

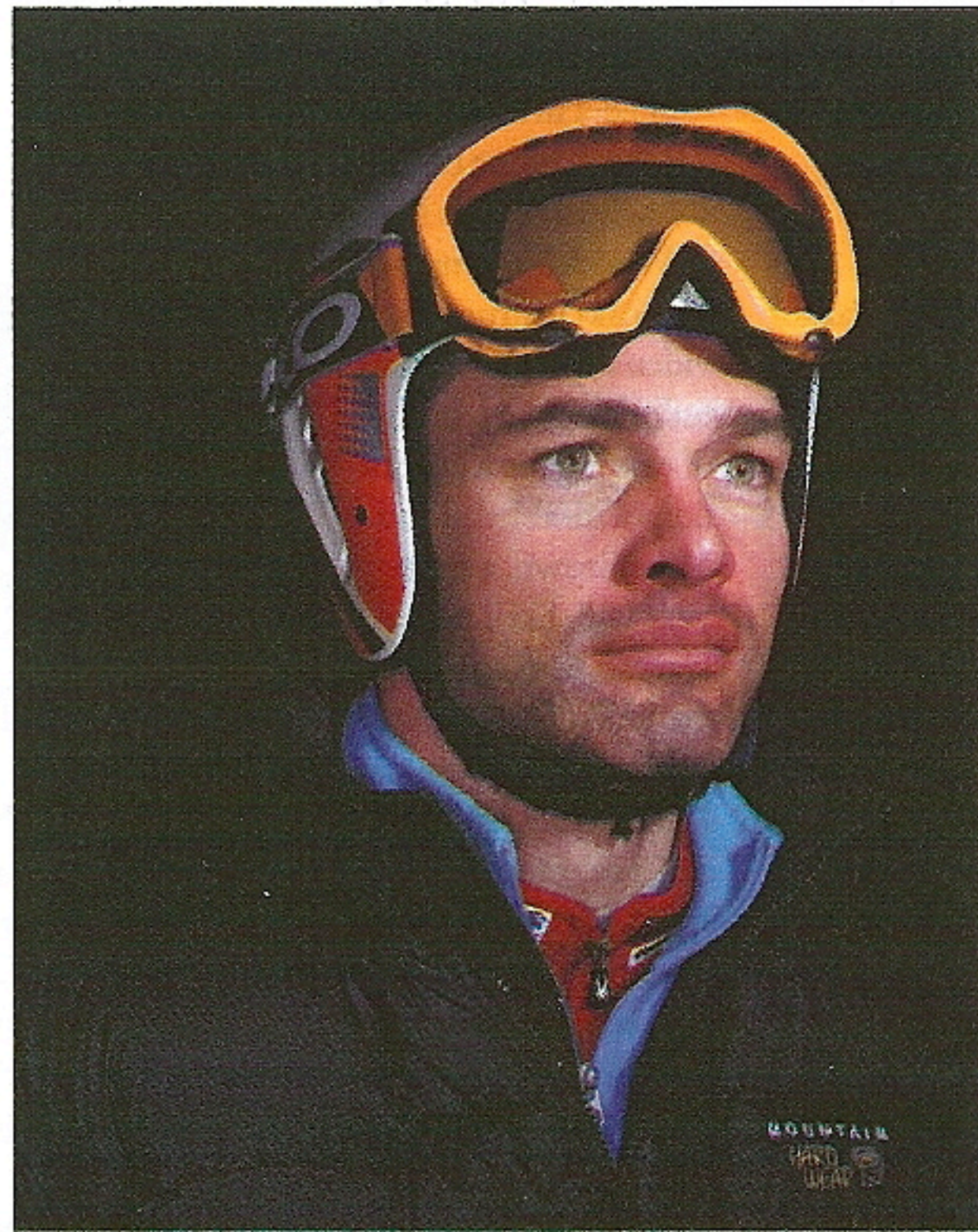
Take a

Seat

WHEN CHRIS WADDELL,
THE WORLD'S MOST
DECORATED MONOSKIER,
COACHES AN ABLE-BODIED

U.S. SKI TEAM VETERAN ON
THE FINER POINTS OF
CARVING WHILE STRAPPED
INTO A BUCKET, THE
LESSONS LEARNED ARE
DOWNRIGHT LIBERATING.

