

## Success Elements of Elite Performers in High Risk Sport: Big Mountain Free Skiers

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### Abstract

Big Mountain (BM) freeskiing is a high-risk, high-speed alternative sport that takes place in an unpredictable mountain environment. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the success elements of elite BM freeskiers to perform their best while immersed in the unique challenges of their sport. Nine of the best BM freeskiers in the world participated in the study. The success elements that emerged from the interviews were categorized into five categories; pre-performance preparation (line selection, visualization, and calmness), performance execution (confidence and focus), and post-performance evaluation (reflection, lessons learned, mindset), love for their sport and what they were doing, and a fully focused connection to that in which they were engaged. A unique aspect of this study was that the participants had the ability to remain calm while facing extremely challenging situations in which severe injury and probable death are the consequence of a less than best performance.

Imagine a helicopter has just dropped you off on a mountain peak. You crouch down on a ledge of snow to protect yourself from the blades of the helicopter, and feel the sting of the swirling snow given life by the powerful machine. Behind you, the mountain drops straight down two thousand feet. In front of you, the snow falls away steeply down a chute over three thousand feet in length. You have never been here, and the only information you have about this area is

from a Polaroid photo of the mountain, and the visual information you gathered from the helicopter ride as it climbed to the peak to drop you off. As you begin putting on your skis, you remember that a fall here would mean almost certain death. Your heart starts racing, and you start breathing faster and harder.

What drives people to put themselves in this position? What are they thinking about or

focusing on just before they start down the mountain? What success elements allow them to perform optimally in this dangerous environment? The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding about the success elements employed by elite Big-Mountain (BM) freeskiers to perform their best while immersed in the sport of BM freeskiing.

The main components that make up a BM freeskiing experience include: creativity, high speed, and big aerial manoeuvres. One of the unique differences of BM freeskiing, compared to the other components of freeskiing, and traditional ski racing (alpine racing, moguls, and aerials) is the freedom each athlete has to create within an extremely difficult and unpredictable environment. BM freeskiing takes place in alpine regions of big mountains, where the terrain for a “normal” run is exposed due to the steepness of the slope, scattered with trees, and littered with cliffs. The athletes who compete in BM freeskiing use personal style and creativity to ski on the dangerous, un-groomed terrain. There are no gates and time is not the deciding factor of winning and losing as with traditional alpine ski racing. The athletes are not restricted to particular features that they must use during their run. For instance, if one athlete jumps off a particular cliff, this does not mean that other participants have to jump off the same cliff. In competition, there is a designated area for the event to take place; one that will be challenging enough for the athletes and one that the judges can see with binoculars. There are five judges who score the athletes’ performance according to: the line they choose (degree of difficulty), aggressiveness, technique, fluidity, and control. Each category is rated out of ten marks for a potential total of fifty marks for each run.

Understanding the success elements that lead to optimal performances in BM

freeskiing may provide insights to those involved in high risk sports as well as other performers, that can help them enjoy their experiences, cope effectively with fear, and focus in ways that will help them perform their best when facing big challenges.

### **Success Elements**

Elite performers from many disciplines, including sport (Orlick & Partington, 1988), medicine (Tribble & Newburg, 1998) space travel (Hadfield & Orlick, 1999), mountaineers (Burke, S., & Orlick, 2003) and the arts (Fageus, 1999; Talbot-Honeck, & Orlick, 1998) have been studied to assess what elements free these exceptional people to perform their best. Most studies on the psychology or mental skills of elite athletes have been conducted with “mainstream” sports. For example, extensive studies have been conducted on athletes from both summer and winter Olympic Games (Orlick & Partington, 1988) and many other mainstream sports.

Orlick (2000) describes in detail seven “keys to success” that have consistently surfaced in the literature in his Wheel of Excellence. Four elements form the outer circle (positive images, mental readiness, distraction control and ongoing learning), and three elements form the inner core of the wheel (commitment, focused connection, and confidence). The Wheel of Excellence is a model that has been supported by many applied studies and extensive consulting experience with elite performers (Orlick, 1980, 1990, 1992, 2000, 2002; Orlick and Partington, 1988; Barbour & Orlick, 1999; Kabush & Orlick, 2000; Burke & Orlick, 2003). In Orlick’s most current work in progress, focus is highlighted as the center of the wheel and the center of excellence.

In-depth interviews were conducted by Orlick with elite World Cup downhill ski

racers to explore the success elements they employed to deal with speed, risk, injury and fear. Many elite BM freeskiers have a rich history in alpine ski racing, making high level alpine ski racers probably most closely related to BM freeskiers. Orlick reported some of these interview findings in four books; *Psyched: Inner Views of Winning* (1986), *In Pursuit of Excellence* (2000), *Psyching for Sport* (1986), and *Embracing Your Potential* (1998). Kerrin Lee Gartner (Olympic downhill champion) stated that the most important mental skills leading to her success as a world class alpine ski racer were imagery, focus, distraction control, learning something from every performance and developing complete confidence in her abilities. Both Kerrin and her teammate, Kate Pace (World downhill champion), spoke of the importance of using quiet time to relax, focus on what they wanted to do, and plan on how they are going to get there. Steve Podborski attributed his eight World Cup wins to a mental step that allowed him to enter a mind-set in which he recognized the fact that he *could* win if he did things right and then focused on doing it.

Burke and Orlick (2003) examined the mental strategies used by elite Mount Everest climbers to successfully reach the summit of the world's highest mountain. Each climber spoke about the severe risk of the activity, and believed that by focusing on appropriate strategies such as; physical training, detailed planning, imagery, developing mental strength, focusing, self-confidence, team support, and short-term goal-setting, they were able to overcome the obstacles they faced while on the mountain.

One of the most informative pieces of literature related to the focus and fear in ski performance was found in a book entitled *Into the Yikes Zone: A Conversation with Fear* (Blakeslee, 2002). In this book the

author explores the relationship between fear and skiers, and more specifically, how fear enters the experiences of skiers, and how the skiers react to that fear. Blakeslee states that;

By regarding fear as a pathology to control or cure, we assume that life without its presence is possible, normal, or even desirable. But once we accept fear as a habitual acquaintance in an imaginative, meaningful life, we can begin to cultivate a conversation with it rather than engage it in a fight. (Blakeslee, 2002, p. xvii)

BM freeskiing by nature challenges participants to draw upon their physical and mental skills to overcome or channel uncertainty and fear. To excel in this high-speed, high-risk context, athletes must employ certain success elements, specific to the individual, which allow them to focus on the right things and to overcome uncertainty and fear.

### **Methodology**

To explore the success elements used by elite BM freeskiers a qualitative research design was used within the post-positivistic paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated that qualitative research design should always have built-in flexibility to allow for discoveries of new and unexpected empirical materials. To avoid imposing thoughts or theories on the participants, the interview questions for this study were presented to the athletes in a semi structured fashion without mentioning any elements of excellence or using those terms in the wording of the question. An interview guide was used to provide a framework of questions asked to each participant to gather similar data.

Nine participants, seven men and two women were interviewed for this study. The athletes were all North American, seven athletes were Canadian and two were from

the United States. Each participant was an elite BM freeskiier. For the purpose of this study, elite was operationally defined as any athlete who had placed in the top five of an International Freeskiing Association (IFSA) event, or an athlete who had contributed to the BM freeskiing world through their efforts by skiing in major films. Only the best BM freeskiiers are asked to perform in the filming industry of the sport. This ensured that these participants were truly world class performers in the realm of BM freeskiing.

The data analysis process began by conducting the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), listening to the interviews, and transcribing the interviews (Maxwell 1996). The participants were sent a copy of their transcribed interview for member checking. This allowed the participants to read the transcript and provide any feedback or clarification with regards to the text.

Some of the athletes requested to have their names directly linked to their quotes in the final document rather than being identified by numbers or pseudonyms. Upon this request all of the other athletes were contacted and asked if they had concerns with this. All these high performance athletes preferred this option, thus the names of the athletes have been included with their quotes.

## Results

The results of this study clearly indicate that these elite performers identified specific performance factors that they felt were essential for successful high level performance and acted on these factors or success elements on a regular basis. The success elements that the athletes identified are presented below and are supported with rich and detailed quotes from the athletes.

For simplicity and clarity of presentation, a decision was made to present the data in

three main temporal categories (pre-performance preparation, performance execution, and post-performance reflection), and within each of these temporal categories to include the specific success elements associated with each category.

### Contextual Description of a typical routine on performance day of a BM freeskiier

Many people have a limited understanding of what it is that these athletes actually do. A contextual description of a typical performance day for a BM freeskiier has been included here to provide some basic details about the sport to help you understand what a BM freeskiier has to deal with on a daily basis. It may also help to better understand the relevance of certain elements of success that these athletes discussed in their interviews.

With extensive alpine skiing experience, back country freeskiing experience, a physically trained body, and a desire to test their skills on a BM challenge, the athletes head to the mountain, to begin preparation for a BM freeskiing run or competition. Upon arrival at the mountain the athletes head to the venue to begin selecting and inspecting the line or path they will ski. The line selection/inspection process is an area of BM freeskiing that differs from many sports. The path that athletes choose to ski is completely up to them to decide (with the help of the mountain). There are no gates or specific features that the athletes must include in their runs (there are only general boundaries assigned to each venue due to visibility for the judges). Line selection/inspection is a creative process in which risk management is used as the skiers must be aware of their abilities and match that with a run that is challenging enough to post a good score, while respecting that something overly challenging may lead to a loss of control,

poor score, and quite possibly severe injury or death. The biggest determinant in the line selection/ inspection process is environmental conditions. Where are the rocks and drop-offs? What is the falling distance off the cliff? Is the snow deep? Has there been new snow? Is it cold? Is there wind? Will the run I want to do be tracked out because I start late? A skier could pre-select a line and then show up on the day of the competition and it may be impossible to do. Therefore the athletes must have backup lines in mind in case of altering conditions. As you will see through their quotes, these elite athletes are very good at *asking the mountain where to ski rather than telling it where they are going to ski*.

