

WHERE THE PEAKS

HAVE NO NAME

A SEASON IN THE HIGH SIERRA



"We had just ridden a long couloir in blower powder next to this line on a slightly different aspect. With sun hitting this line, by the time Jeremy got to the top, it had mostly softened to perfect corn. It's amazing when you can ride two beautiful couloirs in succession and experience such great conditions with totally distinct snow types."
Photo: Ming Poon

Words Jeremy Jones

Home ranges are the great teachers. Some lessons are in your face—rocks hurt, stay away from cornices, respect avalanche conditions—but some are more subtle and take years to learn. They are life lessons that only come with time spent in one place. Learning to leave your ego at the trailhead, knowing that humility is the best tool, and being present in the moment are all essential in order to pick up the faint signs. Some lessons leave their mark—a season-ending injury or a friend who didn't make it home.

The home range is where breakthroughs happen alongside beat-downs. It is also a place of worship. A place I go to heal over a lost friend, to work out life's biggest questions.

The Sierra is where I ride 80 percent of the time. At 450 miles long, it is 15 times the size of the Tetons. And thanks to early pioneers such as John Muir and Norman Clyde, it is home to one of the longest untouched wilderness areas in the lower 48, stretching south from Lake Tahoe almost to Bakersfield, CA. It is where I have reached some of my highest highs, riding that perfect line, standing on a mountaintop, watching the sunrise. It was love at first sight. The 450 inches of annual snow, the sunny days, the lift-serviced access to technical terrain. But true love and devotion take more than a few bottomless days lapping Squaw Valley's KT-22 chair.

True love comes with time. While the range is the master, the lo-

cal are also teachers. They pass down lessons learned from generation to generation: Where the skintrack should go, what slide paths to avoid, where to find a good takeoff and landing. There will always be more to learn and more lines to ride, even in my own backyard. The Sierra has given me strength, knowledge and the perspective it takes to travel the world and ride big mountains. It is where I mull over possibilities and conceive my plans.

In the winter of 2016/17, on the heels of a four-year drought, the Sierra saw one of its biggest seasons on record. More than 700 inches of snow fell at many of the Tahoe resorts. I stayed home for a full season for the first time in over a decade—aside from two days of riding lifts in Colorado during the SIA trade show, I spent the whole season in the Sierra with a diverse crew. The following are vignettes from a season in my home range.





"Nick Russell skins toward Mt. Whitney (at 14,505 feet, the tallest peak in the lower 48) on his birthday. Nick, Jim Zellers, Jeremy Jones, Seth Lightcap, Glen Poulsen, John and Jim Morrison, Michelle Parker and I all climbed the Mountaineers Route and rode Mt. Whitney via its North Face. Aside from being great ski/riding partners, most of us are also very close friends. The coverage was great all over the Sierra, but conditions really weren't ideal for this objective on this day. The access road to the normal trailhead was closed because of snow and rockfall, so we had to climb from the very bottom in the desert. It's a little more than 8,000 vertical feet to the summit from where we started. We all moved fast and had some great—and not so great—turns on the way down. Regardless, we rode off the summit all the way to the pavement, where we walked a short distance to the cars, cold beers, snacks and soaks in the running creek. It was a very memorable birthday for Nick, and a special day for all."
Photo: Ming Poon

8/15/16—JOHN MUIR WILDERNESS
THE WONDERFUL PROBLEM

A lifetime of descents in one ridge, one mountain, one view. How can that be? The ridge is 15 miles long. Every 100 yards is a new couloir—maybe a hundred in total—and in each couloir are multiple options. The lines are probably in proper form 50 days per year and it is a day's walk to get here. If you sleep in a tent you could probably do three in a day. The same scenario plays out on the mountain just to my right. If I do a circle, I see a total of five major mountains, all with the same story. And this is from the valley below. If I was to stand atop one of these, I would see a sea of mountains stretching endlessly to the horizon, all with the same story.

Herein lies the wonderful problem. This view, this scenario, plays out over and over in the valleys, drainages and Sierra mountains stretching 450 miles in length and as much as 30 miles in width. This view, all these mountains, is why there is not an end game, no retirement, no finish line to my snowboarding. It is why I stay strong. To add intimate meaning to this landscape, I need to be able to walk far with a heavy pack, sleep in a tent, wake up early, hike all day, and do it repeatedly. The Sierra is guarded by long approaches, alder-choked drainages and wind-scoured flanks. At a younger age, I cursed the inaccessibility; complained about the lack of roads and resorts and the bans on snowmobiles and helicopters.

Taking in the view, I wonder if I will return here when the snow covers these giants. Or will I be distracted by the thousands of other options? It is not a question that keeps me up at night, though. I have learned not to get tied down by a never-ending "hit list." I am at peace with the fact that most of these mountains will never see my footsteps or my snowboard. The goal is to become immersed in nature, become inspired by it, to learn from it, to become one with it. Just to set foot in these special places, just to know they exist, is extremely rewarding.

Every walk, every trip, every view plants new seeds. Which ones will ripen and blossom?

Jeremy Jones rides a "lasboard" in his backyard after a January storm shut down Truckee for several days. A Turkish relic, this board is descended directly from the first boarders in the world, who have been practicing this rudimentary form of snowboarding for hundreds of years. Jeremy brought it back from a visit to Turkey about eight years ago (which was featured in Issue 7.3 of this journal) and still breaks it out on occasion to feel the simple joy of sliding sideways on snow. Photo: Andrew Miller

1/10/17—TRUCKEE, CA
BACK TO THE BASICS

Cold, large, soft snowflakes float gently to the ground. They have been doing this for the better part of a week. My family lies beside me sleeping peacefully on a rug under the glow of a fire. I am content, happy and at peace in a way I have rarely felt. Today's tracks, laid steps from here, are erased like they never happened. We are pinned at home from all the snow. The power is out, town is shut down and the roads are impassable.