BY EDIE THYS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENT HUMPHREYS



BACK IN THE GAME Chris Waddell (above and, at left, on Park City's Payday) was a promising racer at Vermont's Middlebury College when a 1988 freeskiing injury left him paralyzed from the waist down. Today he's among the world's top Paralympic competitors, widely credited with inventing modern monoski technique.

LOOK AHEAD. It's perhaps the most oft-repeated advice in ski racing. Look three gates ahead in slalom, two in GS, as far downslope as possible in downhill. But at the moment, "ahead" is the six inches between my nose and the snow. I am struggling, for the third time in quick succession, to right myself without using my legs, which are strapped irremovably into a monoski. I have traded the security of my own skis for a hip-hugging molded fiberglass bucket mounted on a shock-absorbing frame, attached to a ski and stabilized by two outriggers. With the proper guidance, this baby can go in excess of 70 mph, *in control*. Under me, however, the well-engineered machine is little more than a twirling teacup ride, its movements capricious and random.

In my nine years as a downhiller on the U.S. Ski Team, I applauded the successes of the U.S. Disabled Ski Team but never looked closely at this apparatus. It was not out of disrespect or apathy, but a conscious aversion to contemplating *What if?* What if the key to my livelihood and happiness—my physical capabilities—were compromised? Would I have the guts to get back on the mountain and confront what I'd lost, the patience to start from scratch?

That curiosity brought me to the National Ability Center (NAC) in Park City, Utah, and ultimately to where I now sit, panting, overheated and armed with nothing but the two outriggers and a rusty understanding of physics to rescue myself. "Whatever you do, don't fall on the flats," was the last advice I got from Chris Waddell, my eminent instructor. Waddell was a promising racer on the Middlebury College ski team when a freeskiing accident in 1988, at age 20, left him paralyzed from the waist down. A year later, with no instruction and a \$2,000 monoski donated by the Friends of Middlebury Skiing alumni organization, he rediscovered his passion for competitive skiing and, in the process, invented modern monoski technique.

That, too, was an accident, though in this case a fortuitous one. In December 1990, at a training camp in Winter Park, Colo., Waddell made "The Turn"—a single audacious arc that proved what coaches had only begun to think possible: Monoskis could carve. The Turn ended in a fall, but on the video, Waddell saw that by positioning his upper body precariously to the outside of the turn—that is, angulating instead of bank-

ing—he could keep the ski on edge. "The next day it felt like my ski was on rails—it just stuck and turned," Waddell recalls. "For the first time on a monoski, I felt like I was really skiing."

The Turn became a Rosetta Stone of sorts, forming the basis of Waddell's seminal monoski instructional video *Perfect Turn* and unlocking the secrets of carving for a generation of disabled skiers. Mike Brown, a nine-year U.S. Ski Team veteran who coached the U.S. Disabled Ski team from 1990 to 1997, witnessed The Turn and Waddell's subsequent rise to the top of the sport. He remembers thinking, "You might want to hang on to that, because we've never seen anything like it before." In a moment, the potential emerged for monoskiers to match the speed and precision of stand-up skiers. "Chris took a leap of faith," Brown says. "He can be compared to the greats in any sport, the ones who come along once in a generation."

Waddell went on to win a dozen Paralympic medals (five of them gold) in four Winter Olympics. He is, without question, The Man. Out of respect, I resist the overwhelming urge to cuss (loudly, at least) when I fall yet again.

Waddell and Reid Fuller, my stand-up (and very patient) instructor from the



IN DECEMBER 1990, WADDELL MADE 'THE TURN'—A SINGLE AUDACIOUS ARC THAT PROVED WHAT COACHES HAD ONLY BEGUN TO THINK POSSIBLE: MONOSKIS COULD CARVE. 'FOR THE FIRST TIME ON A MONOSKI, I FELT LIKE I WAS REALLY SKIING,' WADDELL SAYS.

