

ZEN AND THE ART OF SKIING

Kristen Ulmer's Ski to Live Clinics



You might ask why a guy like me would attend a clinic called “Ski to Live.” Kristen Ulmer asked this very question as our group lounged in a condo at the top of Main Street in Park City. Some of my compatriots were there to ski better; others wanted a better understanding of Zen; one was coping with a recent near-fatal plane crash. The youngest in our group, a 20-something from western Colorado, was returning for her second Ski to Live session. Last year’s clinic, she told us,

had given her a productive outlook on life ever since having been diagnosed with lymphoma.

Last to answer, I said I was there to meet a movie star. Everyone seemed surprised. Don’t you people watch ski flicks? Kristen Ulmer, in a very rare flash of blushing humility, admitted that she’s been in some ski films. Understatement doesn’t suit her, so I’ll fill in the details: for a dozen consecutive years, Ulmer was voted the world’s greatest female big mountain skier. She did things in the backcountry on skis that no other woman — and very few men — were doing, like sticking landings off six-story cliff hucks.

Originally from what she calls “Cow Hampshire,” Ulmer has become a Wasatch lifer, dating back to her college days, when she skied here in jeans. One day, her boyfriend, who had

tired of drying her tears after every ice-rash denim wipe-out, insisted she buy real ski pants. Fifty dollars and three years later, the self-taught Ulmer had carved her way onto the U.S. Ski Team and into sponsorship deals and was on her way to making ski history.

Propelled by a famously uncompromising personality, she earned her reputation through athletic prowess, with feats such as making the first female descent of the Grand Teton. When I heard that today she coaches “Zen”

skiing, I recalled what a mutual friend had told me about Ulmer’s fury: she once flipped a poker table over in frustration. Not exactly calm meditative behavior. No way skiing’s original big mountain diva has cashed in her chips — something interesting is going on here.

The newly married Ulmer retired from the cameras, cliffs and knee surgeries six years ago. That’s when she created her Ski to Live clinics. As I discovered, these are not podium lectures, self-help seminars, or new





PHOTOS COURTESY OF KRISTEN ULMER

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onto the ski slopes.

The skiing component is no mere gimmick. When asked if we were there to improve our skiing ability, two of us shrugged and said, “No, not really.” Frankly, Ulmer took offense. We said we could be content with our skill levels, drifting through tree runs, easing down cruisers, admiring nature. She balked, challenging us to view skiing as a sport, not a mere “activity.”

On the next run, I gave the exercise a chance, kicking-jumping as if out of a starting gate, viewing the bottom as a finish line. And there my fierce inner competitor arrived. Some inner furnace felt freshly stoked, propelling me down that run, and the rush was unmistakable. Ulmer says some people call it “the zone.” She calls it Big Mind. And that was only day one. ☺

— Greg I. Hamilton

For 12 years, Kristen Ulmer was heralded by many as the world's greatest female skier. She still bristles at that moniker, insisting that she kicked most men's derrieres, too. She brings this fiery attitude to her *Ski to Live* clinics in Utah at least three times each winter, including Deer Valley on February 5-7, 2010. She also hosts private clinics on ski slopes, race tracks, golf courses, and even the flying trapeze. To learn more, visit kristenulmer.com.

age retreats for softies. These are hands-on, boots ratcheted down, thigh-burning, adrenaline-fueled inner explorations. You might say Ulmer probes the psyche the way she tackles avalanche-prone heli-ski terrain: with rebellious fire.

Ski to Live is based on a concept Ulmer and others call “Big Mind.” You might think of it as guided role playing: she’ll ask you, for example, to embody vocal facets of your own personality. If that sounds like woo-woo, then you might imagine skiing the bumps as the

personification of “anger.” Or imagine launching yourself down a steep groomer, as we did on The Canyons’ Apex Ridge, as the embodiment of “reaching.”

The three-day journey was certainly heady stuff, full of cerebral and emotional encounters with our own personal fears and strengths. What made it visceral was putting all this navel-gazing into motion. Big Mind is a fusion of Eastern Zen and Western philosophical traditions ... and Ulmer has taken it off the meditation mats and