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Dominique Perret: King of powder snow

Mark Shapiro



In the last decade, freeride skiing has become one of the most important cornerstones of the winter sports industry. The sport's most prominent exponent is Dominique Perret, from the Valais.

BY ALAIN WEY

FOR TWENTY YEARS Dominique Perret, the man voted Freerider of the Century, has been gliding down virgin slopes. In February 2004, the US magazine "Skiing" presented Perret as one of twelve skiing stars to have changed their ski brands. A film showing the daring exploits of Verbier's local hero is released each season. Dominique Perret's tours and expeditions lead him to places like the Alps, Scandinavia, Canada and Alaska, Uzbekistan and the Himalayas. This exceptional athlete spends his time away from competitions, on slopes without starting and finishing lines, in line with his unique philosophy: Freedom and creativity are all that matters.

"I was born with this passion," explains the 42-year-old skier. His first attempts at skiing were at the early age of two. As a junior racer he competed in alpine skiing for 15 years, but then his instinct drew him away from groomed pistes towards the natural wilderness of untouched slopes. After graduating as an engineer, the young man devoted himself entirely to adventure skiing, determined to turn the sport into his profession. He takes great risks - and wins. Dominique Perret is a pioneer of freestyle filming and his engineering skills enable him to represent and work for large ski companies, developing a wide range of ski sports equipment. He founded his first company in the early 1990s, dedicated to research and development in the field of sports. This was fol-

Dominique Perret has left his mark on the world's most famous mountainsides.

lowed by Vertical Zoo, a film and photographic company which has signed contracts with the world's best extreme sports athletes.

This exceptional skier has left his mark on the world's most famous slopes. He is continually developing his skills, collaborating on a number of different projects to help him come closer to his ideal of perfection. In 1990 he set a new cliff jump world record, hurling down a 36.4 meter rock face. A year later, he chalked up a new world speed record when he reached 211.825 kilometres an hour in Portillo, Chile. In 1996, in a joint collaboration with fellow Swiss mountain guide and adventurer Jean Troillet, he set out on an expedition to ski down the Tibetan north face of Mount Everest – in pure alpine style, without bivouacs or oxygen masks. After three months and as many attempts, the pair partially succeeded. Extreme cold (–60°Celsius), snowstorms and high winds of up to 200 kilometers an hour had hampered earlier attempts. Their successful descent started from an altitude of 8500 meters above sea level. In 1998 Perret set yet another world record in the Canadian resort of Blue River, covering 120,000 vertical metres non-stop in 14 hours 30 minutes by repeatedly being flown back up to the peak by helicopter. And he has lots more in store. Perret is determined to ski at this level for another twenty years.

Nowadays, in the wake of the freeride skiing marketing boom, Dominique Perret is much in demand, not only in the sports industry but also in film and many other sectors. A number of companies want to instill some of Perret's life philosophy and winner's mentality in their staff. As a result, he is often invited to conferences and seminars in Europe and North America. "For instance, a biotech company invited me to Saas Fee," says Perret. "Sport has a lot in common with economics and science. It's always a new adventure." What are the basic values these fields have in common? "Creativity; a willingness to take risks; team bonding; the ability to have visions and dreams and share them with others; the freedom of mind to do things no-one has ever done before; the courage to go your own way; the ability to see what is immediately ahead as well as in the distance, just like avoiding a rock and at the same time looking 500 metres ahead to maintain your line when skiing down a slope." So Dominique Perret is more than

just a simple skier. "In freeriding, you don't have to be the best, you just have to try to get the best out of yourself": an admirable philosophy for life.


The divorced father of two (7 and 10 years old) is a familiar figure to Swiss in all four corners of the globe. His skiing skills are his best calling card, because nationality and national borders lose their significance in the high mountains. Concrete actions and know-how are much more important. He sees himself not so much as an ambassador of a country, but more as a representative of the freeriding lifestyle. Asked about the origins of this type of skiing, Dominique Perret simply answers, "2000 years ago, people started to move around on skis. My grandfather skied off-piste and effectively did what we now call freeriding. As racing and the grooming of slopes gradually evolved, the sport became more artificial. Yet skiing should be all about nature, powder snow, forests and mountains. This is what freeriding aspires to: getting back to the roots of the sport, just like cyclists do with the mountain bike. All freeriding disciplines are on a quest for simple values and the natural wilderness rather than ready-prepared, artificial, standardised and organised experiences that gradually rid you of any originality. Freeriding is all about re-awakening the instinct we have within us."

Dominique Perret skis about 100 days in every year. He only goes out when conditions are right. "It's all about quality, not quantity," he says. "Sometimes just one day of skiing can be worth as much as a hundred other days." When the ski season comes to an end in the northern hemisphere, he turns to other sports and seeks new inspiration for his skiing adventures. His favourite sports are mountain biking and surfer. "I try to go wherever the waves swell high, but I'm no prophet," he laughs. "I'm a bad surfer, but I just love it!" Asked how he stays in condition alongside these leisure activities, he answers: "Staying fit is not one of my strengths, but I always try to be active. I worked with Roger Federer's coach, Pierre Paganini, for three years. But that's a thing of the past now that Roger has become so successful."

"Athletes who have the privilege of making a living from their hobby should also make an effort to help other people," says a committed Perret. Since 2000, he has organised an annual sports event to help sick children here and overseas. Every year the 24-



Perret: a passionate sportsman

hour Freeride in Verbier raises some CHF 150,000 in donations. In addition, his last film "Red Alert" drew attention to global warming, after he had to abandon his trip to India, Canada and Alaska due to lack of snow. For his next film, scheduled for 2005, he plans to be more flexible and travel at short notice to spots where conditions are just right. Like a call for freedom, the skier-philosopher, who injects passion into everything he does, repeats his credo to us: "Live out your adventures and passions with every breath you take!" 

Translated from French.

Camera on

Through his production company, Vertical Zoo, Dominique Perret has directed and produced 16 films and been presented with over 60 awards around the world at festivals for sport, adventure and mountaineering films. His latest film, "Red Alert" (May 2004), is set in the Swiss Alps. The DVD is on sale now and also features four earlier films, shot on location in Canada, Alaska, Norway, the Himalayas and of course Switzerland. It can be ordered from info@skier.ch or via Dominique Perret's website at www.skier.ch