NAC, calmly coach me upright. I plant one outrigger in the snow like a fork and push myself partway up with both hands. Then comes the crux move, releasing one hand to quickly guide the remaining outrigger into propping position. I've gotten this far twice before, only to splat when the second outrigger slid out like a spoon. My push-up regimen is irrelevant—arm strength is less critical to success than sheer tenacity. Finally I lunge and stab successfully, then push myself upright and exhale, relieved and triumphant.

Once upright, I start learning the basics of maneuvering my new craft. Whereas stand-up skiers crank their boots tight for control, monoskiers depend on the snug-fitting buckets. I'm cinched into mine with

three straps, one each across my shins, thighs and waist. I can't help but recruit my leg, stomach and back muscles in my efforts, but the monoski is unresponsive to my clandestine cheating—it's designed to navigate entirely by flowing movements initiated from the waist up. At lower speeds, by simply looking down the hill and reaching with my outrigger, my shoulders and hips fall into their proper positions and I can entice the wily monoski to obey. Within a run I can turn gently

with relative ease. Loading and unloading the lift, however, is a challenge all its own.

Each NAC student goes out with an instructor and a volunteer, and both are critical for chairlift duty. To load, I extend myself vertically with both outriggers and simultaneously throw my head back as my helpers hoist me onto the chair from both sides. Muffled groans belie my apparent success. Once I'm settled, Fuller clips a tether on my bucket to the lift. A bad visual emerges, involving awkward and likely painful dangling. "Remind me to unclip your tether at the top," Fuller mentions casually as we settle in for the ride. Another bad visual—this time starring a bullwheel—materializes, and I remind him unfailingly.

Behind me, Waddell exhibits total independence, needing neither boost nor tether. He casually but firmly loops one arm around the chair's side and another around the back. Compared to the man-eating, unassisted pomas and T-bars in Europe, where Waddell earned his

stripes, this is cake. After a few runs, we're both eager to rush my progress, so we head up to a mellow intermediate run called Payday. Looking ahead isn't enough to lure me down the totally blue yet suddenly fearsome "face" of Payday. "You've got to commit," says Waddell, recognizing my hesitation. Trust the ski to get out from underneath you, and it will seek the fall line, bend into an arc, release its energy and pass underneath you into the next turn. This, again, is familiar advice.

What follows resembles the death throes of the Titanic. I balk midturn and then skid, sending my craft back uphill nearly to vertical, where it pauses before rushing straight down, backward. When I finally slide to a stop, my outriggers having failed at self-arrest, Waddell quips, "That's one way to get down the tough part."

Farther along the trail, I build some good speed, catch some air and experience my first "flyswatter" fall. "You have

to go over that edge to find it," Waddell reassures me. "That's sort of what it's all about." The slam does feel strangely good, in the way that getting worked by a wave when learning to surf is confirmation that now, finally, you're in deep enough to make progress.

From there, I go for flow, training my eyes down the hill as Waddell swoops in and out of my peripheral vision with the fluid accuracy of a fighter pilot. It works, all the way down to the NAC, where a supportive crew of Park City Disabled Ski Team regulars greets us at the bench skiers use to transfer themselves between wheelchair and monoski. Encouragement soon turns to chastisement when Fuller moves to take my ski inside. "What's that about? She has to do it herself!" they all agree.