Upon selecting a general route, the athletes will move in closer to scrutinize their line, looking for potentially dangerous obstacles, both large and small, that they may encounter during the course of their performance. Many times the pitch of the run is steep enough that the athlete can only see about fifty feet of terrain in front of them before it falls away. The inability to see the entire run causes the individuals to inspect the run relentlessly, looking for any landmarks that can help them find their way through the maze of snow and rock. Lining up terrain on their run with landmarks in the distance is a common technique used to be aware of their location. One athlete mentioned that he asks the helicopter pilot to tap the ski of the helicopter on certain areas of the snow to provide visual cues as to where the skier should be and where he should head next. This specific technique is used only during freeskiing filming sessions and not during competitions.

Many athletes mentioned that they choose their lines according to how they feel that day and the environmental conditions. They are also driven by the pleasure of pushing

limits, and they want to do a run that is challenging and fun for them so that they can gain extreme enjoyment from the experience. Some are seeking a run that is possible, but only barely possible if they do everything right. With the line inspected, chosen and inspected again, most of the athletes then visualize themselves skiing the line. They all said that they see the images through their own eyes, trying to picture what they will see when they actually ski the line.

Once these elite skiers have decided on a line, they are confident and committed to the line they have chosen to ski. They then focus on relevant things (or nothing negative) until it is time to ski. One of the main elements they focus on during the waiting time is remaining calm. Calmness is achieved and maintained by using distraction control techniques such as self talk, positive thoughts, and breathing techniques. Most of the athletes talked about allowing themselves to raise their state of arousal at the right time. If they got pumped up too early they would make themselves nervous, and if they were too late they would not be in an alert enough state to do well right from the start.

Due to the intense emotional experience and the possibility of facing death or the fear of death, many of the athletes talked about taking a moment after each run to think about what they had just done and put some feeling of closure on the experience. This process of reflection opens their mind to draw lessons from the experience and further develop their mind-set.

Success Elements - The specific success elements used by the world's best BM freeskiers are presented in the following text.

There were two success elements discussed by all athletes that seemed to transcend temporal categories. They were more holistic and all encompassing concepts that expanded beyond time, and were more related to a way of being or experiencing. These larger or more encompassing success elements were directly related to what the participants loved about their sport (and life), and the extent to which they carried a focused connection into their various pursuits. A decision was made to present these two powerful success elements first due to their importance and pervasiveness.

### ***The Love of Doing and Being***

Each participant interviewed in this study, spoke of the love they had for elements of their sport and their life. The love elements mentioned by the participants included; the challenge/achievement in their sport, skiing in powder snow, and being a part of the powerful elements of nature. They also mentioned loving the sense of control, the intense emotions, and the feeling of being totally in the moment.

It was clear throughout the interviews that the love for what these athletes do was one of the key elements to pursuing, persisting, and succeeding in such a high-risk sport. Mikey Stevenson said, “It is very much a sport that just like other ones, you have to develop a love first.”

*I think you have to love it very much. That is how you are going to do well. It is like anything, if you love your job you will be good at it. The best guys in skiing they're the guys who love it the most. They are always there and they are stoked to be there.*  
(Hugo Harrison)

*It was all about the joy of the sport for sure, for me it was a huge portion*

*of my success. And other things I mean like working hard and stuff. But once you lose the love of something or you are just depressed you can't perform....It is the pleasure of the sport that has totally taken over the little issues. I do have a passion for it, I do think that it is really fun, and it is one of the purest, coolest kind of feelings that you can do.*  
(Wendy Fisher)

*Like kids...you have to have a passion for it, you have to love it. Otherwise what are you doing it for? You don't want to do it because other people are doing it, or because it is the cool thing to do. So have the love for it and then be ready to work hard for it.* (Mark Abma)

Every single participant said that they love the challenge of BM freeskiing. In a very real way, due to the extremely dangerous environment in which these athletes perform, the ultimate challenge of BM freeskiing (aside from the challenge of performing better than the other competitors) is surviving the ski down the mountain. These athletes perform in an extremely dangerous environment. Facing the danger (and even embracing it), meeting the challenge head-on and emerging alive, is one aspect of the sport that these athletes love. One of the reasons they perform so well at the elite level in this sport is because they love doing it and finding a way to get themselves through the tough challenges. Jonny Law talked about his love of the challenge in this sport in the following way:

*When I am going skiing, when I am in the gondola, and there has been some snow, or even when there hasn't, almost everyday I almost feel sick going up the mountain. It is al-*

*most vexing really because you are doing something and you want to do it, you are excited to do it, but you are scared and sick about it.*

*It leaves once I get on snow almost immediately. I think it is the challenge I find it to be enlightening, when you are on top of something and you know it is a bad idea. You are kind of fighting common sense. Because your common sense tells you no, just ski around have some fun. But you have to fight that, and I think that is what is exciting because when you can finally decide that 'I am doing it' and then you actually do it. That is what I think it is all about, that split second where you're mentally strong enough. Maybe it is, that you are ignoring common sense and doing what you want to do, what you think you can do. There is a quote by T.S. Elliot that I like, it goes "only he that will risk going too far, can possibly find out how far one can go." I think about that a lot. It is never going to be comfortable to try to excel at something. (Jonny Law)*

In the preceding quote, Jonny discusses the inner battle that is going on between his common sense which is telling him to avoid the danger of the cliff, and some other voice that is telling him to launch his body off the cliff into space, and uncertainty. For most people this mental battle would not exist, they would simply not launch themselves off of a fifty foot cliff. There must be some strong motivating factor to leave one's comfort zone and direct oneself through this kind of uncertainty. The answer may lie in another element of BM freeskiing that the participants say they love, and that is the emotional reward they feel upon successfully completing something that they

thought was challenging or barely humanly possible.

*I get these rushes of self fulfillment over doing something that some people might find crazy. And it is not self fulfillment, like I am the man, I totally stomped that! It is more like I brought myself to do this, and I was able to control the situation. It is a feeling that I can't really describe. (Jonny Law)*

*Let's say that you do something where fear comes in, like 'oh I could fall here or fall there' but if I ski here around this and around there and it goes perfect and I am out, you are like 'wow'. It is such a big feeling you get of achievement. And even if there are all those elements of death, and even though there is all that risk, it is a big achievement. By achieving something like that and defeating all the risk, it is a big achievement and a big challenge and you get really proud. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

There is no doubt that BM freeskiing is a sensation packed sport that generates intense feelings and emotions. Once these skiers had experienced free skiing in dry powder snow, their pursuit was to relive those feelings as much as possible. They describe a "perfect" powder day as an amazing combination of opportunity, skill, dedication, and coincidence. Each participant mentioned the powerful effect that skiing in champagne powder had on them.

*If tomorrow is going to be sunny and stable (and there is pure powder snow), I can't sleep because I know it is going to be like that, even though I have a broken leg. You*

*know it is the green light, even if I can't take it, I know it is on. JC: And how does that make you feel? PY: It is like you are going to meet a girl that you have been talking on the phone for a month and you are going to see her the next day. You know you have butterflies and you can't stop thinking about it. And (for powder skiing) you are trying to get everything ready and you watch the videos and you get the visualization and you watch the good skiers or whatever the trick you want to do. That is how I am. I can't sleep I wake up. I am usually up at four. (Pierre Yves Leblanc)*

*Just the feel of it, it is just buttery smooth and you can go so fast and it is almost like peaceful at the same time. JC: What do you mean by peaceful? MS: Because it is a quiet thing. You are going over the snow at a hundred miles an hour, and there is no engine, no nothing, you are in your own body, and that's it. It is a pretty crazy sensation, like slopes you can rip down super smooth without feeling anything under your feet. Yeah so that's what gets me about it really. You can be going full speed and be using very little energy. The nicer the snow is and the smoother it gets, the less energy you use doing it. (Mikey Stevenson)*

*I think once you find that moment when it all just flows on it's own, that's when you have found that point. It is basically just in powder you know, fucking hell man this stuff is just money! What else comes close to that? Skiing through, floating through, like water isn't even the*

*same because it is so much harder. It is floating, pretty much. You are just at the will of gravity, then it is just pulling you down. And I am trying to work with gravity. You don't want to be fighting with it in that aspect. Making it look smooth and working with gravity, not going right down the fall line, you are using the whole mountain to control your speed you know? (Mark Abma)*

The love these athletes have for powder snow is directly linked to another major area of love in their life which is the connection with nature and the powerful elements that make up the playing field in which these athletes perform. The love of being in this natural setting is a powerful motivator for the athletes and they prepare as well as they can to ensure they can perform at their best in these extreme environments. Pierre Yves Leblanc discussed the connection he created with the mountains as follows:

*I love it. I just fell in love with the elements, the landscape, the strength of all that stuff...I felt really good in the mountains. I felt that I had a super good relationship with the mountains and I was talking to them and then really know when it was time to go and when it was time not to go. And I would say where do we ski today? Where is the snow? Where is there not snow? And then we choose our path. Everywhere else the mountain was telling me not to go there, and that takes a lot of years but I was so into it that I got this relationship with the mountain. (Pierre Yves Leblanc)*

*It is almost like it is spiritual, how you and the mountain come together like that. JC: Why would you say that*

*it is spiritual? MA: I just wouldn't know how else to put that kind of connection. Just like when you are in a place where there is that much power, but at the same time it gives out so much love. It is pretty cool. (Marc Abma)*

*I just love being in the mountains. That is something that I always like. Sometimes when I am on top of a really big line I feel small. That's the cool thing of it. It is a totally different sport but you have to have the same feelings because you are out there in the elements. (Hugo Harrison)*

When asked if anything else in his life gave him the same feelings that he gets from BM skiing, Pierre Yves Leblanc responded:

