

Warren Miller's name has been synonymous with spectacular skiing films for more than 50 years. It all started when Miller was discharged from the Navy in 1946. With his mustering-out pay, he bought an 8mm film camera. For the next two winters, he and a friend lived in a camper in Sun Valley, Idaho. They taught skiing and used the camera to film each other as a way of improving technique. During the summer, they'd do the same at surfing spots on the California coast.

# ski films

chronicled for 60-plus years by  
**Warren Miller**

Miller began showing the footage to friends and cracking them up with his humorous narration. He was known to show the film in exchange for a tuna casserole dinner. Eventually, the screenings were popular enough that Miller saw commercial potential. He began showing up in resort towns across the United States, skiing and shooting during the day, and renting a local theater, hall or high school auditorium to show last year's films at night. He upgraded to Bell & Howell 16mm equipment. After a few years, Miller was personally showing and narrating the film in more than 130 cities. Things began to snowball, so to speak.

Miller didn't realize it, but he was inventing a new kind of movie. His films definitely gave a huge boost to what are now known as extreme sports. Today, entire television networks are dedicated to showing breathtaking feats on various boards on snow, water and skates.

The Warren Miller ski film experience grew over the years. Miller himself, at 81 years of age, is no longer involved. But there has been one constant: for 61 years, the stunning images that ski bums look to for inspiration have been captured on film.

"Film was simpler for me," says Miller, recalling the early days. "We always used Kodachrome film, which was consistent no matter where we purchased it. It didn't deteriorate before we exposed it and it was very sensitive. The ability to pick up gradations was much better and snow has lots of shades of white. Stability and dependability under difficult conditions were very important for us. We'd go from the heat of July in the northern hemisphere to the freezing cold of the Chilean mountains. We often went from the warming huts out into the bitter cold, and film was always reliable."

### Making *Wintervention*

Today, the annual Warren Miller Enterprises ski movie is still made on Kodak film, mostly in Super 16 format with certain shots done on 35mm. This year's edition is titled *Wintervention*. As always the film premieres at the beginning of ski season, around the same time that the production crew is planning the making of next year's film. Cinematographer Chris Patterson has been working on the films in one capacity or another for close to 20 years.

Patterson grew up in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and saw the Warren Miller films there as a boy. He sent his reel in and offered to carry cases for the production. For the first five years or so, he travelled with the road show as a projectionist - a great way to learn about which shots work best, he says. Eventually he moved up to the production unit. Today he works mainly on feature films and television commercials with a specialty in ski footage. He shot much of the kinetic ski chase scenes in director Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, in collaboration with that film's director of photography, Wally Pfister, ASC. But Patterson still relishes his annual trek to mountain locales around the globe, packing his lightweight Aaton A-Minima Super 16 camera in a backpack along with many rolls of film. His goal: capture elite ski and snowboard athletes doing what they do best in a pristine natural environment.

The production starts out with a surprisingly informal meeting where possible locations are discussed. The core group includes the executive producer, the producer, the editor, and the writer who crafts the film's narration, Patterson, and a second cinematographer, Tom Day. Most have been working on the project annually for more than a decade.

"It's a bunch of people who have a passion for skiing and really know the sport well," says Patterson. "We seek out places that have a good story, that we know will be captivating for the audience. Often we've just seen the premiere of last year's film, which inspires us to do our best on the new project."

At the location, the crew spends the first couple days getting to know the lay of the land. "You have to combine snow conditions and terrain, the position and time of day when the light will be best, and safety," says Patterson. "It's a constantly shifting equation. It's been a great film school over the years because you have zero control, and every day you work with a different set of circumstances. After a few days we usually have the whole place figured out, but we still have to hope that conditions and weather cooperate. We go up the mountain with everything in backpacks. We have to be very mobile and streamlined down to only what we need for the day, while still bringing a kit that is complete for everything we might encounter. It's a delicate balance."

At the grand mountain vista locations, a classic shot uses a long telephoto lens in a big pull-out or push-in. The push-in will begin on the vast landscape, and after a few seconds, the audience realizes with a gasp that there is a skier coming down the seemingly impossible and inaccessible vertical landscape.

