

ON THE HILL



Can you believe it? Look at him go!



A PARAPLEGIC'S FIGHT TO SKI**JEREMY MCGHEE AND HIS MONO-SKI ON THE SLOPES OF MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN**

Jeremy McGhee was balanced, sitting atop his mono-ski at the lip of Gremlin's Gulch, midway down the St. Anton run on the open, groomed slopes of Mammoth Mountain. Anyone with eyes saw that McGhee, 28, was twitchy and ready to go—a little impatient with his ski buddies that day. ¶¶ It was morning in November. The snow was freshly groomed and soft in the early daylight. In Mammoth for a solid month of skiing, McGhee saw immediately that these were among the best snow conditions of the early season. He waited until his buddies showed up at his side. ¶¶ "Ready?" he said. ¶¶ His ski partners nodded yes. ¶¶ Holding outriggers in both hands, he dug them into the snow and, in a blurred instant, was gone: a pinball heading into the gulch. ¶¶ Jeremy McGhee is a paraplegic. It is just over three years since he crashed his motorcycle into the side of a car in San Diego, his hometown, shattering his hips, breaking his ribs, puncturing his lungs, breaking his back and leaving him without the use of his legs. It is a little more than one year since he came to grips with the idea that he might not ever walk again. ¶¶ But McGhee can ski. He can ski like nobody's business.

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In November, Gremlin's Gulch is a deep, high-walled, natural half-pipe that begins just below Hair Jump in the middle of the mountain's open north face. As the snow accumulates over the course of a season, the gulch fills in, becoming just another interesting terrain feature on St. Anton. But in October and November, following the unusually early opening of the ski hill, Gremlin's Gulch was a true carnival ride, and Jeremy McGhee—surfer, former snowboarder, motocyclist and all-around athlete—was eager to take that ride.

"I love these wide-open, steep, rolling groomers," he said after a ski session. "That's the best kind of run for mono-skiing. For people at my level, there's Snowmass, in Aspen, where the runs are a quarter mile wide, and it's the same thing at Mammoth. Those long runs, top to bottom—those are the best."

Among those skiing alongside McGhee on that particular November day was Kathy Copeland, director of Disabled Sports Eastern Sierra, a nonprofit school operating on Mammoth Mountain alongside, but not exactly part of, the for-profit Mammoth Mountain Ski and Snowboard School.

Copeland is a 30-year employee of Mammoth Mountain Ski Area and formerly was head of the children's ski school and the former Adaptive Sports School. A well-known firecracker around Mammoth, Copeland organizes about 50 volunteers to help teach disabled children, teens and adults.

She was thrilled to be skiing alongside McGhee.

"I love this guy," she yelled in that familiar firecracker kind of Kathy Copeland way.

"Can you believe it? Look at him go!" Copeland began yelling. "Whoooo! Whoooo!"

And then she herself was off the lip of Gremlin's Gulch, still whoo-whooping, trying to chase down the blazing-fast, careering, helmeted mono-skier ahead of her.

McGhee is the head of Fight To Walk, a nonprofit organization he founded after his motorcycle accident. The group is dedicated to helping people who have lost the use of their limbs as a result of catastrophic accidents. It helps the victims and their families get through what McGhee calls "the chaos" immediately following an accident of that type.

McGhee found Copeland last season when he brought some of his new friends to Mammoth. One of them needed the help of the Adaptive

Sports program.

"I brought a friend who was a beginner," he said, "and she needed to use their equipment and have someone ski with her. So we came in here and got all set up and met Kathy. And then I got involved with the program."

Indeed, on this day McGhee was wearing the program's familiar burnt orange and gray jacket, identifying him as an instructor with Copeland's group. Alongside him was his black Labrador, Freedom—a trained assistance dog who helps McGhee open doors, turn on and off lights, fetch food from the fridge and assist in any emergency situations.

Freedom, four years old and two years out of assistance school, at this moment was mouthing a Woolly the Mammoth stuffed toy while McGhee spoke.

"When they have mono-ski lessons," he said, "I go out with them and do demos and instruct and do fittings for the mono-skiers or the bi-skiers. It's an incredible program here," he said. "There's such a need. There are people out there who can't ski on their own, and if this program wasn't here they wouldn't be able to ski."

"People with disabilities can now come to the Mountain and ski, and I think that is everything. It's been important for me in my life, because being outdoors and being active for me is everything. There is such a sense of claustrophobia when you are unable to get up and run or get up and move.

"It's kind of like a cageless prison, you know? People with disabilities, and so many people who are in wheelchairs, feel stuck. To be able to go somewhere that I couldn't normally go in my wheelchair, and to go fast, and to be skiing just as fast as everyone else, like I was before, is so exhilarating."

McGhee lowered his voice slightly.

"It changes everything," he said. "It heals that huge sense of claustrophobia."