*No, no, nothing. The number of elements you are dealing with. I am also such a beginner at everything else. I cannot get close to the feeling that I get BM skiing. Lets say I go biking... the earth is not moving. It doesn't matter if it is raining or sunny, there are no pow days, there are no avalanche cycles, no winds (like up on mountains) nothing like that. It is pretty consistent compared to skiing. Skiing is very inconsistent, you can get the worst days, the most dangerous days where you can kill you self going off of a little side air. And then you go another day and it is dry snow very stable and sunny. You get both extremes, one day you hate it, it is the last place on earth you want to be and then the next day is heaven. This is different compared to other sports where it is consistent, pretty good every day but never amazing and never super bad. Some*

*days you feel like you are in paradise, like no one can experience what you are living. But the other days sometimes it is really bad, it is really shitty, it is foggy, the snow is really bad, it is hard travel, impossible to ski, impossible to see, and avalanches and you don't know where you are going. That's why you have to wait for that special moment, and it comes two or three times a year. Those moments are very, very, special and you can't just go get it tomorrow. It has to be perfect timing or coincidence. You have to deal with the different elements of nature and the weather systems. Then there are those moments when 'boom the green light is on'. That is hard to beat. For us you are just a tiny part, you are probably thirty percent of what is happening. The biggest percentage is nature, she's the one deciding what is going on. You have to be a good skier to be at the level we are, but to experience that thing you don't need to be the best. You need to be smart and to communicate with the nature and the mountains to know when the green light is there. Otherwise it will take you out, because it is so powerful. So that is why it is it takes years to know that tomorrow is the day. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

### ***Pre-Performance Preparation***

Their pre-performance preparation phase was described as being an extremely important factor in having successful runs in BM freeskiing. Success elements in the pre-performance preparation phase included; drawing upon past experience, physical readiness, careful line selection/ inspection, and clear visualization. Using these success elements raised the level of confidence the

athletes had in their ability to perform successfully. It was very important for the athletes to then trust their preparation and remain calm.

### *Drawing Upon Past Experience*

One of the most positive contributions of experience (with skiing since an early age, ski racing and skiing within this context) was that athletes could increase their confidence and comfort level with an unfamiliar situation by drawing parallels from memories accumulated from past experiences. This helped the athletes make good decisions before committing to a choice or to make quick adjustments while immersed in what they are doing.

All of the participants started alpine ski racing at a young age (average of six years old) and started skiing at an even younger age (average of three years old). The early introduction to skiing and the desire to progress was one part of the path to gaining important experience.

*I have been skiing since I was three so I'm comfortable in certain environments that most people aren't. I have raced (in alpine skiing) and I have constantly kept it up and I love it and I get so stoked on skiing that I want to do more and more and more. I am basically addicted. So when you ski so much you are going to progress to a certain level and you are going to be comfortable in certain situations, where other people aren't because they are not exposed to it as much. (Jenn Ashton)*

All the athletes stated that their experience in racing helped them build fundamental technical skills, and mental skills such as focusing and imagery, that is required to be a successful competitive skier. This base of

knowledge was expanded to allow these athletes to focus on other more advanced areas of their sport. For example, one athlete discussed his ability to “feel” the conditions of the snow, to know whether or not there is going to be an avalanche.

*I am not (formally) educated in snow pack or all that stuff, but I can be skiing something and just by the feel of it and by the terrain and know that it is going to crack and when it is going to break, and I can pretty much pinpoint when with my weight when I am going to make it happen. (Jonny Law)*

With very solid physical and mental skills, and a vast memory bank of good and bad experiences, these athletes stressed the importance of continuing to learn from each experience, and to put themselves in unfavourable situations or challenging conditions in order to build more memories that will help them in future experiences.

*I think you get good at big mountain freeskiing through trial and error and as you experience more things like big crashes and big cliffs, you are able to apply that to what you are doing [italics added]. A lot of things you end up doing, you have probably done something like it before. You just kind of process all of that, really thinking it over, so a lot of it is subconscious, it is almost instinctually. Like no problem, it just comes together. (Jonny Law)*

*That's why you have to ski everyday so that you are used to skiing in every type of storm. So you start to feel. (Hugo Harrison)*

### ***Physical Preparation***

There is no doubt that to be able to survive cliff drops of one hundred feet in height, or to ski thousands of vertical feet in seconds one must train physically to be strong enough to face those physical demands. Physical preparation as mentioned by the athletes included; physical training to build muscular strength and cardiovascular fitness, a nutrition routine that provides the body with enough energy to perform in their demanding environment, and getting adequate rest.

There are many benefits that come with being physically prepared to engage in a demanding sport, such as injury prevention, and having a clear mind heading into competition. One of the biggest benefits of being physically prepared mentioned by BM freeskiers was that it enhanced their confidence in their ability to ski well. Jonny Law said, “By being in the best shape I can be, being well prepared, you know on top of something, ‘I have done everything I can to be able to do this’.”

For this athlete, time spent engaged in physical preparation also provided an opportunity to work on focus and mental preparation.

*I worked on my focus and I think working out (physically) was a big part of that. Because like running I find it to be seriously meditation with the breathing and you do a lot of thinking, and I would think about skiing lines and faces and stuff. (Jonny Law)*

Wendy Fisher talks about the importance of physical preparation;

*Anyone who has the desire to be an elite athlete knows that physical*

*training goes hand in hand with that. I don't think any elite athlete made it to where they did without training. I don't think anyone would say, oh yeah I have never worked out a day in my life. Just because I am a skier, you know I don't ski myself into shape. Everyone who says, oh I am going to ski myself into shape, no way, you can't learn to take airs, you can't learn to ski really technical lines, and keep the leg strength all the way from top to bottom if you are not physically fit.*

*MA: And then take care of yourself. JC: In what sense? MA: Ah well lets say you do have a bit of an injury coming on take care of it don't just ignore it trying to be tough guy Tuesday, and ah if you feel like your body needs rest listen to it. Like I was feeling it a week ago I was like I am done, I finished my coaching job and I was out. And then I got the phone call and I was like alright I will do one last shoot and then sure enough I wound up getting hurt so maybe the next summer I will listen to my body a little more carefully. (Mark Abma)*

### ***Line selection/inspection***

*The line selection/inspection phase is of utmost importance to be successful as a BM freeskier. The importance of good line selection and inspection is immense considering that within those few minutes the athletes' life can be ended by not making a good choice.*

The following quote demonstrates the negative effects of not having a line selected, or not being able to fully inspect the line and be confident with what you are about to do.

*In filming, it is a big thing (line selection), actually it is huge because sometimes I will go up and I will be like, I kind of like that line or I kind of like that line. “Are you ready Wendy” (from the film crew)? And I go up and I don’t really have my line totally picked out. And I am a wreck when I am not one hundred percent sure of where I am going and if I don’t have a Polaroid with me (a Polaroid picture of what is beyond the drop or ledge), it could be the most basic run and if I don’t have a Polaroid I am a wreck. Because you get up to one of those peaks and you can’t see anything but the valley floor. And so I always feel that even though there might not be one obstacle on that run, I just feel, ‘ooh I might be faked out or something’. I just have to have that Polaroid to know you have your out if it is going to slide, what is the best way to go, if the face (of the mountain) is going to go, which way am I going to go. And you can’t see that anymore. But then when I am kind of wishy washy between two different lines or not a hundred percent, I am a complete wreck. I still go but it is probably going to suck. I mean they probably won’t even use it in the film. You can see it in me (the way she skies) if I am not one hundred percent. (Wendy Fisher)*

It is common for people who look at this sport from the outside to say that participants in high-risk alternative sports such as BM freeskiing are reckless and have a death wish. They may think that these athletes are people who don’t care and don’t think about what they are doing. They just “go for it”. This outside perception is certainly not supported by these elite BM freeskiers. The ex-

ternal conditions that exist on performance day are the most influential component when selecting a line to ski and they choose that line with great care. The external conditions are studied in detail so that the athletes are aware as possible of what exists on that day. The external reality of the mountain is then compared with the athletes’ internal feelings about the level of risk they are willing to take that day, in order to find a balance between the two. Each athlete asks himself or herself; what does the mountain have to offer today? And what do I have to offer today? The goal is not to kill yourself. It is to complete the challenging run successfully. If the risk is deemed too high, the athlete will usually back off and wait for another day. Hugo Harrison said, “Sometimes it’s filled in enough to do it (the line has enough snow to make it), sometimes it is not. So each line has its moment.” And Jonny Law said, “I have a career to think about now too. So it (how much risk you are willing to take) changes as you grow, like maybe you love a girl. Things change and that is going to influence how you add up the risk.”

*That’s why you choose your line by how you feel. You have to back off sometimes. The best way, is to respect the mountains. If you assume the risk of going out there, you are assuming the risk of avalanches, and they are set off by you or others. That’s the worst part about the skiing we do, you have to be conservative sometimes, go with the flow of the snow, more or less. (Seth Morrison)*

*No, no, no, there is no way. You have to think about the bigger picture. There is a time and a place for everything. You just have to know when it is. I mean*

*you can jump the biggest cliff you want as long as there is enough transition. You can do a two-hundred footer if you want. But dropping a ten footer to uphill is stupid. (Ryan Oakden)*

A couple of athletes shared their experience of selecting a challenge without adequate preparation. They both got away with their health however they were not happy with their decisions. Defying death by luck is not what they are seeking to do.