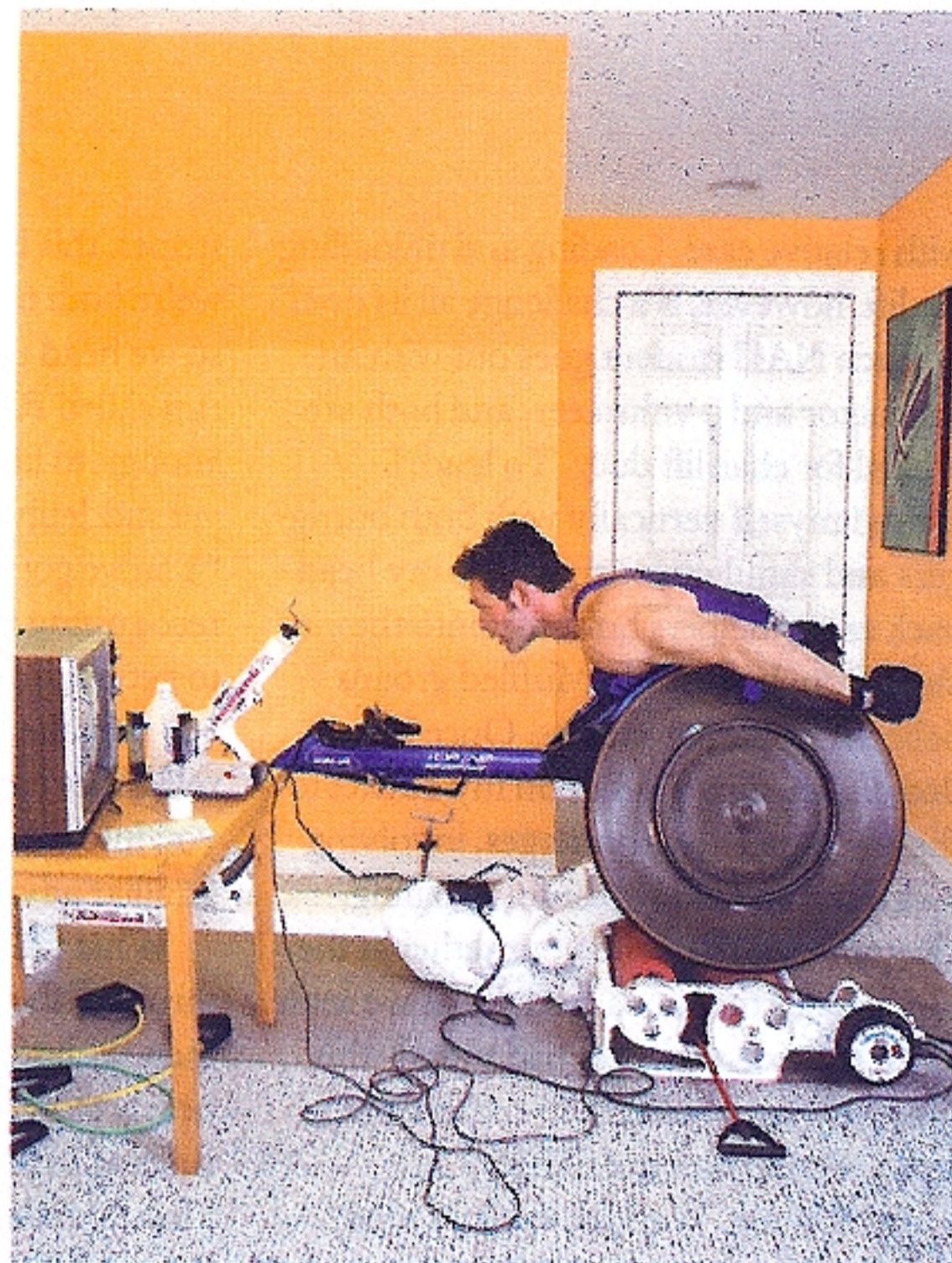
FIRST STEPS Clockwise from opposite: A wheelchair parked outside the NAC waits for its owner to return from a day on the hill; Waddell (left) escorts the author up Park City's First Time lift; Waddell leads the author in her tentative assault on King Con ridge; the author, down but not out.

And so the lesson continues. I wedge the monoski beneath my wheelchair and between my legs, balance the ski itself on my lap, sling the monoski strap over my neck, stabilize the bucket with my teeth and wheel through the slush to the ramp.

Tough crowd, but I get their point. Skiing is the easy part. Getting on and off the hill and picking up the pieces are—literally and figuratively—the real challenges.

Again, looking ahead is the key. Waddell left the hospital a month after his accident, not knowing his prognosis and fully planning his skiing comeback. He didn't expect it to be on a monoski, much less anticipate having such a profound international impact on the sport. As one of the Park City Disabled Ski Team skiers explains (when he's done ribbing me), "The first thing I saw in the hospital after my accident was *Perfect Turn*."

