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Biodegradable

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Dog Day
Mythic BC
East Coast
Nils Larsen
Core Strength and more
Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan

Nils with Chokue near Hkom.  Photo: Nils Larsen
Nils Larsen has many nicknames among his ski partners. Some are inside jokes and some are less than flattering, but one of my favorites is All Snow is Good Snow Larsen. The name is fitting on many levels, but mostly because Nils can drop into a ski line and, regardless of snow conditions, make it look good.

Nils has been involved in the backcountry and freeheel ski world on many levels. He has produced numerous telemark ski movies, worked in ski development, and taught freeheel and backcountry ski clinics for many years. His Beyond the Groomed ski clinics have helped many a freeheel skier, including me, expand their horizons and improve their skiing.

Recently, Nils has directed his energy into researching the origins of skiing and the remnant use of traditional skis in the Chinese Altai Mountains. Skiing evolved out of the need to travel and live in deep snow. Today, the Altai Mountains appear to be one of the few, if not only, remaining places where indigenous populations still use skis in their traditional sense. Nils has travelled to the Altai Mountains five times, produced the award-winning film, Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan, and is dedicated to further documenting and researching the roots of skiing in Central Asia.

Fresh from his most recent trip to the Altai, Nils talked with me about his skiing background and his research into the origins of skiing and the traditional use of skis.

Dave Waag (W): Tell me a little about your skiing background. When and where did you start skiing?

Nils Larsen (L): I was born and raised in Hawaii, so I did not ski there at all. Then, I think when I was 12 or 13, my Dad got transferred to the mainland for a while. He worked in agriculture, and we moved to California. My grandmother's brother was one of the founders of Sugar Bowl in the Sierra. He was a skier, and he invited us up there one winter and outfitted me in leather alpine boots and ski gear. He had this little room that was like the history of skiing. Anyway, he outfitted me. I basically went up, learned how to snowplow, and had a blast. That was my first time skiing.

W: So, this must have been in the cable binding era?

L: Oh, yeah. It was in the 60s. We moved to Oregon the next year, and I skied a little bit there. We had a little ski bus at this junior high school I went to, so I skied four or five times, alpine skied. I didn't really ski much after that for a couple years. When I left high school, I moved to Washington. I was in Sultan in the foothills of Stevens Pass on the west side. We would go up and alpine ski occasionally at Stevens at that time. I probably skied three or four days a year – something like that.

W: When did you first telemark ski?

L: Going back to California, I kinda got into backcountry skiing because the same uncle who started Sugar Bowl, he actually backcountry skied into Soda Springs (my great grandfather's place near Sugar Bowl). It's a day's ski away. Anyway, he would ski into the cabin on backcountry skis, and that got me interested because I really liked that place. So, I actually got wood backcountry touring skis — Bonna 2400's with metal edges. I had these ABC bindings, and I just used hiking boots. I didn't really know how to telemark. I had never even heard of telemark, but I would just go out and thrash around with wax and stuff. But then we had a guy working in there [Soda Springs]. Probably in the mid-70s – I want to say '74 or '75. He was a cross-country skier and he had spent time in Colorado. I remember he showed me this picture once; it was this set of turns and he said, "a guy made these on Nordic gear doing telemark turns," and he tried to describe it to me. He just wanted me to try it. I also showed him my ABC bindings, and he said, "try it with ABC bindings." He just wanted me to try it. I tried it. I had some success with it. I did not fall as much as I used to. I finally got the hang of it.

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Actually, what really did it was that I went over to the Methow [Valley in Washington] when I moved to where I am now [Curlew, WA]. I went over to the Methow and met Don Portman and those guys. They kinda gave me a lesson on telemark skiing up at Loup Loup [a small ski hill near the Methow].

That really got me started. But you know, I read a book that really wanted to ski more when I lived at Stevens Pass in the 70s. So when I bought this place [in Curlew, WA] in '79, a big part of it was that I wanted to live in a winter environment and I wanted to be able to ski out my door. I was definitely moving in that direction. When I first moved here, I became good friends with John Foster, and we went and skied at Mt. Baldy [located in British Columbia west of Grand Forks, BC] a lot together. At that time I was still just skiing alpine at ski areas. It was the next year that I started telemarking and John was really grumbly because I was constantly falling and not keeping up with him on his alpine gear. [laughter] But I soon converted him too.