*JL: I have made some massive mistakes like there are some things that I don't even want to admit to. JC: Like what? JL: Well I will tell you one. This one line in Kirkwood in the final at the top, massive cliff band a huge amount of exposure and I'd planned on doing something that I don't even think is doable. And as I am skiing towards it I realized that I had no idea where I am. Don't know where I am at all. And somehow I lost complete control over like any sort of thought process and I just picked a point and went for it. And I am embarrassed by it, because it is the most reckless thing I had ever done. (Jonny Law)*

*If you do something and it didn't work out how you planned and you still get away with it, I don't get a buzz out of that I get the chills, like holy maybe I should sit down for a little bit and think about it for a while. And I came close a couple of times and I always got the chills, sitting here now I am getting the chills. And it was like being close to death and you know you want to be close to death but know that she can't do anything to you. Dancing with it, you*

*are and that's how you are comfortable with death because you know she can't do anything to you. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

Wendy Fisher talked about being afraid, and what it does to her in terms of preparation.

*There are times when I am like oh my God I am going to puke right now or shit my pants because I do not want to go down this....Once the heli (helicopter) leaves you are shaking for sure. You know if it is a nerve wracking run and it (the helicopter) is going away and you are like oh fuck, especially if you are alone. It is like oh my gosh I am up here all alone and everyone else is on some other peak. That is really cool and scary at the same time. It is cool because you are, wow, I am over here alone about to ski this peak and it is all me and you feel alone.... Being scared is not a bad thing. It definitely makes me look for my line now and where my safe zones are.*

Once athletes come to an agreement with the mountain on where they can ski, they then look to the risks that exist in the line. This is done during the initial inspection phase. This is where risk management comes into play. A debate ensues between risks and pleasure. If the risks outweigh the potential pleasure then they will not choose the line, and if the pleasure is greater than the risk, then they will proceed to inspect the line. The athletes point out that it is a tough debate sometimes. Thoughts of the intense joy from previous challenging runs may flood their mind. It takes self control, self-awareness, and perspective to choose a line that is challenging enough to be intense and joyful (keep in mind the challenge was one aspect that all the athletes love) but not beyond

their skill level or that of any athlete. Pierre-Yves Leblanc said, “For me it’s like finding a mountain that is appealing to you and finding the line that you have to ski. And it is all a mental discovery, and calculation of where can we ski on this mountain.” And Ryan Oakden said, “I want to find something that will challenge me without killing me. It is a fine line.”

*Just look at the consequences, people call it calculated risk management. You know there is risk and you are calculating it. There is probably a mathematic, like you are figuring out this plus that and the weight of one thing compared to another. You just calculate that risk, there is always going to be some level of it and if it is too high then it is not worth it. (Jonny Law)*

*I wanted to ski the line because of the joy I would feel from it, but the risks out weighed the joy. So I didn’t ski it. I picked a line that was hard enough for me to enjoy. But you don’t want to do something above your head. (Jenn Ashton)*

*MS: I am scared a lot but usually I can get passed it. You just have to decide what is being scared and what is being sensible or not sensible. JC: Or reckless?*

*MS: Yeah! Yeah! That is one thing that more and more I have had a hard time coming to grips with. I’ll feel nervous and I am like, why am I feeling nervous? Should I do it? You know is it one of those times like when you were a kid where you might be scared to jump off of a high diving board, but you are going to be fine. You are just scared; you have to*

*go passed it or recognize if I am scared because this is something totally stupid. (Mikey Stevenson)*

Once the athletes have chosen a line, the next step is to inspect it thoroughly. Thorough line inspection increases the awareness they have with regards to the potential obstacles that exist in a line, as well as the “safe zones” or areas that might provide an “escape” route if something goes wrong or if it simply doesn’t feel right.

*That’s what it comes down to with this focus and this visualization, you need to trust your inspection and trust yourself. You need to know that you inspected well, otherwise how you are going to be confident up top and ski well and feel good about it. You are going to be worried and because you are worried you are not going to be skiing strong. So it all comes down to inspection, inspection is most important. (Jonny Law)*

At times the athletes are fortunate enough to use a helicopter to inspect the line they wish to ski, however for the most part, inspection takes place at the bottom of the mountain. This poses a problem while picking directional landmarks during the inspection process. The athletes could select a rock while looking up at the mountain, however when the visual perspective switches and they are at the top of the mountain looking down, the rock could be covered with snow and confuse them potentially misleading them. Experienced athletes use visualization in an attempt to switch their perspective and see what the line might look like from above.

*It can be bigger or you just miscalculated and you go to the wrong place. You know that bump of snow that you were looking at it from the*

*bottom, you know that rock. But then you didn't see that upper bump of snow and so you arc around the first one and you are supposed to arc around the second one. Instead of going over a sixty footer you are going over a hundred footer (100 foot drop). Things like that are not because of the ego, it is because of the preparation...I am thinking about where is the snow, and how big is this really, because when you are looking from a kilometre away and then you have to anticipate or predict all those things, it is not like other sports where it is there and you can go touch it. If you want to go practice like ski jumping they want to make the same exact ski jump so wherever they go it is the same thing. But for us wherever we go it is a whole different thing. You have never tried it before, and it is a big mental challenge trying to figure out what it is going to do and how big you are going to go and what is the inclination of this, and where is the good snow and looking from the bottom, and then when you get to the top you are blind. You have no idea where you are. But that is why it is so cool. It is a big mental game of trying to calculate everything. You are looking for a big buzz. You see things from down there but now you see completely different things from above. So you have to figure out what you were seeing from the bottom because it has this shape and then ok everything looks different so I have to go this way around this one and then this way around that one, and then it is going to be around twenty or fifty feet. Ok I've got this snow here and this snow there and that snow might be a little crusty be-*

*cause of the wind. It is a big like mental game. And kind of like anticipate and calculate, and then you drop in and then all of a sudden it switches. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

Athletes indicated that there are a number of ways in which inspection takes place. As indicated by the athletes, the use of a helicopter is the best method of conducting effective inspection of a line. These vehicles can be flown a few meters above the line the athletes will ski, providing a sensation and visual opportunity to experience the line from the air.

*Sometimes with the helicopter I go up and say, this is what I want to ski, so the helicopter goes like ten meters away from the snow and I go down my line. So if I am going to turn there and off this cliff, then I will go exactly there with the helicopter, and then I go up and ski it...Then at the same time if I am up there and I get the helicopter to fly to a cliff and make some marks, so when I come to the cliff I see the mark and I know that that is where I want to come off. And I know exactly this is where I want to be. I have no idea where I am going, there is a huge roll, and I have no idea where I am, there are no features, but there is a mark in the snow, and so I trust that mark and I go that way and then I hit my air and I land in between my two rocks. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

On the other end of the spectrum, the worst way of inspecting a line is with no inspection at all. Mikey Stevenson explains his mentality towards being led blind off of something. You can tell that he is hesitant in trusting just anyone and would prefer to see it himself.

*By the right person I could be led blind off a cliff. JC: Really? MS: The right person who knows my skiing, and who knows skiing (in general) that well. There could be some guy who could be the best skier in the world but I might not trust him to do that. A good buddy that I skied with a lot (I would), a guy like Hugo I would trust that guy, if he told me exactly (where to go), he just knows so much (about skiing), it is a science for him. I would trust him for sure. And I have before. (Mikey Stevenson)*

It was not uncommon for athletes to line up a landmark such as a tree, or a rock that is on their line, with an object in the distance such as a mountain top on the horizon. This technique was said to be very valuable for providing directional information while immersed in the line. The importance of good inspection was discussed at great length by the athletes. The following quote shows what one athlete did when he could not thoroughly inspect from up close and illustrates how he selected an appropriate line and inspected it enough to be confident with his line decision.

*We were told that we couldn't inspect (by walking around features and checking the depth of snow in certain landing areas). We had to inspect from afar with binoculars. The tram (device to transport skiers to the top of the mountain) kind of went up on top like lookers left (left hand side if you were looking at the mountain from below) so you could kind of see stuff. But it was still a long distance and who knows with depth perception and the host country competitors had all skied it of course. JC: Do you think that is part*

*of why they did it? JL: It is hard to say but I am really glad they did. I think it really separates the weak from the strong and the good from the great. And it was intense. JC: So what did you do? JL: Inspection how did I do it? I did it with binoculars, straight up with binoculars. And actually I took a picture of a picture with a digital camera, I was able to zoom in on stuff. But still it wasn't able to give you specific details of the line, like what if there was shrapnel on the take off and stuff like that. I pretty much came up with a game plan. Like my last cliff, it was probably a good forty, forty-five footer, but it was like a big band with rocks outcropping rocks on either side. And if I didn't have that angle right I would have landed on rocks which would have been really bad. So what I was able to do, because the face (of the mountain) was fall line (same angle) with a cat track (an easy path on the mountain created by an employee of the resort by using a snow machine). I was able to sit on the cat track with the cliff I wanted to hit and my landing lined up, I turned around, looked past myself to find a landmark that would work with that take off. So I used the same technique as I would have if I was on top of it, but from below. (Jonny Law) (This turned out to be one of Jonny Law's best runs ever, refer to Jonny's interview transcript also in this edition of the journal of excellence for a detailed account of this event)*

A key success element athletes mentioned when choosing and inspecting a line is to remain humble. As soon as athletes' ego rises too high, they risk making poor deci-

sions by choosing a line that they are not capable of skiing. The mountains are far too powerful to be egotistical; they can flick you off in a second.

*I look at the mountain and I am saying I am going to do one turn there and one turn there, I am going to hit this cliff here and land there, one turn there and then I am going to straight-line to the bottom. The ego comes in and says I am going to hit the bigger part of the cliff instead of the smaller, and then coming in the first turn and then the second turn you planned. And then coming towards the cliff and you are like 'oh fuck why did I choose this'. That's when your ego comes into play. You make your plan, you can plan something that your body can't handle if your ego or mind is too strong....Yeah so being humble and being smart and being really aware of everything around you is very important. The second you are not watching you can get in trouble, let's say you know you are getting excited over something, you forget a couple elements, don't calculate a couple things like what is the sluff going to do here or there, or there is a little rock under the snow that you didn't see. You just look at it quick and you forget to calculate something that is so dangerous, that is the same as not being humble. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

These elite athletes possess an immense awareness of both their external and internal environments. This is illustrated through the pre-performance preparation that helped them survive being caught in one of the most dangerous events in the mountains-the avalanche.