I AWAKEN THE NEXT DAY and remember a critical piece of advice about falling: "Wrap your arms around your body." Not once did I follow this advice. Rather, I used my arms to break every fall. That's why they now feel like I've been manning a jackhammer, my chest and shoulders stiff and abused as I awkwardly guide my



wheelchair into the elevator, then across the plaza toward the NAC trailer, dropping things and politely rejecting offers of help along the way. I head up the ramp, through the door, past rows of specialized equipment and around the corner to "my" monoski bucket. Into my lap it goes, along with outriggers and a ski.

Outside, Waddell is ready, a smooth mobility machine with everything he needs neatly hung on his wheelchair. Training for the Athens Paralympics in the track events and possibly the marathon, he has already hammered out 50 minutes of intervals on his rollers (metal cylinders on which he can roll the wheelchair in place) and later will head to the weight room, his six-day-a-week

BUZZER TO BUZZER From left: Waddell beefs up with the rollers during a 5:30 a.m. workout in his basement; equipment stands ready in the gear room at NAC's mountain headquarters; after a long day, Waddell surveys Park City's Three Kings.



regimen. One of *People* magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People" in 1998, he's also one of the world's hardest working.

Today, I'm flush with false confidence, and we head to the top. Soon, a sequence of slow, flat falls nearly breaks me—and the people around me, who fight their instinct to help. It takes all of my energy to push myself up and all of their will not to pull me. Waddell entertains me with tales of being beached in powder, dragged by aggressive European pomos, cartwheeling down open bowls. If I hid my frustration yesterday out of respect, today it's because I recognize frustration as a luxury. Waddell's own approach to frustration was necessarily simple: "I couldn't allow myself to be frustrated. That was admitting I couldn't do it. So much was taken away from me, I didn't want to lose being on the mountain." I can suddenly interpret the bright, penetrating look in his eyes. "Look beyond where you are, to where you want to go,"

