

# THE ACCIDENTAL ICON

Mike Mannelin carved a life in Big Sky as a couch-surfing ski bum more than a decade ago. These days, his lifestyle hasn't changed much, but his connection to the mountain certainly has. :: BY BRIAN SCHOTT



CHAD JONES

**W**hen a moose smashed the windshield of his Honda Civic on an icy highway and rolled onto the roof of his tiny car about five years ago, Mike Mannelin didn't call a tow truck; he ripped off the windshield, put on his helmet, gloves, and ski goggles, and drove the 120 miles he had left

back to Big Sky with glass still in his hair. It's a lasting image – Mannelin cruising along US-20 at 65 miles per hour in full ski regalia and a deadpan expression on his face – and as good of a metaphor as any to describe the matter-of-fact, no-nonsense way that this quintessential ski bum has turned his drive for skiing into a budding career.

Mannelin has filmed with the likes of Greg Stump and was featured in Warren Miller's *Off the Grid* in 2006. He has become the go-to photo model for the mountain, so images of him carving the Big Sky steeps regularly appear in national publications. That exposure has helped him secure a long list of ski and clothing sponsors, like Tecnica, Giro, and Columbia, to help support his passion. And over time, he has become a part of the fabric of the resort and perhaps even something of an ad-hoc poster boy for the mountain – if only because he so amiably shares his stoke for the place and has been in so many of those glossy images.

It's a modest dose of local celebrity – one that the 33-year-old will never let on about if you were passing him at Whiskey Jack's. Yet it started from the most meager of ski-bum roots. For this purist who has devoted the past decade of his life to skiing Lone Peak, even that happened by accident.

**When I first meet Mike on** a Saturday evening last February at his local hangout, the Bambu Bar, he is wearing a

big smile and ball cap pulled low around his down-turned eyes. If the bartenders didn't know him, they'd ask him for an ID to make sure he was of drinking age. We tip back a PBR while I strain to catch his soft-spoken explanation – still tinged with a Midwestern accent – of what keeps him coming back here year after year.

Trained as a racer at 700-vertical-foot Spirit Mountain in his home town of Duluth, Minnesota, Mannelin could run gates, but he didn't have his eyes on the ski life.

"I never really wanted to be a ski bum," he tells me. "Before I came to Big Sky, I wanted to go to college and get a real job."

The son of a paper-mill worker (dad) and a bakery owner (mom), he was a good student in high school and was admitted to prestigious engineering programs like the one at Purdue University. Tuition was too expensive though, so he settled for business classes at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. He failed out halfway through his second year.

"I didn't go to school where I wanted to go, so I kind of gave up," he says. "I didn't really want to race anymore and when I stopped racing, I pretty much didn't want to ski anymore."

That was until he visited Big Sky, where his brother and some friends had moved for the winter. Experiencing the high-alpine



Mannelin makes some turns under the watchful eye of the Lone Peak Tram building; (opposite) the poster boy points out one of his shots in the glossies.



environment, something clicked. “It was different here. And skiing became way too magnetic,” Mannelin explains.

The first few winters, he worked night jobs in order to ski every day, whether it was at a grocery store, a front desk, a gas station, or waiting tables. His bed ranged from the back seat of his car to crashing on friends’ couches to more upscale accommodations in the employee dorms with a mini-fridge and a

Part of his charm is that he is tight with the local skier crowd but can also function just as easily with mountain management. He works closely with ski patrol, often getting special access for projects because of his local mountain knowledge and the trust he has built.

Beyond the camera lens, he also serves as a tram guide, a new program offered by the Big Sky Snowsports School that leads advanced

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toilet. He’d work afternoon and night shifts, sometimes falling asleep on the old gondola because he was so tired.

If it was snowing though, he’d give away as many shifts as possible. Even today, most of his paychecks from the resort come back to him nearly empty, with draws on them for food at mountain eateries and visits to the medical clinic for various injuries.

“It’s that addicting,” he says. “It’s the freedom. We’re outside in this giant playground skiing with friends. Where we go all depends on which way the wind blows.”

**Every summer, he leaves this** small community, saving up rent money by working as a commercial fisherman on Kodiak Island in Alaska, as well as doing stints as a house builder. Like Big Sky, it’s the wide-open wilderness that draws him to the last frontier.