*While inspecting from above I looked at my line and I said well if I get caught in it I've got to make sure that I go right because there are no rocks below there and it will be fine. And if I do get caught going left then there are rocks there and that could be bad. So I had this plan that I already knew that I was possibly going to be taken out. My chances (of being taken out) are high but there are no rocks so my chances are high again to be ok. And that was my mentality, and I was going to go for it. (Wendy Fisher)*

*It was the same sort of (avalanche) situation where I am skiing down, I knew it was going to crack on the same face. One guy went crack, another guy went crack, and now it is my turn. You know it was ok, you take things into account. You think ok, it is new snow, it is light. This is the type of things you think about. Sure we are in some unstable conditions but as a professional you can deal with it. It is light enough that it is not really, really going to get you down or break your bones while you are in it.... You keep in mind that there is a crew around watching, it is not like you are alone in the back-country. You know you are going to be saved if you get buried, and you know you are not working in an area that all funnels into crevasses. So you keep all this positive stuff in mind, like sure it is going to avalanche and you might fall on rocks, you might get buried. But there are a lot of positive things you can think of. It is like a scale, like don't get me wrong I turn away from stuff a lot. I say out loud to myself, it is not worth it. I will say it out loud and turn*

*around and get out of that. (Jonny Law)*

*I have had runs where there have been avalanches to ski off of and then take a drop to get out of the way at straight line speed to save your life. Knowing where you are going is really all I need to know. (Seth Morrison)*

### **Visualization**

With a line picked and inspected, all these athletes talked about visualizing how they would like to ski the line. With regard to the importance of visualization, one athlete simply stated; “If you can see it in your head then you can do it” (Jenn Ashton). One of the important aspects of being able to visualize effectively (and thus a reason why they practice it so often) was that it provided the athletes an opportunity to get a turn count (the amount of turns they will make throughout the run) and an idea of what their run would feel like. Keep in mind that the majority of the time the athletes ski a difficult line, and each time they do it on that mountain in those conditions it is for the first time. There is no means of practicing the line you are going to run before you actually do it, other than through visualization.

*It really comes down to visualization, once you pick your line. I go through it in my head before-hand, doing the visualization. Visualizing the run...I would walk away for a little while and visualize my runs for a bit... through my own eyes. I can see my ski tips and I can almost time my airs in my mind, I can know how long I will be in the air. A lot of the times it will come down to inspection, you need to be able to trust your inspection. JC: And so how do you inspect well? Is that something you have*

*learned? JL: I think so, I think ski racing helped like skiing through every gate and do the hand movement through the gate.*

*JC: Do you still to that? JL: Yeah you will see me up there doing like prere, sididi, poo (skiing sounds), like you will even hear sound effects. You just take your time, you line stuff up. If I was to just focus on the cliff drops that wouldn't be enough, you have to almost imagine how many turns are going to be in-between each cliff drop and what you concentrate on certain landmarks. (Jonny Law)*

*You are not even close to where it is, you are in bed or something and you are starting to get super nervous. My brother raced, he is older than me, we used to watch world cup races and mimic what they were doing. So looking back I was probably visualizing when I was really small... I had visualized it so much, (executing a specific cliff drop) for like two years I visualized it and I was nervous real nervous as I was visualizing it. And then the night before and I wasn't getting nervous any more. And it was a weird kind of feeling. (Jenn Ashton)*

Some athletes mentioned that after they have selected and inspected a line, and visualized how they want to ski, they simply commit to the line one hundred percent.

### **Confidence**

Confidence is a powerful and interesting success element. For these athletes, their level of confidence appears to be an indicator of how prepared they are. If they have prepared fully and effectively, they will be

confident (almost always). If they are lacking confidence, than often they must go back to the preparation phase and make some refinements or changes. Having confidence in their equipment is also very important because they do not want to be worried about their skis while performing in a dangerous environment. If there is a problem with their equipment, they must assess their equipment, decide what is not quite right and make adjustments so that they can trust it.

One athlete spoke about raising her confidence level by skiing areas of the mountain that she knows she can ski easily to enjoy the movement and get back to her flow. Another athlete talked about focusing on where she is going and where her safe zones are to raise her confidence. Many of these athletes said that knowing where they were going down the mountain raised the level of their confidence far more than thinking about how good a skier they are. Focusing on a good line is what will actually get them down the hill safely.

*In a no fall zone (if you fall in these zones the consequences are extreme) your confidence goes down because of that, but you have to convince yourself to bring it up because you are fighting it in your head. It is a hundred percent manoeuvre. It is the mental strength that carries you until your confidence is at a certain level. I don't think you are going to ski at a level to perform there. So if I am not able to get my level of confidence there that's when I say it is not worth it. (Jonny Law)*

*It is a confidence thing. If I know that I can rule that line then I am going to rule that line. But if I am like, oh man I don't know if I can do this, then you are going to get a little*

*nervous. But if you know that, oh I can't wait to do this, it is going to be so fun [italics added]. And you are going to rule it, and I wouldn't be nervous, I would just be like, ah is it my turn yet? (Jenn Ashton)*

*Something does go wrong when I am not one hundred percent confident on something. I am hesitant or cautious or I bobble. And then when I go up there, even if I am scared, if I know one hundred percent where I am going, or think I know where I am going, then I am good to go. Even though I am scared, that definitely makes a huge difference in feeling that you are one-hundred, like you are dialled. Or you think you are dialled. That definitely makes a huge difference. (Wendy Fisher)*

Hugo Harrison showed immense confidence in his ability to prepare effectively for the lines he chooses to ski. “For me it is almost impossible [to get hurt or to die] because I am so good about it (preparing), I can guarantee that I will do it.”

### **Trust**

The challenge inherent in BM freeskiing is one of the elements the participants love the most. They enjoy pushing themselves out of their comfort zone to overcome obstacles and innovating along the way. When they step out of their comfort zone, the level of uncertainty increases, sometimes to the point that it is impossible to be 100% confident in their ability to be successful. At this point, the athletes discussed the importance of trust. Being able to trust their preparation, trust in knowing the line where they are going, trust what they are going to do, and trust their abilities (and experience) to be successful. Mikey Stevenson said, “You have got to get to the point where you are going to trust

yourself...If you can't trust yourself in that kind of forum then you can't be there."

*When you are sure about what you saw (in inspection), you can trust yourself a lot on the top, trust in how you can do it. Because if you don't trust yourself, then you will be hesitating and that's when you crash. So it is a lot of believing in yourself and the line you selected. (Hugo Harrison)*

### **Remain Calm**

In the final minutes of the pre-performance preparation phase, the athletes have done virtually everything they can do to ensure their readiness to execute their performance. Just before pushing off the cliff or down the mountain, the final readiness focus prior to starting the execution phase is for the athletes to get them self in a state of arousal that will match the task at hand. For these elite BM freeskiers, it is essential to enter a state of calmness.

There is so much mental and physical tension when preparing for a BM freeskiing performance, and the consequences of failure are so high (death) that it is quite easy to become too stressed or focus on the wrong things at the top. The importance of remaining calm before their run was mentioned by every athlete and felt to be essential for a successful experience.

*JL: I'll be on the gondola with some guys and I'll be quiet just focusing on my breathing, trying to calm down, I take it very seriously, it is by no means a leisure sport, even if it is a day that I am skiing with friends. You have to be able to stay really calm even though what you are doing is very important. So you need to break it down and try not to worry*

*about anybody else. JC: How do you do that? Stay calm and not worry about any body else? JL: I just try to separate myself from the situation. Like I am not there to try to meet people, I am there to ski my best. Actually the year that I was best, I don't think I watched anybody else, so it was a total separation. I would hear this and that but I wouldn't think about it. Ah buddy did this, buddy did that, I wouldn't allow it to get in. I would hear it and then just keep concentrating on what I wanted to do. I would just get away from all the excitement for a bit. And a lot of times if someone else isn't as calm as you, and they are getting all pumped, that can influence you. It can happen while you are waiting. You have to be strong enough to stay with your plan of action. I think it is good to pull away, do your own thing, just don't get influenced by the energy that is out there. So I never buddy up with anyone up there. (Jonny Law)*

*Most of the comps that I have done really well I have been super calm. And I think it freaks some of the other competitors out, like the other girls, they can see it. Other girls have told me that they can see when I am going to do well. When I win a comp I usually have that feeling that I am going to win the comp. (Jenn Ashton)*

One of the benefits of remaining calm is that it helps prevent over thinking the run, where one can think about certain aspects of what they are going to do to the point that it starts to decrease their level of confidence in themselves. If the athletes can maintain their composure and level of calmness, they can then trust their preparation

and free themselves to do what they are capable of doing.

*I just relaxed and the three people had gone and they were like ok Johnny are you ready? And at that point I allow myself to start to get psyched up, not like aggressive or anything like that. I just allow myself to become ready, to do what I want to do... The snow conditions are going to change but if you allow the build-up process to begin too early you might end up getting too anxious before your run, maybe thinking about things that could go wrong. (Jonny Law)*

*I just try to be as calm as possible. I try to think about it in the right ways, that it is not going to drive you crazy and at the same time you will be able to remember where you are going to go. (Ryan Oakden)*

*Sometimes if I am up there (at the top of the mountain) too long I just throw my head way out. Because you can't over think the shit, like what happens here or what happens if I do this. You just have to have your goal and know where to go. (Mark Abma)*

One athlete raised an interesting concept about the difference between being in an ideal state of calm-confident and a not so ideal state of calm-nervous. He found that sometimes when he calmed himself and realized that he wasn't confident in his preparation, he felt weak. To overcome this weakness he then pumped up his state of activation to feel strong again.