Days are fading together. Tomorrow I will repeat today's movements. I will shovel my way out of the front door, grab a simple piece of wood shaped for sliding on snow, slog my way to the top of the hill beside my house, lay my board down, drop in and make the best turn of my life—a floating, quiet, gentle pow turn. The snow will tickle my face, a slight bounce at the exit of the turn will project me to the next turn, over and over again until I reach the flats and stop gliding. Up the bootpack I will go for a new line. When I am tired, thirsty and hungry, I will walk home. The simplicity of the last few days has given me perspective. The more the complexities of life slip away, the happier I become. It's a simple, achievable happiness. Hallelujah!





"Jeremy Jones boots up 13,862-foot Norman Clyde Peak's North Couloir in the Palisades region of the Sierra Nevada. Because the entire range had good coverage for most of the season, we could pick a new drainage with a beautiful peak and aesthetic line to ride on every trip. This time around, Jeremy Jones, Danny Davis, Nick Russell, and Jim Zellers chose Norman Clyde. Jim had already done it years ago, but was thrilled to join us."
Photo: Ming Poon

2/26/17—DESOLATION WILDERNESS
THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

Thousands of steps and countless decisions, both big and small, have led to this moment, to standing on this peak, atop this line, the proudest in all the land. The mountain, millions of years in the making. The slope angle, aspect, elevation and rocks all interconnected, creating ideal terrain. It's like it was made just for me, just for this moment, then coated with trillions of little crystals helped by the wind and the perfect temperature gradient to create the optimal gliding surface. The first rays of light spread across the face, putting a spotlight on nature's finest work. A curious eagle graces us with its presence; its effortless flight inspires.

My breath deepens. If only I could see what's over the roll, my exit. If only I knew for sure what the snow was like, or how wide the crux is. I weight my front foot and gravity works its magic. My body is motionless yet accelerating, my mind screams for a turn or a speed check, but I hold out. I am as free as I will ever be.

At the last moment, I give in. My chest leads the effort. I roll onto my toeside edge and let the snowpack receive me. It is here and now I will pay dearly for a missed calculation, a mistake in that bizarre combination off science, feel and experience. An undetected crust or weak layer would have dire consequences.

The snowpack welcomes me. Force builds as I fall lower into the turn. My spray is positioned to the side of my cheek. It caresses my back shoulder. A face shot here would be a problem. I still can't see the crux or the exit, but everything is in the perfect spot.

The energy builds to a tipping point, I release, and project onto my heelside. My front hand and thigh slightly brush the snow. I repeat the act—fifth gear up top, downshifted to fourth, then momentarily to third through the crux, quickly back to fourth on the apron, redlining into the flats. My whole body shaking as I hold on for dear life. There is nothing to do now but trust your board, trust your body, hold the line.

I glide to a stop in the empty valley 3,000 feet below where I started. Doubled over, I want to let out a primal scream, but there is no air in my lungs. So many emotions in such a short period of time. The dark fear climbing out of my tent six hours earlier. The beauty of sunrise, endorphins on the hike, the altitude headiness on the summit, the anxiety, then adrenaline. It's a dangerous cocktail of natural chemicals produced and consumed on a day of foot-powered snowboarding. It's so addicting it will make you drive through the night, sleep in the dirt, rise in the dark and walk through dangerous landscapes. Days will turn into years and, in the blink of an eye, decades will have been consumed by this simple act of mountain riding.

People have stopped asking me how long I will do it for. They see the look in my eye. They realize I am too far gone.

I no longer ask myself why I do it. It makes me happy, for now. My standards for a memorable day seem to be getting lower. Give me untouched wilderness, my splitboard, food and water and I am happy.



"Jeremy Jones coming out of the white room. We waited until around noon, when a beam of light would illuminate the line from top to bottom for just a few minutes. A classic Sierra couloir, it had a steep, sustained pitch and held beautiful snow."
Photo: Ming Poon

“Jeremy Jones, Nick Russell and Sammy Luebke skin to their objective of the day. This part of the Sierra has a plethora of 13,000-14,000-foot peaks, all offering great riding when the snowpack is right.”
Photo: Ming Poon



3/4/17—INYO NATIONAL FOREST
WALKING INTO NEW LAND

We started under the light of a fading moon. My headlamp led the way for the first few hours. I have broken free of the treeline and am rounding a corner that has been hours in the making under a slow, steady pace. A long valley formed by rugged peaks curves into the unknown. Fueling up, my excitement builds as the rising sun spotlights high peaks lining the north side of the valley. Lines that I have never seen strike forth from the puzzle of granite. Moving now, I am overwhelmed by the landscape.

A distant observer might view my slow pace and the distance yet to be traveled with empathy. But this new land is coming at me too fast. It frequently stops me in my tracks as new discoveries reveal themselves. You only get one chance to walk into a new land. For more than 20 years I have been seeking new landscapes, new vistas, new mountains to ride. It is the most exciting thing I do as a snowboarder—nature’s work is greater than my imagination.

Walking into new land is like meeting a stranger for the first time. Sometimes you may be treated with a high five or a hug. Other times, it may be a cold handshake and an intense stare. The conversation grows with each step. Over time, you start speaking the same language, reach an understanding of the conditions and the scale. To know what is good to go and what is off limits. To understand when a line is open for business and when one closed. This is the key to big mountain riding.