber under foot will give edge hold on steeps and high energy rebounds. Will track straight...full Kevlar package to stiffen under boot...pinned tail for slightly pow specific but waist will roll nice on our groomers.

I thought: if a ski like that could actually be brought into



existence—and I had to admit a quotient of skepticism—would I, as a skier, even be able to do it justice?

FROM THE HIGHWAY I TURNED ONTO AN UNMARKED DIRT TRACK on the south end of Olancha, bounced across the scrub through a collection of old rubber tractor treads, cable spools, Joshua trees and insulated building panels. It was 20 degrees warmer than it had been in Mammoth. No wind, no sign of the storm that was then rushing toward the High Sierra, bearing the season's first snow. Michael's daughter Noa was jumping on the trampoline in her swimsuit.

I recognized the trailer, with its corrugated, storm-grey paneling and porthole windows, docked at the far end of the encampment. It was connected to an outbuilding and also to the main bunker by a series of elevated gangplanks, allowing for easy passage from one node of activity to another without the need to go up or down stairs or descend to the level of the scorpions and rattlesnakes.

One of the coolest features of the trailer is the way its starboard wall can be lowered at the push of a button—with Millennium-Falcon-style hydraulic sounds—to open the shop to the outdoors,

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and to create a platform where customers like myself could, weather permitting, stand in the sunshine and look in on the action, as on a pizza kitchen, to watch their skis being made. The inside was patterned after a commercial kitchen. If the ski thing didn't work out, I thought, it would make a terrific catering trailer for Burning Man.

He'd been giving a tour of operations to his new business manager, Kristin Broumas, who had filed an application online a week earlier, and then driven out from Colorado the night before. She was about to miss Loveland's earliest opening day in forty years. But with the recent write-up in *Powder* magazine, another due shortly in *Backcountry*, new crew members on the way from France and New Mexico, and 300-plus orders just waiting to be filled, she—like so many others—had been infected with the potential of the thing.

"Sorry I couldn't get here earlier," I said.

"What time is it?" asked Michael, sliding out across the plank like an exuberant Iroquois warrior in shorts and Doc Martens. It was 10:30 AM. "No problem," he said. "There's still groundwork to do before we get started. But the skis will be built today. Not a problem."

[Facing page]

Michael Lish redefining capitalism with modern, handmade skis.

[Above left]

Cutting cores and prepping for winter at the foot of Olancha Peak.

[Above right]

Michael and 333 business manager Kristin Broumas.

And sure enough, within a half hour, having explored graphics options with Michael's wife, Jael, I was onboard and ready to rock. We had the Be Good Tanyas on the iPod and a saucer of Noa's fried wonton skins for snacking on. Michael clipped my spec sheet above the jig, between a hand-scrawled quote from Gandhi, and another, unattributed, about the drastic nature of the Zen method. He handed me a mask and a Sharpie for making it my own. In the distance, traffic floated by on 395, oblivious to the impending revolution.

"Michael is essentially redefining capitalism," Jael had said. "If you really look at it, it takes on huge dimensions." And indeed, before I could fire up the router and start cutting cores, I found myself asking big questions. He outlined his 20-year apprenticeship, all the way back to a stint with legendary surf- and skateboard shaper Bill Bahne.


He remembered when Jerry Jacob came back from Europe with a Duret fluorescent-orange pintail monoski. He was teaching karate in Reseda, where he grew up, and dabbling in the English Reading Room at UCLA. "My mother was wondering what the hell she was going to do with me," he said. "We need a future for your ass." So she bought him a monoski venture.

The future came in the form of Yama Snowboards, all manner of fierce innovation ("we started 53 other companies"), and, eventually, a next-generation monoboard called The Tool. When Noa was about to be born, Michael designed a shop trailer that could run on radiator fluid plumbed from the car. The idea was to get out of the factory, and at the same time promote The Tool. After two years living "out backcountry," they bought land in Olancha, halfway between LA and Mammoth. "We called it piss and pickup," he says. "No one stopped." Michael went to work on the Owens Lake dust mitigation project, so he could glean materials and cash to build a house. Noa and Jael went to Death Valley for school.

Noa (now 11) came padding across the gangplank with coffee and




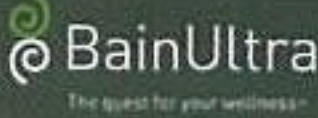
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battered bread. Michael looked out at the prow of the Cosos and talked about the energy required to run a traditional ski factory. He talked about the phase-change in Pitex when you ramp up the heat to increase production. He talked about the vacuum press, the advantages of not paying for electricity, or rent, about the potential alternatives to fiberglass and carbon—bamboo? human hair? He talked about the migration of K2 to China, how the business of retail was keeping prices artificially inflated, and how, soon enough, it would all come crashing down.

He painted a grand vision: an off-grid satellite trailer in every ski town in the world—in Alaska, in Chamonix, up and down the Owens Valley, like so many microbreweries, selling skis for \$300. He was ready to share everything he'd learned with whomever was interested, right down to the math. He'd already put most of it in videos on the internet. "If someone could actually compete with me," he said, "I'd say we won the day. We broke the ground. Did we make a ton of money? No. We didn't need to. We're not profit driven."

Two hours later I was pushing a fresh-beveled cabinet-grade birch core against a bandsaw, trying to cut the taper, my shoes sliding backward on the aluminum floor. Then the guide jumped—in a way that was less than satisfying. I shut off the saw. "Hmm," said Michael, "you may have been feeding too fast."

He cracked off the splinters and examined the unsightly bow in the tip. "No problem," he pronounced. "I can reinforce it with Kevlar." Then he added: "I think we're in this interesting range of possibilities with these. They may actually be bitchin'."