*This year I tried to calm down a bit. But sometimes if I am calm but nervous I just feel weak. It's a bad nerv-*

*ousness, so if I am feeling that I always try to turn that around to be like an amped up nervousness. I can do that to myself. So I am kind of on either side of the coin. It sounds weird but whatever feeling I just have to go with it or work with it. (Mikey Stevenson)*

The time that the athletes arrived at the competition venue was a key element in remaining calm before a competition. All but one participant mentioned that they felt calmer when they arrived early at the competition venue with enough time (as determined by themselves) to prepare. The one outlier participant shared examples of competitions where he actually missed his start time, but was allowed to ski immediately to fill the void. This immediate start time prevented him from over thinking his run at the top. An important thing to note is that in each of those situations the athlete had completed his pre-performance preparation and trusted what his was going to do. He was aware that all he needed to do was to stay calm and do what he had planned to do.

When we think about fear, we often think about physiological responses such as increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, basically being in an extremely anxious state. We rarely think about calmness, tranquility, and silence. Many of these athletes shared examples of experiencing a state of calmness unmatched by anything previously experienced in their life, while immersed in some of the scariest situations they had ever faced. Mikey Stevenson said, "The biggest scariest thing I have ever done was this year and it was the most calm I have ever been."

*Usually if I am prepared to do it, I am calm about it. And if I am not prepared to do it then, then I start to get super nervous. A lot of times for*

*the biggest things that I have done, I have been super calm. (Jenn Ashton)*

*It is just little things that you have to be calm with. That's why the people doing the most risky things, the scariest things are the people that are calm, so calm. And Hugo is even calmer, you know he is a very calm....I am never scared or nervous when I am prepared. The second I am scared I have to go back into the helicopter and do some more preparation. When I get to the top and I am not scared, that's when I know it is going to go down. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

### **Performance Execution**

With an immense amount of mental and physical preparation invested in the pre-performance phase of a BM freeskiing performance, it is then time to focus on actually performing the run. Going from a stopped position at the top of a two-thousand foot chute, to exploding into action begins the transition from readiness, to releasing it into action. The athletes spoke about the feeling of releasing or channelling energy and how with each good turn, or manoeuvre, their confidence grew stronger. One of the most gratifying or feeling moments described by the participants was having the confidence to perform the first turn. An intense focus in the moment was the main element cited as the most critical factor for being successful while skiing. This included the ability to re-focus when obstacles presented themselves. Each BM freeskiing performance is filled with moments where split second decisions must be made. The athletes said that during great runs, their decisions seem to be made automatically or at a sub-conscious level. During less than best performances, (and some runs where an unexpected obstacle was faced), the decisions were made con-

sciously, within a state of “hyper-awareness” as one athlete put it.

### **Confidence during the performance**

A huge amount of confidence is needed to go from standing on the peak of a mountain to actually skiing down its side. The athletes said that it was their preparation that provided them with the confidence to leave the “comforts” of the peak. As soon as the athletes made their first turn they said the release began, and with each good turn their confidence grew stronger. Confidence is important before the run begins and during the run itself.

*Confidence is huge. Because that first turn, if you are a little bit tentative you are going to just wash out. That first turn you don't know what the snow is going to be like. So you have to be soft and supple, and also have that edge. So you get that first turn and it is like, all right now you can start going. And usually as soon as I drop in (making the first turn of the run) then I have no worries you know. It is just standing at the top that is the hard part. (Mark Abma)*

*It is that very first turn. Because you can't see anything, and that first turn, you push off, and you make that first turn. And usually after that first turn, it rolls over and you see it all. And it is like aaaah, oh my God, cool. When that reality hits, ok here I am, and sweet, I can see everything...that is a huge change in mental and physical relief. Just making that first turn. Just being able to be, now you are on it. This is what is on your plate, now go where you can with it. (Wendy Fisher)*

A cautious approach to the initial part of each run was employed by most of the athletes. Hugo Harrison was the only athlete who had a different mentality. He said that he liked to scare himself at the beginning of each run by going straight. His reasons for this are explained in the following quote. He also mentions that how you start the run usually affects how the rest of the run unfolds.

*Usually I try to go really fast and scare myself at the beginning. To bring the adrenaline so I don't feel the legs burning. I always try to have something good at the top. Stomp it and be very confident. Sometimes it might be 'Oooh that was close', but usually when you almost fall, or have a bad turn, the rest of the run can be affected a lot (in a positive way). Because when you stomp (execute a manoeuvre successfully) something very good and scare yourself, your confidence builds up. And confidence is the main thing. When that confidence is high at the top of the run, it will usually go good for the rest of the run. And when the confidence gets knocked out right away then it usually knocks you out for the rest of the run. (Hugo Harrison)*

### **Execution Focus**

During the execution of a good run, the athletes focus is centered on relevant stimuli and the task at hand and nothing else. The preparation elements on which the athletes focused during the pre-performance phase such as identifying obstacles and picking safe-zones are stored in their memory and are not consciously focused on during the run. The information stored from the preparation phase is available to call up if something goes wrong. The execution focus is totally riveted to the task at hand. Seth

Morrison said, “While skiing down it’s just you. You forget about all your worries and focus on your run.” And Wendy Fisher said, “After my first few turns, I get into my run then. I just focus on my run. With the eye-balls on the back of my head to make sure that nothing is coming down after me.”

*After you actually start, a lot of stuff goes away including a lot of the bad feelings. Because at that moment that you are skiing you are more intent on what you are doing. You can't be worried about what is going to happen, you have to be focused on what is happening. If your head is somewhere else you could fall over making your first turn, and roll down the whole line. As soon as I am making that first turn I am thinking about what I am doing. And that is when the game really starts. (Mikey Stevenson)*

### **Refocus**

It is inevitable that not every run is going to go exactly as planned. Each athlete mentioned times when their focus was disturbed or not in the right place and the effects it had on their performances. All of the athletes agreed that if their focus was thrown off and they could not refocus their performance would suffer. The degree to which their performance suffered depended on the extent of the distraction and their ability to regain composure quickly.

*During the moments of spontaneity or sudden extreme challenges, you stay focused on the task at hand, which is now plan B (because something unexpected has occurred). You have one choice and you have to go with it. If something goes wrong, you look for your nearest exit point (that was identified in the inspection*

*phase of the pre-performance preparation). Getting away from an avalanche is tough, recovering from a crash off a drop, is hard to manage as well. That's why (you have a plan B or exit plan) and you choose your line by how you feel. (Seth Morrison)*

*JC: So if there is a run that you are going down and you hit a shark (an unexpected object underneath the snow) or something that you can't plan for, how do you refocus? MS: I have to make a big point of it. And try to pick up a ball of yarn quick, before everything unravels and you are just trying to get things back together as best as you can. (Mikey Stevenson)*

*I might be 'oh fuck' but the next turn is good again and you just have to keep going with the flow of that good turn. It is like 'oops oh well I kind of hit that rock', but you just keep going. In skiing you don't have time; you just have to keep going. You have other issues to deal with rather than stopping and dwelling on it. It is totally a different mentality. Unless it just totally wipes you out, there is no reason to dwell on it. (Wendy Fisher)*

### ***Doing without thinking ( sub-conscious thought)***

A BM freeskiing run is full of moments where split second decisions must be made to ensure success. With intensive relevant preparation and a good focus during the run, an athlete seems to enter a state where these split second decisions are decided and acted upon at the subconscious level. Most of the athletes said that when they are skiing well, they enter a mental state where it seems like they are not thinking at all.

*The biggest thing, once you start skiing, is that your head is clear. You know what is going on, it is just happening....Everything is moving pretty quick usually. Once you start skiing down, you don't have to think about anything. It is pretty incredible really, full on, just instincts...I don't hear anything, sight is just on key (relevant things), and just your feet, your body are all totally aware and working together. You don't have to think about moving any part of your body. (Mark Abma)*

*JC: The example of your focus in France is so amazing because just before you were going to go there was a helicopter hovering above your head and you said you didn't hear it. JL: Well the interesting thing about that was that it was there and super loud and my heart was pumping, and the second he (the starter) said "go", the helicopter turned off. As far as I was concerned the helicopter wasn't there I couldn't hear it, it was just gone. It was just like in alpine ski racing, I would never hear cheering, I would never hear the cow bell, you just go until you are done. (Jonny Law)*

Some of the more experienced and more accomplished athletes enter this doing without thinking state on a regular basis, for others it only happens some of the time. Wendy Fisher said, "My instinct just took over and when I let my mind be when I was skiing, I had my best performances."

*I wasn't thinking of anything, it was just reflex. It is all reflex. I don't have the impression that I am thinking at all. As soon as you drop in (initiate skiing the line) you stop*

*thinking. You think about your first big stunt and once you are close to it you are just so concentrated on what you need to do that you forget everything else. I start thinking again when I am at the bottom. (Hugo Harrison)*

One thing that is consistent for all the participants is that this doing without thinking, running on auto-pilot or letting your body lead occurred *only* during good runs.

*Everything just goes as planned. It is like you don't have to think. You just go. You go to the exact right spots, you land in the exact right spots, and you just ski to the bottom and that is that. That's how it is when it is a good run. (Ryan Oakden)*

### **Conscious thought**

Contrary to the subconscious decision making process is making decisions at the conscious level. This conscious decision making process often occurs when something happens that was not prepared for or calculated such as making a turn at an unforeseen or wrong landmark. Or something that would be quite difficult to prepare for that surprises the athlete such as a hidden rock or an avalanche. Mark Abma said, “There is that moment that everything is going well and you don't have to think, and then as soon as shit hits the fan, you are in turbo alert.”

