



INTO THE WHITE

The bond uniting the Freaks, Aspen's fastest ski gang,
runs deeper than the powder they chase.

By Devon O'Neil



Founding members of the Freaks, Sam Coffey, Wiley Maple, and Baker Boyd, hike Aspen's Highland Ridge on their way out to Tonar Bowl in April 2019.



The storm swirls around Baker Boyd and Wiley Maple as they approach the entrance to Silver Queen, a steep, double-black-diamond bump run half-way down Aspen Mountain. It's a midweek powder day in April, and almost no one else is skiing. Boyd and Maple, both 28 and founding members of the Freaks—a homegrown collective that bills itself as “Aspen’s fastest ski gang”—drop in and blast from mogul to mogul until they reach the bottom.

Normally the Freaks ski in a pack of four to 12, but some members are out of town—including the gang’s cofounder and face, Sam Coffey—and others have to work, making up for lost time at the end of a deep winter. I have come to observe the Freaks in their element, and you could argue no pair better represents the gang’s ethos than Boyd and Maple. Both are Aspen High School graduates and pro skiers: Maple, an Olympic downhiller and eight-year World Cup veteran known as “Danger,” was once clocked at 96 mph during a race in Wengen, Switzerland. At 6’2” and 225 pounds, he charges Ajax like a bearded bull and has been known to fly home from Europe in the middle of the season just to freeski with his friends for a week. Boyd, meanwhile, barely looks like he’s trying—even at mach speed

Above: Five core members of the Freaks in front of the Ajax gondola. From left: Morris Hogan, Coffey, Victor Major, Travis Van Domelen, Boyd. Opposite: Boyd lays into the goods at Aspen Mountain.

in huge terrain—which is why credible observers whisper about him as one of the world’s best freeskiers.

Dressed in black pants, black jacket, black boots, black beanie, and white Oakley goggles, Boyd greets the lifties by name and they do the same, lighting up when he appears. Few outside Aspen know who he is. But after avoiding attention for most of his 20s, Boyd, who has blonde hair down to his shoulders and intense blue eyes, started courting sponsors a few years ago. Now he earns respectable paychecks from Polartec and Head Skis, along with a host of product backers. He also filmed a segment for Warren Miller Entertainment’s “Timeless” in Austria last spring. However, he remains a reluctant pro, torn between pushing out content and honoring his instincts.

Despite calls for 10 inches by mid-afternoon, the storm sputters and we make do with four until the lifts close. It picks up again on our walk to Stapleton Ski, a hub of Aspen culture that specializes in hand tunes and scuttlebutt. By the time we arrive, it is snowing so hard you can barely see the other side of the street. Boyd started working at Stapleton when he was 14 and remains the longest tenured employee. For a while he slept at the shop. Now he moonlights and milks the perks, not least that the tiny showroom serves as the Freaks’ unofficial headquarters—slightly edging out the Red Onion bar a few blocks away.

A couple of middle-aged ladies walk in and are promptly offered a beer. They oblige as a young man wearing Gucci sneakers tries on demo boots. Meanwhile, the conversation flows between a small group of employees and hangers-on.

“Are you guys a gang?” asks Alex Bert, a Croatian ski tech who has worked at Stapleton for a decade and watched the Freaks grow from teenagers to men.

“I guess,” says Boyd.

“Why a gang?” someone adds. “Why not a club?”

Boyd wrenches his face. “Ski club? That sounds pretty lame.”

Bert, who has skied throughout the Alps and spent extensive time in Austria and Italy, says he has never seen a higher concentration of talent than in Aspen. Still, the Freaks are on another level. “Watching them is like watching a movie,” he says. “There are a lot of really good skiers here, but you won’t see a group like this again.”