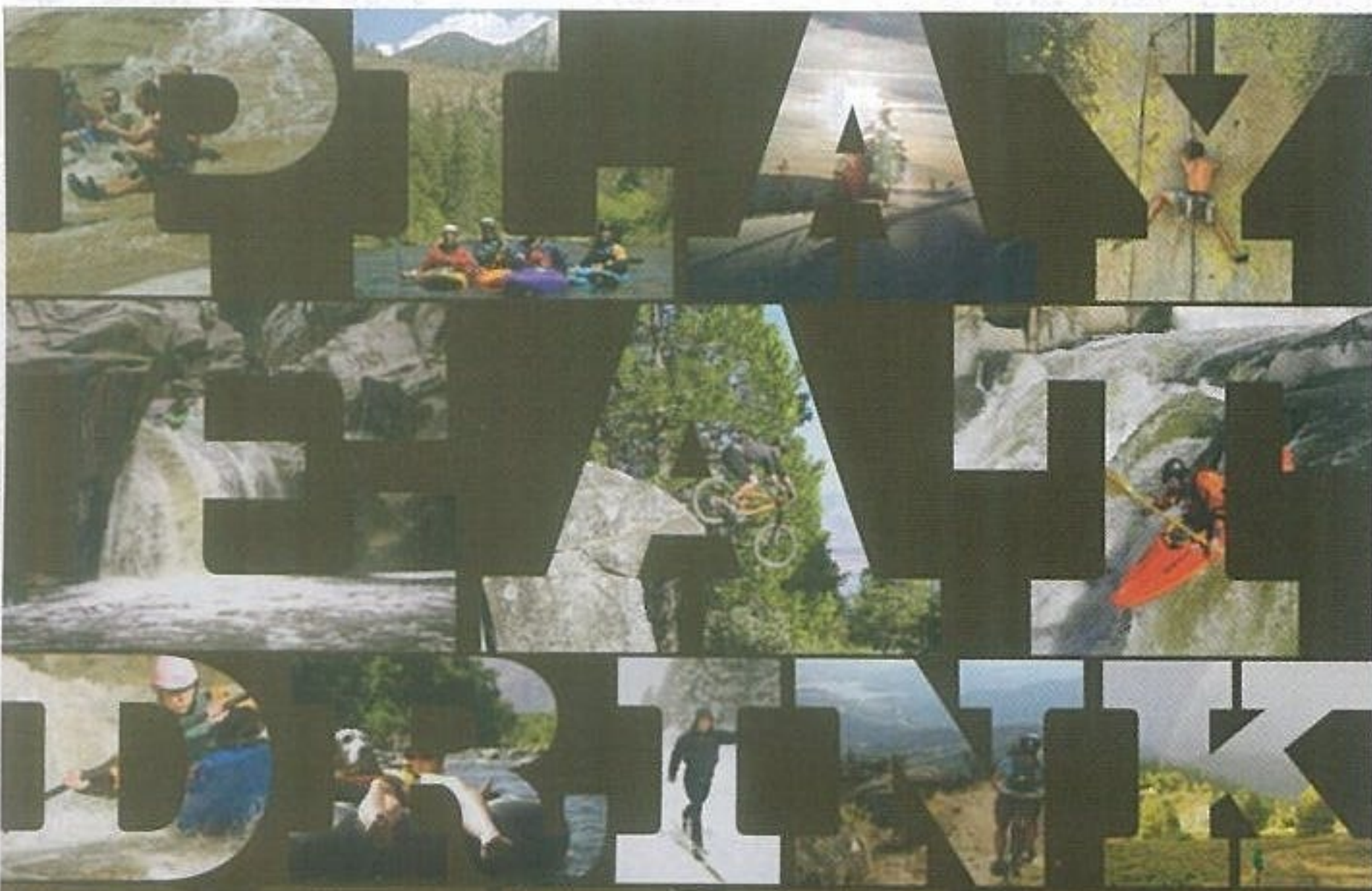
It took the rest of the day to finish one ski. Midway through gluing edges to the base, the wind picked up, buffeting the trailer and gusting sawdust in our faces. Michael closed up the side panel. By 5 PM we had the thing molded, glassed, and sealed in a plastic vacuum bag at 17 psi, like a six-foot slab of beef jerky. We put it on the roof of the trailer to cook in what was left of the late-afternoon sun.

I'd built a ski, I thought to myself, driving home into the wind. With a well-designed shop and some expert guidance, I'd helped construct one half of a means of transport and recreation—and joy. If things got bad, my wife pointed out, I now had the beginnings of a trade to fall back on.

THE NEXT MORNING I left home under four inches of snow. I brought a picnic. Jael and Michael carried a table out onto the plywood, in the sun. We ate chicken and pickles and drank—straight from the tap—the same granite-filtered snowmelt that Crystal Geyser sells to the world at \$2 a bottle. We looked out over the remains of an airstrip that Howard Hughes is supposed to have built before he turned to Vegas.

Michael wasn't happy with the ski. It looked good. But knowing its inner workings I could see where it was soft. He'd build me another pair, he said, and deliver it in time for the season. There were glitches to be addressed, he said. But with Kristin taking on customer relations, and a crew on the way, he was confident he'd be able to do 300 skis in the next few months. Plus, he'd taken no deposits, so there was no reason to cut corners. "We're making history here," he said.

I gave him \$340 cash, fresh from the machine, diminishing his accounts receivable to the tune of a few domestic beers—and a pair of skis. Then, with a new appreciation for the old boards hanging in my hallway, and in anticipation of those to come, I raced back uphill to face the winter. ■



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