

BACKCOUNTRY PEOPLE

The Lucky One

Giulia Monego on skiing, men,
mountains and Summits4Kids

BY DEVON O'NEIL

Giulia Monego remembers when she finally felt validated as a skier and mountaineer. It wasn't the day she won the 2006 Verbier Xtreme—the most famous big-mountain competition in the world. And it wasn't during any of her recent ski-mountaineering expeditions to Patagonia, China, Alaska, Peru, Ecuador, or Bolivia. In the high-stakes, male-dominated world of elite big-mountain skiing, Monego says her moment of validation was simply, "when a guy trusted me on a one-to-one level."

Monego, who grew up in Venice and Cortina,

Monego has always sought challenges beyond her comfort zone. After a racing career marked by inconsistency (albeit against the likes of Julia Mancuso and Denise Karbon), she started freeskiing competitively. She won the Verbier Xtreme the first time she ever skied the Bec de Rosses—the petrifying, cliff-strewn face where the contest takes place—but eventually she grew tired of skiing the same competition lines as everyone else. So she switched her focus to climbing and skiing the steepest walls in nearby Chamonix, notching descents of

"People are still a little surprised when they hear only two people did something, and I was one of them," she admits.

Italy, and now lives in Verbier, Switzerland, doesn't have many female peers. At age 30, she skis the rowdiest lines in Chamonix with some of the valley's best male skiers and snowboarders, including John Minogue and Dave Rosenbarger. "People are still a little surprised when they hear only two people did something, and I was one of them," she admits. "But I don't want to be judged only as a girl." Beyond the Alps, Monego has made first descents in Alaska and China and is currently plotting a trip to eastern Tibet's Kangri Garpo range, a wildly remote, unskied paradise.

"Giulia is charging—doing some big, gnarly things," says veteran ski mountaineer Hilaree O'Neill, who's gone on two Alaskan expeditions with Monego. "She's got something I never had, which is goals for herself. She's got focus. She has ideas of where she wants to go and what she wants to do."

Mt. Blanc's enormous west face, the icy, 60-degree north face of the Tour Ronde and the massively exposed Eugster Couloir, among others.

"With experience, gradually you start feeling confident in terrain you wouldn't even imagine feeling confident in before," Monego says. "It's a hard question why you do this, but it's something that was built inside me. What it gives me is so alive, so strong, so important. But I have a lot of respect for the mountains. It's important to see yourself as a guest. The mountain is the master."

Truth be told, with flowing dark hair and a radiant smile Monego looks more like a model than a mountaineer. And her decidedly Italian personality and energy endear her to everyone she meets. "She's fiery," says Swedish freeskiier Marja Persson, one of her closest friends. "She can talk about anything, and she's a party (*continued on p. 87*)





Giulia Monego gives it her all, from Ecuador's highest volcanoes to its lowest income bracket. // Photos: Chris Figenshau

Under His Own Power

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Eastern Sierra. A feature-length documentary called *Drop In* was planned to showcase McGhee's mission. "A heli can't land up there, you can't take a snowmobile up there. It's too extreme," McGhee says. "So we were going to climb the face. I was going to have climbers ahead of me setting anchors."

His friends weren't surprised by his determination: McGhee, after all, has already heli-skied, surfed and ridden a motorcycle while paralyzed. "Jeremy has never been content with average, and being paralyzed is more of a challenge to him than a disability," says Alan Jacoby, McGhee's friend and a co-teacher at Disabled Sports Eastern Sierra. "He's fixated on pushing his personal limits. Getting out in the backcountry was the next logical step."

So McGhee trained hard—hand cycling, weight lifting, cross-country skiing—but as the spring backcountry season was ramping up, complications in Jeremy's personal life stymied his plans to climb and ski the Bloody Couloir. The film project was postponed, but McGhee hardly seems disappointed. "We weren't able to do the Bloody Couloir, but I definitely hit some backcountry spots around Mammoth—trips involving off-road vehicles, snowmobiles and my friends pulling me like a dogsled team," he said. "There will be another attempt to climb Bloody. It's just going to take a while." ■

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animal. But she's also an open book, which I love about her. She's a really genuine, caring person."

The same ambition that drives Monego's athletic pursuits also inspired her and two friends—fellow pro skiers Laura Bohleber and Persson—to form a charity in 2009 called Summits4Kids (summits4kids.org). The organization funds everything from medical care to education for struggling kids in mountainous nations where the women travel to ski. Before their trips, they raise money via used-gear sales, slideshows and by soliciting their sponsors. Then they donate the funds to small, indigenous child-advocacy organizations they've researched in advance, and those organizations allocate the money. In all, the women say, they've given more than \$30,000 to humanitarian centers in Peru (where they skied in 2009) and Ecuador (where they skied in 2010).

In Peru, they donated to a safe house in Cajamarca that provides shelter, food and education to runaways. "There's a lot of kids who are 'street kids'—just unlucky kids with difficult realities," Monego says. "They run away from home because there are problems with their families. They don't really have a future." When Monego and her friends visited the safe house, after notching summit descents of Ishinca (5,530 m), Yanapaccha (5,460 m) and Pisco (5,752 m) in the Cordillera Blanca, the kids danced and laughed as Monego regaled them in Spanish, one of four languages she speaks. In Ecuador, some of their money paid for a little girl's eye surgery; the rest went to a haven for teenage mothers in Quito.

Monego's S4K involvement reminds her that no matter how much danger she faces in the mountains, hers is a life of privilege. "These kids are suffering," she says. "We're lucky." ■