Ski gangs have existed in Aspen since at least the early 1970s. But what was once central to the town’s identity had faded by the time the boys who would become the Freaks hit middle school. In 2002, Boyd, Maple, and Coffey started skiing together five days a week and called themselves the Stallions. Coffey later became fascinated by “stories of crazy debauchery and the ski gang culture” that he heard from his high school

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teacher and race coach, Mike Flynn, who founded Flynn's Flyers in 1971. The Bell Mountain Buckaroos formed that same year, followed soon after by the Dogs of Bell, who carried the ski-gang flag through the '90s and can still be found barking and howling as they rip down Ajax. Yet as people in town joke, the Dogs never had puppies, and gradually the gang scene dwindled.

One night in 2015, Coffey and a handful of friends gathered at Bobby Moyer's house and began leafing through the pages of *Freak Power*, a new book chronicling Hunter S. Thompson's 1970 campaign for sheriff. Moyer's father, a former U.S. Ski Team coach, had hung out with Thompson and often regaled his son with stories. Moyer and his friends admired the Good Doctor as well as the era he lived in. "Just the raw style," says Moyer, 24, a two-time captain of the University of Colorado ski team. "In those days Aspen was a haven for counterculture and a rebel outpost for people who didn't have a place in the world but ended up here." They decided to form a gang and call themselves the Freaks. "It was a way of separating ourselves from the status quo," Moyer says. "We just want to ski as fast and hard and long as we can, who cares what anyone thinks."

One of the first things they did was create an Instagram account called the Freakstagram, where you can find the #freakoftheday. The number of Freaks ranges from about 10 to 25 depending on who you ask, and standards for admission are vague. "We don't have criteria," Coffey, a 6'3", two-time all-American racer at the University of New Hampshire, tells me. "We're not even actively accepting people. It's more just if you ski with us every day and can keep up, you get added to the text chain."

"That's when you get your tattoo," adds Maple





with a smirk, “and you have to do some Voodoo stuff in the woods. Kill a raccoon and wear it as a necktie for a week, then you’re in.”

Coffey announces the gang by yelling “Freaks!” in the lifeline and at the Red Onion, where some of their childhood ski passes are laminated into the tables. But mostly they get noticed due to their speed. “It’s just an attacking mentality,” says George Rodney, 25, a core Freak who won the Freeride World Tour overall title in 2015. “There’s not a whole lot of tricks going down—other than backflips and 360s, and some 7s.”

A surprising number of Freaks maintain 9-to-5 jobs while notching 100 days on the mountain. Travis Van Domelen, a former World Cup halfpipe skier, helps oversee \$150 million as a portfolio manager. Milo Stark is an architect. Morris Hogan, one of two snowboarders in the gang, is an accountant. Victor Major, whose grandfather served in the 10th Mountain Division and whose father was the U.S. Ski Team’s alpine director, studied alpine hydrology at Williams College and works as a media strategist. Oliver Bacharach, son of Oscar-winning songwriter Burt Bacharach, paced the Freaks with 138 days on his pass last winter—while working five nights a week as a waiter.

The gang’s beating heart remains Studebaker Hawk Boyd. Born in Telluride, where he got sponsored by K2 at age 6, Boyd was named after a superhero in a 1972 Frank Zappa album. As a kid he raced on core-shotted skis and won by enormous margins—until he lost interest and started missing his starts to freeski. “I never really cared about style,” he says. “I looked up to Glen Plake.” Every Freak will tell you there is no hierarchy, but Boyd’s rare athleticism and zest for skiing every day, often all day, no matter the conditions, cast him as the gang’s unofficial leader.

“Getting to ski with Baker really changed the way I ski,” says Rodney, who doesn’t doubt Boyd’s potential on the Freeride World Tour. “Talent-wise, he’d probably win it his first year.”

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TYLER WILKINSON-RAY

"The stuff that he'll do with a GoPro in his mouth is unbelievable," says Hogan.

"I'll never forget one time someone asked Baker what makes a good skier," says Billy Boyd, Baker's older brother and the only Freak over 30 (as well as the only father). "And he said, 'Somebody who skis every chance they get.' That was it."