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Laundry day in Iceland. Photo: Dave Waag

Nils enjoys Canada's finest. Photo: Dave Waag
It was all XCD gear at the time with low leather boots. It was pre-Merrell boots.

W: You have been involved with the ski industry in a variety of ways over the years. How did that start?

L: I moved here and I was primarily doing construction for work. In the winter, at that time in the early '80s, construction essentially shut down over here...So, my first winter I went over and worked on the coast with a buddy building over there...you can build there in the winter, but it is miserable and I really wanted to live over here...I decided I'd open a ski shop over here. ...my first year I think was '81-'82. It was the first year of my ski shop, Highland Nordic. ...I had groomed trails and rentals. I taught skiing. I had gotten involved with PSIA [Professional Ski Instructors of America] at that point, too. I actually had a little snowmobile-type groomer and would go around to this rural, hippy-type area and we would do this potluck, soup kitchen-type thing. I'd set track, bring a bunch of rentals, you know, get everybody psyched on skiing. I'd sell a bunch of skis that way. I got a bunch of people skiing. Rancher's wives would all come in and get skis and drag their husbands in too. It got a lot of people on skis.

W: You have made several videos over the years - both instructional and more pure entertainment.

L: Yeah, not counting the China stuff, I have made three of my own stand-alone movies. I have done other projects too, for Karhu and Voile, but only three that I have published and would claim ownership to. Shooting video all started because I was teaching skiing and at the time there wasn't really any [telemark representation]. We would go and watch Warren Miller movies and there would be no telemarking or maybe there was a laughable, joking segment. I just felt like it got no respect and no one was seeing what good telemarkers could do. So I really wanted to try and get something out there, especially backcountry-oriented, because that was more my interest at the time.

W: When did your first movie come out?

L: I want to say the first one came out about '91 or '92. It was called Beyond the Groomed, and was purely instructional. But my tack was to film lots of good skiers, and use visuals of good skiers with narration that pointed out what was going on and what was successful in general terms rather than super specific. Because of that it still works today; because it talks about body position and movement that applies regardless of equipment. I spent a lot of time working on the script for that video - getting it honed down to the bare bones of what makes skiing work. ...The second video was Freedom of the Heels. It was more instructional about backcountry skiing in general. It has information on route finding, using skins, and lots of little snippets of backcountry skiing from various places from the East coast to the West coast. The third one was Big Mountain Little Skier. It was purely entertainment - backcountry telemark ski porn.

W: Shifting gears a bit, let's turn to your recent trips to China and your research on traditional skiing in the Altai Mountains. I have a question related to this. You live off the grid in a relatively rustic setting. It seems very natural for you to be interested in traditional ski use. Can you verbalize the connection between your lifestyle and your interest in the culture of the Altai Mountains?

L: Well, there is some kind of connection there. It is hard to really spell it out. I would say it has to do with my interest in people being self-sufficient and making things themselves. You know, I love working with wood and using old tools and all that kind of stuff at my place. So, when I see people doing that as a way of living, it is appealing to me. It is a bit of a throwback and something I can connect with. I have used some of those tools and have been living in some of the same ways. I mean, I have lived off the grid since, gosh, since 1974.

W: What sparked your initial interest in the Altai?

L: What sparked my initial interest in the Altai? I have a little about how all that came about.
some friends, Naheed and Eric Henderson and Jimmy Chin. There were six of them, actually, that got what might have been the first permit to ski in the Chinese Altai in 2003. People had been going into the Mongolian Altai and the Russian Altai, but not on the Chinese side. It had been closed to foreigners. They got a permit to go in there and they were going to try and ski Friendship Peak from the Chinese side. They went in late April and the snow was bad, and when they came out they ran into some of these local guys who had their own skis. They had not known about this beforehand. Naheed showed a slide show at one of our events [ski clinics]. She had a couple pictures of some of these indigenous folks with their [homemade] skis and it really captured my imagination and attention. Jimmy Chin actually took the pictures. If you look at the movie [Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan] the opening shot is a photo by Jimmy Chin from their trip. As soon as I saw those pictures I thought, someone has to document this. We thought it was long gone – this kind of skiing.

