

# ALASKAN HIGHS & LOWS

In 2022, **Sam Anthamatten** teamed up with extreme snowboarder Victor de Le Rue to make an Alaskan ski movie *Free Rider*. Here, Sam reflects on what he learned and how it can be applied to all backcountry adventures



## SAM ANTHAMATTEN

**Born:** September 1986

**Home town:** Zermatt, Switzerland

**Lowdown:** Sam is a professional big mountain skier, Faction and The North Face athlete, mountain guide, and father of two

### TRUST YOUR GUT

We had already been sitting in Haines for 10 days waiting out bad weather when another storm appeared on the forecast. This is all part of the game though: waiting, watching, hoping for a break. When the window finally opened, we had one chance to check out the zone we had chosen as Option A for shooting the movie before the next storm cycle. We decided I'd fly out there in a small aircraft with enough supplies to survive a week, so I could do a proper recce. The pilot dropped me off on the glacier and, as the sound of the plane faded, I realised how alone I was. I put on my skins and crossed the glacier towards the face, but as I got closer I realised we'd made a mistake. The face was massive, so much bigger than I had grasped from the maps and photos. Objective hazards loomed everywhere: monstrous cornices, deep crevasses at the bottom, and countless no-fall zones. The plane was already on its way back to Haines, and I was alone to make the decision. But the decision was clear; I didn't feel good about this.

In the mountains, trusting your gut isn't just a cliché, it's survival. If something doesn't feel right there's usually a reason, and when you're under pressure to make a call, that gut instinct can be your best tool. I pulled out my satellite phone and called the team: "It's a no," I told them. They weren't exactly thrilled, but the decision was made and the plane turned around to come pick me up.

On the flight back, I got a good view of Option B and it looked solid. The next morning, the storm slammed into the mountains, tearing through the zone where we had originally planned to set up camp. Another crew, not far from that area, lost their tents and all their gear and had to be rescued. In the mountains, you can't force things to be good just because you want them to be, you have to be honest with yourself. The question I asked standing on that glacier was simple: is it actually good, or do I just want it to be good? That's the kind of question that keeps you alive.

### CONDITIONS, TERRAIN, AND THE HUMAN ELEMENT

In the mountains, I think about three key factors: conditions, terrain and the human element. If two out of three line up, you can usually go for it. If all three align, that's when you can really push your limits.

When we were shooting *Free Rider*, at first one of those factors felt off. Jérôme Tanon was there to film, but he didn't have the technical mountain background that the rest of us had. I saw him

as a potential risk, and if something went wrong, I assumed it would be with him. The guide instinct kicked in, and I was balancing my own focus with an awareness that I might need to look out for him too.

We'd wake up at four in the morning, getting ready for the day ahead, and there he was, filming us brushing our teeth. I remember thinking: "Come on, man, focus. It's go time." But what I didn't realise was that he had a plan of his own. He wasn't telling us the storyline of his film, he was letting it unfold naturally, capturing every real moment without interference – and that's exactly why it worked. He even caught the moment when I called my wife and she told me she was pregnant. It made the experience even more personal, and every time I see that film I can't help but tear up.

Victor knew what Jérôme was capable of and I didn't, but in the end, he was the best thing that could have happened for the project. As the trip went on, the three factors started to align. We had perfect conditions, we found ideal terrain and, despite my initial concerns, the team worked seamlessly. Looking back, the skiing I did on that trip was some of the best of my life. The mountains demand respect and require you to be honest, not just about the conditions and the terrain, but also about the people you're with.

### NEVER TRUST A FRENCHMAN TO DO YOUR GROCERY SHOPPING

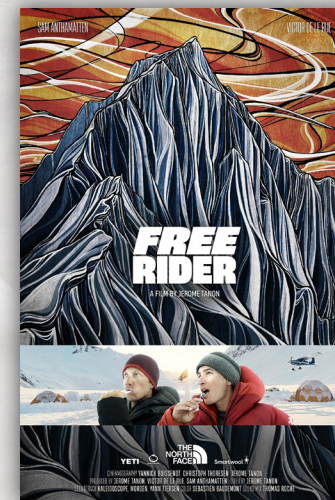
When you're heading into the mountains for weeks, food isn't just food, it's your only fuel. We had plenty of time to plan and get it right, but we were so focused on the safety of the riding it got pushed to the bottom of the priority list. Before we headed out to the glacier, Jérôme and Victor were sent to do the food shopping, but what they brought back was a disaster: canned meat, canned minced beef chilli... Basically dog food!

If there's one lesson I took from that experience, it's that the right calories make all the difference. Luckily, Yannick, Christopher and I had brought some cheese and meat for ourselves and that really saved me. Food might not seem like the most important thing when you're planning a big expedition, but if you don't have the right food, you don't function. We take it for granted that we can walk into a store and buy whatever we need at any time. But planning food for five people, for 21 days in the mountains, is a huge challenge. Get it wrong and you're in for a nightmare. Get it right, and it can make a good trip an unforgettable one. *Fall Line*

When all three elements come together – conditions, terrain and the team – you can really go for it, says Sam



"Looking back, the skiing I did on that trip was some of the best of my life"



"Trusting your gut isn't just a cliché, it's survival" says Sam