*JC: If you are skiing and you hit something in your run that throws you off, how do you refocus after that? HH: That is when you think. When something like that happens, you have a moment to think. I usually try to stabilize myself and just go with the flow. Sometimes the line doesn't go exactly as planned but it still works out. In the actual moment*

*you think a little bit more when you hit something that was not planned. (Hugo Harrison)*

Whatever sparks the conscious decision making process during a run, the reaction is consistent according to these participants. First a state of surprise and alarm is felt which only lasts for a very brief moment, and then they shift focus to the next thing they are going to do.

You are always thinking ‘oh shit’ at first and then, ‘now I need to land this’.

*It is not panic for very long; you revert to thinking about how to land perfectly. You are going to do what it takes to get hurt the least amount as possible. (Ryan Oakden)*

*Your attention and your energy goes to this moment and you can't be scared because you are just dealing with what you have to deal with now. You just have to focus on ‘ok I have an edge on my ski, fight it’ and that's what you do. (Wendy Fisher)*

These athletes said they rely on what they called their “instinct”. This instinct has been honed from years of experience to quickly identify a possible solution to various issues.

*Going from the point when things are working well to the point where shit goes wrong. It is just like your first instinct, you just have to go with it. You see an option and then you go with it. And then from there it is commitment again. (Mark Abma)*

*So I pointed it off and ended up drifting left. And I am eighty feet up and there is a big rock that I am going to hit. I am going to land on a*

*big frigin rock. And you know if you have a cliff like that, you have some time (to think). And I thought, this is going to break me badly. But you do what you can to make a bad situation dealable, and I just kept it really tight. And then at the very last second I leaned over and I kicked off the rock. I was somehow able to measure the angle of the rock and I kicked off of it with both skis at the same time with the same amount of pressure on each foot and my pole, and I blew both my skis apart in exactly the same way. I think that if I'd taken more of that hit with one leg instead of the other I probably would have broken that leg. I broke my pole within the handle and my wrist was sore from that. And I was fine and again being able to just deal with the situation. (Jonny Law)*

*You have to do what you have to do. And that is what my instinct told me to do, I mean how much time do you have to think and yet you have to make a split decision in an instant, it is instinct for sure. (Jenn Ashton)*

The final thing these athletes do in compromised situations where conscious decision making is taking place is to remain calm. This is especially essential in situations such as an avalanche or airing over a cliff, when the consequences are severe and time is of the essence.

*JC: What was going through your head when you came over the edge of the cliff and you realized that you are ten degrees off and you are going to land on rock now? PY: I just said, ok this is going to have to be the best landing I have ever done in my whole life [italics added]. The*

*smoothest I am going to land, so smooth, so perfect, I can't just jam my feet into the sharp rock and I sort of dove. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

*I have been caught in a few (avalanches) and the funny thing is the few that I have been caught in, I have been as calm as can be. And you are like, wow this is the thing that I am the most terrified of. And the two that I was definitely in one, you just have to deal with it. And you deal with the moment and it is not that scary. I don't think I thought of swimming, but I definitely would feel myself hit the ground and I would try to dig into the ground, or grab the ground. And then you get flighty again, and you are kind of floating with the snow. And I remember getting snow in my mouth and I was like, oh my God cover your mouth. And so I would go through this motion of covering my mouth and then when I hit the ground, I would fight and then cover my mouth. And I would go through these things until I felt my legs, like a layer of it was slowing down... And at that point I was like, put up your hand and cover your mouth. And I was fully prepared to make that pocket and have my hand in the air. (Wendy Fisher)*

### **Post-Performance Reflection and Learning**

The post-performance reflection is the final phase in a BM freeskiing performance. This phase is linked to future successful performances when the athletes take the lessons they have learned during the performance and transfer them into knowledge that they can use for future experiences. The main element that enables the athletes to acquire this knowledge is conscious reflection on their experience. By consciously reflecting on

their experiences, the athletes are able to draw out many lessons, and think about how to apply them to future experiences. The identification and application of lessons learned appears to lead to the development of a mind-set that the athletes carry with them into skiing and a number of areas of life.

### **Reflection**

Reflecting upon one's run is something that each athlete did shortly after they finished their performance. This reflection process appeared to occur quite naturally for the athletes. Some seemed to be drawn to reflecting on what they had done due to the amount of effort they put into something that was very much life threatening.

*After I come to the finish line it usually takes a while to allow myself to come down from what I have just done. Your eyes are just (unexplainable), your heart is pounding and you are shaking. And I put my head down, and this is what I usually do at the end of competitions before I talk to anybody. I stop and I go through what I had just done, I visualize what I did. I visualized what I just did and try to compare it to what I visualized before I had done it. It is a bit of some sort of closure, because you really give a lot of yourself, it is life or death basically. It is not going out there and swinging a bat. You are controlling a day in your life that could turn out so wrong. I remember getting to the bottom, head down, poles in my armpits you know, just relaxed, get my heart rate down and visualizing the run that I had just done. (Jonny Law)*

*If you do something and it didn't work out how you planned and you*

*still get away with it, I don't get a buzz out of that. I get the chills, like maybe I should sit down for a little bit and think about it for a while [italics added]. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

Some athletes carry this reflection process into other larger scopes of their lives such as family.

*My brother died skiing a long time ago at Squaw and I wanted to go and just reflect on his whole giving me the love of the sport. It was because of him that I started skiing. And I would think back to when I was at Squaw about how much fun skiing used to be. (Wendy Fisher)*

The reflection process was felt to be important in the progression of one's skill. Jenn Ashton and Jonny Law discussed the use of video information to analyze situations that didn't go as planned to avoid making similar mistakes in the future.

*Well basically I was surprised I had hit the rock. You can see the video and I have watched it over and over to see what happened [italics added] and you don't see any rocks. Just smooth powder. And because I aired onto the shelf that's why I went through enough to snag the rock, and you can see the rock after me. (Jenn Ashton)*

*I know now how to be better prepared for it now just through seeing myself on film and listening to the people I ski with. (Jonny Law)*

At the end of our interview for this study, Ryan Oakden surprised me by making the following statement: "This definitely helped

just having the conversation. I need to go and think about the conversation a bit.” It did not surprise my supervisor because his experience has shown that “great performers try to pull lessons out of every relevant experience.”

### **Lessons Learned**

Each athlete discussed many lessons they learned through BM freeskiing. The lessons learned came from a variety of areas within skiing.

#### **Lessons from the Mountains**

*I learned that you can't lie; you can't hide anything in the mountains. You have to be true to yourself, and it gives you an image of who you are. I have learned to bring that into the real world. The real world is not like the mountains, though you can play games and pretend you are someone who you are not. The world is all about talk and how you can sell yourself but that doesn't mean that it is true. But in the mountains there is none of that. It is all real, you cannot pretend in the mountains. So I try to bring that into the real world, I don't play games with people, I don't play games with anybody. What you give is what you get. Like things are more grounded, honest people. We are who we are, it doesn't matter what you are wearing. It is your aura, your energy, that's who you are, that is not hiding anything. And then you come to the city and think that is why I have learned to be like that. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

#### **Lessons from Competition**

*It is a deep personal learning experience skiing comps and I have learned a lot and I know now what judges are looking for and what I*

*can ski. Yeah it is definitely a learning experience skiing in comps (from that perspective) because there is definitely ways that they judge things and it is good. If you have a good run, then there is no better feeling, crossing the line, it is elation. Because it is done and done well and you are like, yeah! It is too bad that it is not more enjoyable for me during, but you would probably be pretty hard pressed to find someone tell you that a competition run is pretty enjoyable while it is happening. But I am sure that when those guys are riding Jaws (one of the biggest waves on the planet) in Maui or something you know they are probably not dropping into it thinking, oh this is just a peach. (Mikey Stevenson)*

*I learned the less I think about during the run, the better. I think back to my racing career and to my best races, and it was the races where I was having fun, not thinking at the task at hand not even paying attention to the race. And then I think my natural ability took over...my instinct. (Wendy Fisher)*

#### **Lessons from Compromised Situations**

Jonny Law said the following with regards to jumping off of a cliff, and being a couple of degrees off on his take off, which led to him dropping onto a rock:

*It was probably an eighty, eighty-five footer and this was a really good learning experience. My take off was kind of angled and I think that the combination of having an angled take off, actually makes you drop away, you know it is like hitting a golf ball on a slope..... It gave me a*

*pretty good outlook on things. What messed me up this last year, after having success and wanting to build on that, I think I messed with my focus a bit. Being more concentrated on results rather than my own personal challenge. (Jonny Law)*

### **Learning from Injuries**

*Well I think it has to be the self awareness that allows me to do it. I think injuries have been a big part of it. My first injury I broke my jaw and had my mouth wired shut for a month and I think, I got to learn from my mistakes [italics added]. I found that time tough because I was really on my own.... I used to fall a lot on stuff that I don't even think about now. Just being able to fall and get up and hurt yourself and get better, it is just one big learning process.... I think that it touches again on how quickly your reality can change and how trying to be in control as much as possible but there are always going to be things out of your control. You can't let that choke you up. Some people really allow things to get them down too much, things that are out of their control. Life is too short. How can you let that stuff bug you? That's what I think skiing teaches you! As much as I prepare for the future, you have to love what is going on at the moment. You can't always say I can't wait until I am doing this or I can't wait until I have accomplished that. You just have to chill out.... The fact is my reality changed. This is now my reality. I can't be upset with what I am going to miss in the next three months or what is now what I have to deal with. is going to come because of this accident. ThCope. (Jonny Law)*

*What I have learned most has come from being hurt. That has taught me a lot of things. When I get hurt I analyze why I got hurt, and then use that knowledge to not get hurt again. Since I have been hurt for a while I haven't been able to ski, so I haven't been able to go to the mountains for a while. I had to focus on other skills. I was saying to Johnny (Law) we used to get such a buzz out of the perfect day, the perfect moment, and the biggest peak and the best scenery and it was so great. I was so high. But now I can't do it anymore, so everything was so boring. But then I had to re-find it. When I walk in the street, smiling to an old lady you know that I find that as a buzz. And fixing things, being nice to people, smiling to people and not making a big deal out of nothing. All this stuff is what I learned from not being in the mountains. Down here they are making a big fuss out of nothing. JC: So if you can't get that buzz out of the perfect day, you are trying to get it from another area? PY: Yeah, I am saying that just because I have found a big enlightenment, doesn't mean that I have to get it only there (in the mountains)... Someone does something negative and I pick it up and make it positive. If you take life for granted and you don't put attention on those little things, then it is going to slip away from you and you can't be a better person. So that is my philosophy and what I have learned from my injuries. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

### **Applying lessons learned to sport**

An important step in acting on knowledge from experiences was to think about future applications of the lessons learned. Each

athlete shared at least a couple of experiences about reflecting on something that happened to them, drawing out lessons and then identifying areas where they could use or apply this new knowledge. The majority of application were back in the mountains in similar skiing situations. Hugo Harrison said, “Yeah but I apply lessons in a good way. I remember the lessons from that line and the next time for sure I will stick it.”