Unlike urban gangs, ski gangs share the same territory—in this case 675 acres of steep, rowdy runs over Aspen Mountain's 3,267 vertical feet. The Freaks are no longer the only millennial gang in town, having been joined in recent years by, among others, the Umbros (Aspen's fastest gang over 30) and the Flying Monkees (Aspen's "slip-periest" gang, whatever that means). There is no shortage of masculine tension lurking beneath the copacetic surface when the Freaks and Monkees cross paths. "Individually we're all friends. But gang to gang, there's definitely a rivalry and some serious competitive nature," says pro skier Colter Hinchliffe, the Monkees' leader.

"The Monkees think they're a rival of ours," Coffey clarifies with a smirk, attempting to define a sensitive dynamic without throwing too much fuel on the fire.

We are riding up the Exhibition lift at Aspen Highlands, on our way, with Maple and Boyd, to ski Tonar Bowl, a steep, majestic north face accessed via a short hike from the resort. Coffey has just returned from a trip to British Columbia and is tired. But the chance to ski an Aspen classic in fresh powder with his childhood best

Clockwise from left: Victor Major flips out on Ajax; George Rodney slashes the pow on the backside of Aspen Mountain; use the flow chart below to see which Aspen ski gang is right for you.



WHAT ASPEN SKI GANG SHOULD I JOIN?

ARE YOU THE FASTEST SKIER ON THE MOUNTAIN?





Clockwise from left:
Coffey digs in deep on
the backside of Aspen
Mountain; Coffey, per-
haps the most recogniz-
able face of the Freaks,
passed away in May
2019 after suffering a
stroke; Coffey stands on
Highland Ridge just past
the summit of Highland
Bowl as clouds converge
on Pyramid Peak and the
Maroon Bells.

Time, Coffey had said,
is more valuable than
any amount of money
he could earn.

friends is not something he can resist.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Coffey's identity overlaps with the Freaks'. He started their text chain and runs the Freakstagram from the Freak Mansion—a 100-year-old log cabin that he rents from his high-school math teacher with Stark and Hogan. When his father, Big Joe Coffey, died of cancer in January 2018, devastating Sam, the Freaks helped him arrange the memorial service. "I can't even explain how much these guys were there for me," he says.

"It's not just some hedonistic group having fun skiing together," explains Boyd's mother, Nancy Sullivan, who has watched the gang evolve. "They're this little aspen grove who are all connected on a deep level. I think it's something all of us wishes we had."

Halfway down Tonar, we pause for a moment of solitude that will echo long into the future. The snow is perfect—six inches of cold powder overlaying a solid base. Boyd, Maple, and Coffey decide to gang-ski the final pitch. I watch as they bomb downhill like kids, weaving in and out of each other's tracks, in perfect sync, close enough to high five. It is joy in its purest form.

That image still lingers when I receive a text from Sullivan one month later. Coffey, 29, has died from a series of strokes while on vacation in Mexico, caused by a gene mutation that he didn't know he had. Boyd was with him when he passed. Maple collapsed on the side of a mountain when he found out.

The following week, on Memorial Day, a thousand people gather to celebrate Coffey's life on Richmond Ridge, high above the town that he



called the greatest place on earth. Many wear "Coffey for Mayor" T-shirts—an ode to his longtime (and, if you ever observed Coffey in Aspen, fully realistic) goal. One by one, relatives and friends stride to the pulpit and deliver their homage in front of his beloved backyard, the Elk Mountains.

"Thanks for making this family that we have now," Stark says. "The Freaks are strong because of you."

Toward the end of a rousing tribute delivered alongside Boyd, Maple recounts what Coffey told him after Big Joe died, when Sam decided to quit his communications job and spend that spring skiing in the Alps. Time, Coffey had said, is more valuable than any amount of money he could earn.

"I'll never get this time back," Coffey had said.

You could argue the Freaks ski so fast for the same reason. ☉