W: Tell me more about the image. What did it tell you about the people in it.

L: In part it was the history; I had read somewhere that skiing may have started in the Altai/Lake Baikal area. But what really did it was those pictures of these guys with skis that looked right out of the stone age. Naheed also had just enough info to pour gas on the fire, stories of hunting on skis and such. The idea that there was still an intact culture that used skis in a traditional way — well, that night I saw those first pictures I started thinking about how I could get over there.

W: Tell me about these people, their ethnicity, and their history.

L: Ethnicity in the mountains is a little mixed, but there are two groups. One is Kazakhs. They are Turkic. The Kazakh language is Turkic and originates in the Altai. The other group is called the Tuwa by the Chinese. In digging through [history] it looks like they are probably Tuvan [from the Russian side of the Altai] who settled in the region around 500 years ago. The Chinese do not have the letter v in their alphabet, and we think they probably just changed the v to a w calling them the Tuwa. They [the Kazakhs and the Tuwa] cohabitate there in the mountains together. There are very few Chinese up there. In the summer the Chinese come up to open tourist facilities [primarily serving Chinese tourists] that they recently built.

I would say that on this last trip I honed in on that the Tuwa or Tuvan people have lived in the mountains for a long time. They have actually resided in the mountains year-round for a very long time, whereas the Kazakhs have traditionally lived in the lowlands in the winter and in the summer they move to the mountains to pasture their animals. They move vertically to get grass versus horizontally, like they do in Kazakhstan.

Now, the Kazakhs live in the mountains too, but this trip I decided the Tuwa are the more traditional mountain dwellers. In talking to them they are the ones with the real ski history. In the traditional races that are being held it is virtually all Tuwa skiers. They are the real dedicated skiers. You talk to Tuwas and they have this mythology that they were born with skis on.

W: How many trips have you made to the Altai now?

L: I have been four times in the winter and once in the summer.

W: I was on the first trip with you and Naheed. What is it that drew you back for more?

L: The first trip, as you know, was in mid-March to mid-April. We did not really know any background info when we got there. It turns out that they do most of their skiing, hunting, and use of skis earlier [in the winter]. They told us on that trip that they really ski a lot in December, January, and into February. By the time we got there, they were busy with birthing animals . . . so they were not skiing as much. We did ski with them but it was more because we were there and they were interested in our skiing too.

After that first trip I decided I wanted to be there when there really was more skiing going on. I wanted to be there in late December and into January, so all my winter trips have been late December and into January.

W: Tell me about your visit this January and where you went.

L: On our trip together [the first trip], we went to Kanas Lake and branched out from there. That was a really good area and there is definitely skiing in that area. On the second trip, I included a second major mountain town called Hkom [pronounced like comb]. It is about two days travel from Kanas and is probably the snowiest place in the Chinese Altai. I have been spending a lot of time in Hkom the past couple of trips. . . . I have been trying to go where the most snow is to find skiers who are actually skiing.

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Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan
Timeless Skiers of the Altai

The movie is (finally) finished and now available on DVD.
You can find the DVD in the following stores:
- Mountain Gear
- Alpenglow
- The Mountain Shop
or through Free Heels at 800-227-2054

Also available from Free Heels: The Backcountry Box set
3 films about freeheeling in the backcountry

www.freeheels.com 1-800-227-2054

Hosted Wilderness Area
Powder Skiing
wallowahuts.com
541 426 HUTS
Another thing is that people are a bit stand-offish when you first meet 'em. So I have found over the years of going back and spending time with them [and] bringing them pictures I have taken [on earlier visits] they become a lot more friendly, and [I am] able to build relationships and gain some trust with people.

Initially, and for lots of good reasons, they do not really trust outsiders. So a big part of it [return trips] has been to develop acceptance and trust with them, and I feel I have done that now. I do add new excursions to other places each trip, but I also try to go back and see the same people to spend time with them too.

W: What are you hearing from the folks there about skiing and its importance to them and their history?