*I think you get good at big mountain freeskiing through trial and error and as you experience more things like big crashes and big cliffs, you are able to apply that to what you are doing where falling becomes unacceptable. For example skiing lines in Alaska. But when you are learning and trying to progress, falling is very important. Number one, if you are on top of a forty footer and you have crashed off of a forty footer and it didn't hurt, you were fine. You can be on top of another forty footer and say, I can do this. I could fall it probably wont hurt. And you know that it is possible to not get hurt on something like that. (Jonny Law)*

### **Developing Mind-set**

The outcome from the processes involved in post-performance reflection is ongoing learning and the development of a mind-set that athletes can carry into their next experiences in life. Some of the mind-set views acquired and shared by these athletes are presented below.

### **Life views**

*JC: What recommendations do you have for people who would like to pursue a career in big mountain freeskiing? JL: Basically you have to become what you do. I learned a lot and I would apply it to anything else*

*I did. If I found out I wasn't able to do what I am doing now I would be able to take the lessons I have learned and apply them to like school or business or whatever. (Jonny Law)*

*Just get the most out of each day. You could just be resting, waiting to go again, and charge it. (Seth Morrison)*

*Try to be good, and to do good. Skiing is one thing I have always cared about. I want to be good. (Mikey Stevenson)*

*When I am in the mountains I feel like I had more knowledge than a scientist of the highest level. When you are in the mountains it doesn't matter how much money you have. If a person is not a mountain person, his knees will be clacking like this, he will be white (with fear). I am healthy, I know where I am, I know where the danger is, I feel one hundred percent confident and money will never buy that. So that's where my richness is. You need to know that you can make your buzz out of something simple. Get something out of simple things in life, and not make a big deal out of nothing. (Pierre-Yves Leblanc)*

*Some people might work a job that they absolutely hate but they just keep doing it. Their heart might be aching but they still keep doing it. For me it would be forget it, I am out of here. Life is hard work, and the younger you can realize that the better your future will be. For sure the younger you can have the mentality of trying hard in school or*

*whatever is going to benefit you in the long run, will make you happier in the long run. (Wendy Fisher)*

*Get experience. I have been asked this before and I think it is a hard one, because it has to be fun to be fun to do, if you are not having fun doing this then there is no point. But if you are not having fun doing whatever you are doing then you shouldn't be doing it. If you are having fun going around doing the easy lines then go for it. (Jenn Ashton)*

*I guess you can pretty much base your whole life on skiing, respect for the mountain and where you live and how you got here. Everything that I am going to do is linked to skiing. (Ryan Oakden)*

### **Focused Connection**

A decision was made to create a separate section for the success element of focused connection because of its uniqueness and importance and because every athlete felt it was critically important to high level performance in this context. Each athlete uses their own words to describe the importance of a focused connection with what they were doing, an intense focus on relevant things. A focused connection that led to success emerged from focusing on relevant performance elements at the appropriate time. The athletes spoke about being aware of what his or her success elements were and identified the appropriate times to focus on each of them. When do you need to be focused on line selection, when do you need to be focused on relaxing, when do you need to be focused on connecting and reading the course in front of you, when do you need to be focused on reflecting on lessons from your run? The examples of the focused-con-

nection that the athletes developed have been presented throughout this article in the quotes from the athletes. The intent of this short section was to simply highlight the extreme importance of a focused-connection to ones pursuits, in order to reach ones potential.

### **Discussion**

This study supports the findings of Orlick (1980, 1990, 2000); Gould, Eklund, & Jackson (1992); and Orlick and Partington (1988). The elite BM freeskiers used many similar success elements including pre-performance preparation (line selection/ inspection), imagery/visualization, and positive thoughts/self talk, which helped them be confident and trust their readiness to perform. While immersed in their performance the athletes became highly connected through their exceptional focusing skills. After the performance they reflected on their experiences to draw out lessons and to build positive mindsets towards future performances and life (ongoing learning). The Love they expressed for their sport and their life was nurtured through a highly connected focus with relevant parts of their performances and their daily life.

The results of this study are further discussed in light of specific components of Orlick's Wheel of Excellence

The first element of the Wheel of Excellence is commitment. Orlick (2000) stated:

The heart of human excellence often begins to beat when you discover a pursuit that gives you a sense of meaning, joy, or passion. When you find something within a pursuit, or within yourself, that you are truly committed to develop, everything else can grow. (Orlick, 2000, p. 4)

Each participant interviewed in this study, spoke of the love they had for parts of their sport and their life. The athletes commented on their strong love for BM freeskiing. Through a process of self-reflection Jonny Law asked himself what it was in life that made him happy. What did he really love? He realized that he loved to ski more than anything else, and from that simple realization he broke his daily pursuits into simple goals to create a new reality. From that moment on he began to fill his days with elements of what he loves, elements of skiing and being in the mountains, making it easier for him to be committed and connected to his pursuits because they were created from love. *This is contrast to people who fill their days with activities based on what they think they should be doing, rather than looking into themselves to decide what they love, and how they can engage in that love more often.*

The second element of excellence in the Wheel of Excellence is a strong focused connection with relevant things at relevant times. According to Orlick (2000); “A fully connected focus releases you from everything irrelevant and connects you totally with your experience or performance. It is a mind-place where nothing else in your world exists apart from being totally connected with what your are engaged in or experiencing at that moment” (p.7). The participants in this study said that intense, focused preparation allowed them to enter the “zone” or to be fully “in the moment”. One could argue that a strong focused-connection for BM-freeskiers within the performance is when the past meets the future, in the present.

The third element in the Wheel of Excellence is confidence. All the athletes discussed this success element as being essential for successful performances. Confid-

dence in their abilities to execute their performance plan, was of utmost importance to these athletes.

The fourth element in the Wheel of Excellence is using mental images in positive ways to create positive images, positive feelings and positive realities (Orlick, 2000). Each participant for this study shared detailed examples of using positive mental images to improve the performance outcome of their run.

The fifth element in the Wheel of Excellence is mental readiness. The sense of complete readiness prior to a performance comes from preparing well and using all the elements of excellence to build that mental readiness. The athletes in this study were able to stand on top of exposed mountain peaks, stare down the steep faces, and feel confident and ready to engage in a high-risk, high-speed experience. This readiness was a result of thorough intense preparation, which resulted in the feeling of being completely mentally ready to not only survive their runs but to embrace the challenges and risk that they faced.

The sixth element of the Wheel of Excellence is distraction control. Orlick (2000) stated that at some point, “distraction control becomes the most important mental skill affecting the quality and consistency of your performance” (p.13). The athletes in this study discussed at length the importance of distraction control, the ability to refocus and regain a positive connected focus when faced with potential distractions, or obstacles.

The seventh element of the Wheel of Excellence is ongoing learning to draw actions lessons from careful post performance reflection. The post performance phase was viewed as extremely important by all of the

athletes in this study, perhaps because of the high level of risk in their sport. The athletes took the information they were exposed to during their runs, consciously reflected on it and channelled it into practical action steps for future experiences.

An extremely interesting finding in this study was related to how these athletes turned fear into focus or calmed their minds just before the start of their run down the mountain. All the athletes mentioned that the last thing they do in the pre-performance preparation phase is to try to calm themselves down and clear their minds just prior to their run.

The athletes are well aware of the deadly consequences of a less than best performance and consequently carefully plan their run and line to avoid danger zones. If they feel good about the upcoming run and the line, the athletes decide to accept the risks and their chosen line, and continue with their preparation process which increases their confidence and their ability to trust their plan. At this point their focus shifts away from anything negative and they focus solely on executing the run. The thought of death or severe injury does not enter their mind while engaged in a successful run.

One athlete stated that if the thought of negative consequences continues to stay in the forefront and leads to anxiety towards the run, he either backs off completely and creates a new plan, or looks to his prepara-

tion to try to alleviate the anxiety by accounting for whatever it was that was causing the anxiety. The importance of effective preparation in removing the negative thoughts that can lead to a less than best performance is consistent with the information provided by the accomplished astronaut Chris Hadfield in his interview with Terry Orlick. Chris stated, “The main benefit to detailed preparation is success; that’s the short answer. The long answer, the main benefit of detailed preparation is confidence and lack of fear” (Hadfield & Orlick, 1999, p. 88). Hadfield went on to say that the best indicator of readiness is not fear or anxiety, but rather relief of actually being engaged in the performance. This was consistent with BM freeskiers thoughts towards being engaged in the performance in BM freeskiiing.

The findings from this study provide insights into the success elements used by some of the world’s elite BM freeskiers in their pursuit of excellence in this high-speed, high-risk sport. The most applicable concepts discussed in this study include a strong focused-connection, loving what you are doing, the ability to remain calm when performing in contexts with extreme consequences for failure, and acting on valuable lessons from personal experiences. These success elements have the potential to guide the positive development of performers in many sports and in many walks of life.

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