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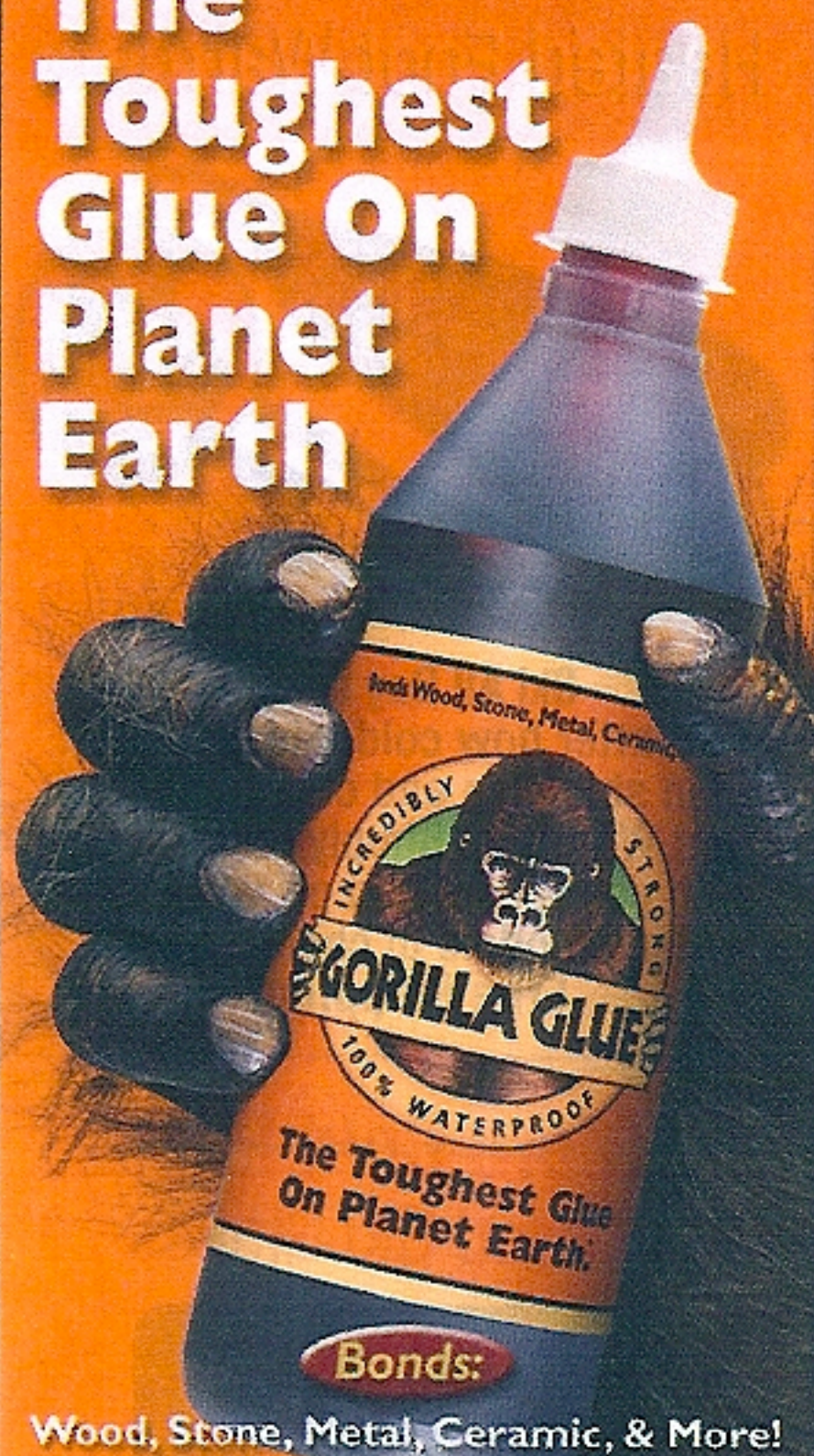
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A monoski breaks down into four main components, says Jeff Goodman of Radventures, Inc., maker of Yeti brand monoskis. There's the **seating system (1)**, which consists primarily of a fiberglass seat, which may be reinforced with Kevlar or carbon fiber to improve its strength-to-weight ratio. Next comes the **frame (2)**, constructed of chromoly steel or aluminum. "Much like a bicycle frame," says Goodman. A **suspension system (3)** cushions the ride, and typically uses a stock motorcycle shock absorber, though pricey suspensions may feature customized shocks. Finally, there's the **binding system (4)**, really a high-end conventional race binding, modified to prevent release, which accommodates a boot-shaped adapter. As for the ski, Goodman says just about any traditional ski will work, but "stiffer boards are better."

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it says. Look to the mountains, to what you can do to keep them in your life.

I'm looking down a seemingly interminable run, feeling as if I've missed my turnaround time on Everest and may be stuck here forever. "You're naked out here," Waddell observes, "you" meaning anyone stripped bare of confidence.

This vulnerability on snow feels unfamiliar, unnerving. "It's like in downhill," he offers. "If you feel anxious, just go like hell to the first gate, and before you can think about it's already there." That's my language, and I go, finally skiing in full sentences rather than randomly patching words together. When I hit bumps I relax and feel the shock absorber working beneath me. Then I blow past the "slow" signs and ride my momentum all the way to the bottom, neatly cornering into the lifeline. I'm tempted to blow smoke from the barrels of my outriggers, but instead flip them down quickly to avoid capsizing and spoiling the moment.

On this ride up we ignore technique and tactics and revel in laughter and conversation. I lunge off the lift unassisted, forgetting all the things I don't know or can't do. This moment, this alchemy of friends and scenery and activity—not any particular technical mastery—is what I'd miss in the what-if scenario, and what I'd work through anything to recapture.

The next morning we meet again, this time with me enjoying the comfort of my own two skis. For the first time I can closely watch Waddell ski, laying over clean arcs in perfect control, skiing every bit as fast as I care to go, which is always rather fast. He describes his style as a "leap of faith"—a matter of looking ahead, moving forward under all circumstances. Now, as I look ahead, all I see is him getting smaller, leaving me in the dust. ◆

For more information about the National Ability Center, visit nac.org or call 435-649-3991.



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