L: Well, it is changing a little bit. Part of the problem is that they have had a series of low snow years and that has affected the need for skiing. I was talking to some older guys on this last trip and they say that on a big snow year they have to put skis on just to go get water for the house. It has not been like that the last three years or so. And for hunting large animals – many different guys have told me this – they need at least a meter of snow to run down animals like elk. Otherwise, the animals can just run away from them. When you get more snow, all of a sudden skis become a tool to run down larger animals by following their tracks. They can capture them or lasso them. The lack of snow has affected their hunting. What they still do a lot of, and what they were doing this visit, and always have done, is go out trapping on skis. They trap squirrels and martins – anything they can trap, fur-bearing wise. They do this on skis a lot. All of this [hunting and trapping] is technically illegal [based on Chinese law] but they still do it. There is no question they are doing it and they do not really hide it. They show me skins of freshly caught animals and stuff.

W: The snowpack is cold and dry – comparable to a Rocky Mountain or Intermountain snowpack here.

L: Definitely. When you look at the Altai, it is as far away from an ocean as you can get on the planet. So it kind of defines continental snowpack. It is also fairly far north. It is actually the same latitude as I am here – about 49-degrees north. It is very cold and it never gets above freezing in the winter. Average January temperatures are below zero all the time. Because it is cold and dry and fairly shallow, the pack gets faceted really easily. They are skiing loose, cold snow when they ski.

W: The snow is so loose that when it's deep there is no way to get through it without skis.

L: Yeah. The classic almost creation myth about skis is that they [the people] are out with their horse and get founded in deep snow. They end up having to kill their horse and cut down a tree to make skis just to survive. I have heard that in variations from probably five or six different people.

W: So what's next? Do you have plans for another trip? Have you been filming? What's the next year or two on the China front look like?

L: I am hoping to go back next winter. I finished the first movie, Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan after the last trip in 2007. This year, when I went back, I switched to filming in HD [high definition video], which is a much nicer format. I was hoping to get hunting footage this year, but with the low snowpack, I did not. But what I did get was some agreements with [Chinese] officials to allow me to hunt because hunting is basically illegal. I did not really want to get any locals in trouble by taking photos of them hunting, and some of them were unwilling just because of that. They did not want to be photographed hunting and I do not blame them.

So, in meetings with some local government officials, I got some really good agreements to allow me to document the hunting process – not necessarily having to kill animals but to document how [local hunters] hunt on skis and how they chase animals on skis. I really want to go over and document that. My hope is to go next year. Unfortunately, I returned about January 20 this year, and I have been watching the weather there and it looks like it has been snowing a lot since I left. It is unfortunate, but that is the way it goes.

W: Have the Chinese come up with petroglyph or artifact evidence that helps date skiing in the Altai?

L: Norbek, one of the horsemen we used, and who I used on my most recent trip, found a great petroglyph two years ago. A large dam is going in on the Irtil River that will flood the entire area where he found the petroglyph. So, Norbek actually removed the rock – an absolute a no-no from an archeological point of view. I actually visited the area. There is a 75-meter-high dam going in so he is right that the image would have been lost forever. He found a really good one. There are lots of reports of other ones in the Chinese Altai. I tried to track down a few on this trip, unsuccessfully, but I have lots of local guys out scouting around at this point.

W: It would be pretty exciting to come across something like that.

L: I heard another great rumor that someone found this old cave with these really old skis stashed in the back, but in the winter you can't really search around too much for that sort of stuff. That is another possibility; I could go back in the late summer strictly looking for petroglyphs and stuff like that. The Altai have an unbelievable amount of petroglyphs all through them. On the Mongolian side, there are researchers going there, they found two or three really nice ski petroglyphs. The Mongolian side of the Altai is the dry side so I suspect that on the Chinese side there are more too. There just thousands of petroglyphs in the area.

W: We found a variety of petroglyphs above Kanas Lake.

L: Yeah, I feel like if you follow some of those big river systems from the valley up into the mountains [you are likely to find more]. Just around Chunkur, where that dam is being built, I looked at thousands of petroglyphs in a quarter mile area.

The rock that Norbek found is actually in the movie [In the Shadow of Genghis Khan]. The image looks like he has two ski poles – I suspect that it is something else going on there – but he is chasing a couple of ibex in that one.

W: How has the movie been received? It has won some awards, right?