McGhee rides a mono-ski rig that is valued at about \$7,000. The main seat and chassis is top-of-the-line, designed by the famous disabled skier Kevin Bramble of Squaw Valley—a member of the U.S. Disabled Alpine A Team and an innovator in mono-ski design.

It takes effort, upper-body strength and coordination, but McGhee can hoist himself from his wheelchair into the seat of his mono-ski rig. On this day, he positioned his mono-ski on the sidewalk, just off the snow. With his dog Freedom keeping watch at his side, McGhee clambered from his wheelchair into the mono-ski seat, then strapped his legs down



and cinched the strap tight over his lap.

The chassis, which uses a motocross-type shock absorber, sets into the ski by way of standard, albeit top-of-the-line, bindings. The ski itself is a Nordica Beast 72TT, a wide, impressive shaped ski that allows McGhee to make impossible-looking, low-leaning carves down the slopes.

In place of ski poles, McGhee uses outriggers. While skiing, he flips the ski end of the outriggers outward, creating little mini-skis that lie flat against the snow. When maneuvering in a lift line or out on the ski hill, McGhee flips the ski-ends of these outriggers up, in essence making them poles.

McGhee himself has added other touches, and has enlisted the help of some of Mammoth Mountain's personnel to make his refinements work. For example, he crafted a chest strap that attaches the back of the seat to his ski jacket with Velcro. Mountain seamstress Leslie Ritter made the Velcro patches for his jacket, so that his invention would work.

The idea behind the chest strap is that Bramble's design didn't exactly take into account a mono-skier like McGhee, who throws his upper body into each run with considerable strength and precision.

After skiing Gremlin's Gulch and lower St. Anton, McGhee and his buddies rode up Chair 1/Broadway Express, crossed over the wide trail at the top of the lift and got in line for Chair 3/Facelift. McGhee automatically positioned himself on the outside, next to the lift attendant.

"It doesn't happen very often," he said, "but every now and then I don't make it into the chair and they help me out."

As the detachable quad lift swung round, McGhee dug the points of his outriggers into the snow, and as the chair came up close, he dug in, lifting hard until "Ka-phloom!"—he's in the chair.

The liftie smiled and waved.

"Have a good run, man," the liftie said, and McGhee waved his outrigger back in acknowledgement.

At the top of Chair 3/Facelift there is a choice. One can ski the steeper face of 3, or take the back route, around a large rock outcropping onto the intermediate slope of Upper St. Anton.

McGhee, without hesitating, took the face route. He disappeared over the lip of the run and attacked the hill on its far right side, negotiating a small mogul field before settling on a line under the Upper Gondola.

And then he leaned into the hill, leaning so far that his shoulder almost scraped the surface. A big, arcing rooster tail shot out from behind his ski, and a smaller rooster tail shot out from under one of his outriggers.

Skiers and snowboarders on the trail stopped and watched as McGhee shot down the slope, leaning this way and that before disappearing down the ramp that leads to the bottom of Chair 3/Facelift.

McGhee said his athletic interests do not stop at mono-skiing. "My main sport was snowboarding," he said in the après ski interview. "I was racing boardercross a lot; not pro or sponsored or anything, but I was a good snowboarder: solid, with maybe some potential to take it to a competitive level. And I grew up surfing, and I still surf now. I've got a board I sit on and I've got a paddle. My friends carry me down the cliff and throw me in the water. Once I'm in the water I don't need help. I can surf ceiling-height waves.

"I did a lot of swimming, cycling and running—triathlons and stuff, and I still do some triathlons. Swimming's normal. I just strap my legs together. The bikes are a hand cycle and the run part is in a race chair—a wheelchair with an extended front axle. It puts you in a real forward position so you can really hammer away at the wheels. It's pretty intense."

On this day, though, the sport was all about skiing Mammoth, and McGhee was looking for a little bit deeper snow, to practice.

"The upper-level guys want the off-trail stuff," he said, "but I'm not quite at that level yet. I can do off-trail, and deeper snow, but it's really difficult. The guys who are best in the world are off-trail all the time.

"I want to figure out something that works better in powder, because those 'riggers get caught in powder and get pulled behind me, so they're pretty much useless in loose snow."

McGhee looked up toward the crest of Mammoth Mountain—in November a wall of whitewashed steeps.

"Chair 23 is how I've gotten up there in the past," he said. "I haven't done the Gondola, but I've been thinking through it. I just need two guys with me. Somebody to carry my rig, someone to carry the ski, someone to help me."

He continued to examine the top.

"Cornice Bowl is the best scenario, for me, but I've come down it when it's not groomed, too. And I've come down Scotty's. That one week last year, that one week where we got six and a half feet? I think I fell five times coming down Scotty's. There were big, huge chopped powder bumps."

"But I handled it," he said, then repeated:

"I handled it." 