But caring so deeply about Big Sky – returning each winter just as dependably as the first big storm of the season – is one aspect of his personality that has landed him the unique position he is in. His part-time resort job involves ferrying pro photographers and journalists around the mountain to get them what they need. And he’s worked diligently to build a life out of the opportunity by sweating hard on photo shoots to get the images in the magazines that then beget sponsors.

skiers around the upper reaches of Lone Peak looking for the best snow and the lines only the locals know. His favorite experience was guiding a 14-year-old boy down the Big Couloir three times in one day. There was no tip – but money has never taken precedence; his biggest priority is just to keep skiing.

“I go out every day,” he says. “It was drilled in my head from racing to try to get better every day, so that was my goal. Just go out and pound laps from nine to four, top to bottom, and just try to get better all the time. When I started working with photographers, I found an avenue and things started progressing. I could see a goal of having sponsors.”

**When Mike first moved to** Big Sky, local skier Dave Stergar was his hero. Stergar was known on the peak as one of the best ski athletes and held a similar role with the resort, modeling for photo shoots. Today, Stergar’s a school teacher in Helena and only skis on weekends. He has a family and few regrets, but watching Mannelin still gets him thinking about the way his friend has made his way of life sustainable.

“Mike makes me a little jealous,” he tells me while the Bambu begins to clear out. “He’s found a way to do it.”

Doing “it” is what we do the next morning, when I meet Stergar and Mannelin at the Swiftcurrent Lift, the clock hands tipped just past nine on the tower outside The Summit



SCOTT SPIKER





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These days, the resort and town are more than a base camp for Mannelin.



Hotel. The mountain is eerily quiet as we slide to the triple chair, then over to the tram for the first car up Lone Peak. The sky is tropical blue and the wind is calm as the half-empty 15-person car rockets us to the top of the stone peak in four minutes.

At the summit, clouds are pouring over mountains into faraway valleys and Wyoming's Grand Tetons 150 miles away are spiking toward the sky. We gingerly pick our way across the wind-scoured Otter Slide and dive into Marx. Already, I am lost in the

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dust of their fat skis, but Mannelin waits patiently for me as I pick my way through the 45-degree no-fall zone.

And for the rest of the day, as we tour the mountain from east to west, Mannelin happily makes arcs down terrain he could ski with his eyes closed. Run after run, from Elk Park Ridge to the Big Rock Tongue, I notice his laugh grows larger with each turn and his energy is twice what I felt the evening before.

Clearly, he is in his element out here. It doesn't matter that he's not charging as hard as he could and having to wait for me to catch up still; he's skiing the mountain that he knows and loves. That's all that matters.

**Call him an ambassador.** A tour guide. A ski pro. Whatever. Mannelin began his Big Sky life as a skier who was only here to ski. While he works for Big Sky two or three days a week, he uses it to his advantage to build a bigger network within the ski industry. He genuinely loves this place and it shows. There is nothing fake about him.

And he's not the face of this place just because he appears in so many photos and films – he truly exemplifies many of the things that make Big Sky so special. He's humble and without ego, and projects a laid-back vibe. While he's soft spoken, he can make a point when he needs to. The same could be said of Big Sky.

Later I ask him why he didn't roam the West, trying different mountains rather than stay here. It's as if the question is absurd. "I'd never really considered going to other mountain towns," he says, pointedly in the past tense.

But what about the future? I press him. Is it ever troubling not having any money in the bank?

"I'd rather be here skiing and not worry about that stuff," he says, without inflection or care in his tone. "Yeah, I'm kind of a bad planner, but you can plan your whole life away and never do anything. I'd rather be on Lone Peak. It's my favorite spot in the world." ::

## Mannelin's Mountain

Tram guide and magazine photo model Mike Mannelin selects some of his Big Sky favorites.

**Two Runs in One** This is one of Mannelin's favorite tram runs: Drop into the narrow 45-degree spindles of the Dictator Chutes, then head skier's right into the wide-open, steep bowl terrain of The Wave.

**Heli Tracks** If he's on the first tram the morning after a storm, Mannelin hits Marx first. "It's wide-open powder – like heli-skiing without the helicopter," he says.

**Warm-Up** For those not up for Lone Peak's exposed steepes yet, he suggests the shorter pitches off the Challenger lift like Big Rock Tongue into 17 Green.



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