Patterson notes that the perfect day is surprisingly rare. "We had one of those days last year in Alaska," he recalls. "It was magic. I was shooting with two veteran skiers I'd been working with for years. At the end of the day, we had shot a ridiculous amount of film and used heaps of helicopter time. We had amazing action, perfect conditions, fantastic light, and momentum. Afterwards, we all knew it might be five years before it all came together again, and we were glad we'd taken full advantage."

Dependable gear is a must. In addition to the A-Minima, Patterson often uses an ARRI 435 or 235 when 35mm images are possible or appropriate. ARRI SR2s and Photo-Sonics high-speed cameras are also sometimes part of the kit. Patterson also often depends on one of three small, wind-up, reflex Bolex cameras he owns. These are adapted for Super 16 and fitted with PL lens mount adapters. These are especially handy when the crew needs to scale a peak or travel to a particularly remote location.

"Two years ago, we travelled to a very remote part of northwestern China," Patterson describes. "A still photographer had told me about some villages where people travelled on wooden skis. It's practical transportation, but sometimes the kids ski for recreation as well. Going there was like travelling back in time."

Patterson and his team, including two world-class skiers, drove to the end of the road, and then spent two more days on horseback with their gear on little wooden sleds. "We spent a week there, and we knew there would be no power, and no way to charge our batteries," he says. "For three days, the temperature was 40 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, without wind chill. We couldn't slow ourselves down with dozens of camera cases. But I had my three windup Bolexes, and a handful of lenses, and the footage we came back with was beautiful.

"We have all encountered shoots where you get anchored down by all these cases of equipment," he says. "Carrying all that stuff can completely compromise the creative process. I just love simplifying and making it all fit in the backpack. It's fun to be able to maintain your freedom, and it allows you to shoot in a different way.



"The results can be stunning," he continues. "There are new digital platforms coming out every year, but there is no reason for us to take the chance that they might fail. My oldest Bolex is from the late 1950s. We take these film cameras to the extreme places and conditions. We know how the film and the cameras are going to react. You have 100 percent confidence in the image quality, and you are not going to be sitting there wondering what's happening because the camera won't work. And the image quality is unsurpassed. I re-watched last year's film and could hardly believe how beautiful the color and contrast was."

### 10 stops difference

Film also gracefully handles the extreme contrast inherent in the wintry environments. Patterson and Day usually use KODAK VISION2 50D Color Negative Film 7201 and KODAK VISION3 250D Color Negative Film 7207. "7207 Film is awesome," remarks Patterson. "I especially love it in high-speed situations. There's often as much as 10 stops difference between the shadows and the skies. But you have that latitude, so you know there will be detail. I have tried digital cameras, and you find yourself having to change the way you're going to shoot because the camera cannot handle that contrast. There are little nuances in the texture and shape of the snow surface, and you know film will capture those gradations, or that subtle blue reflecting from the sky. When the skier is tunneling through deep snow, and the sun is backlighting him and beaming into the lens - it all works. Something amazing happens with the moving snow, the light and the movement of the athletes.

"We don't want the audience to be aware of the technical things that are going on to make it look that way," he says. "We want them to experience sensory overload on the big screen with great music and sound. We want them to escape to this

other place and forget about everything else because the visuals are so strong."

All the footage is transferred to HDCAM at SSI in Los Angeles. The footage often amounts to more than 100,000 feet. After editing, the images are re-transferred to HDSR format. Most of the road show projections are done in this format. A warehouse with 60 years of skiing history on film is maintained. The archive is in the process of being remastered, and Warren Miller Enterprises has been taking full advantage of film's superior archival qualities by creating decade-by-decade compilation highlight films from this treasure trove and releasing them on DVD and Blu-ray. "It's the history of a sport," says Patterson. "It's important."

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Patterson knows he has a good gig. "There aren't a lot of places I could work where someone says, 'Here's 8,000 feet of film and a plane ticket to China - come back with something cool,'" he says. "You sit by yourself on the mountain and you see it through the viewfinder, and you say, 'Wow, the audience is going to freak out when they see that!' Nine months later, you sit in the theater and you see the audience react. Sometimes I think it looks better than it did in real life, more vibrant and surreal, especially the high-speed material. That, for me, is the greatest reward."

ski films



- 1 An example of the wooden skis used in remote parts of northwestern China.
- 2 Cinematographer Chris Patterson.
- 3 Karine Falck-Pedersen skiing in Austria.

(All photos by Chris Patterson except 2 by Josh Haskins)