



McLEANINGS

PHOTO FINISH

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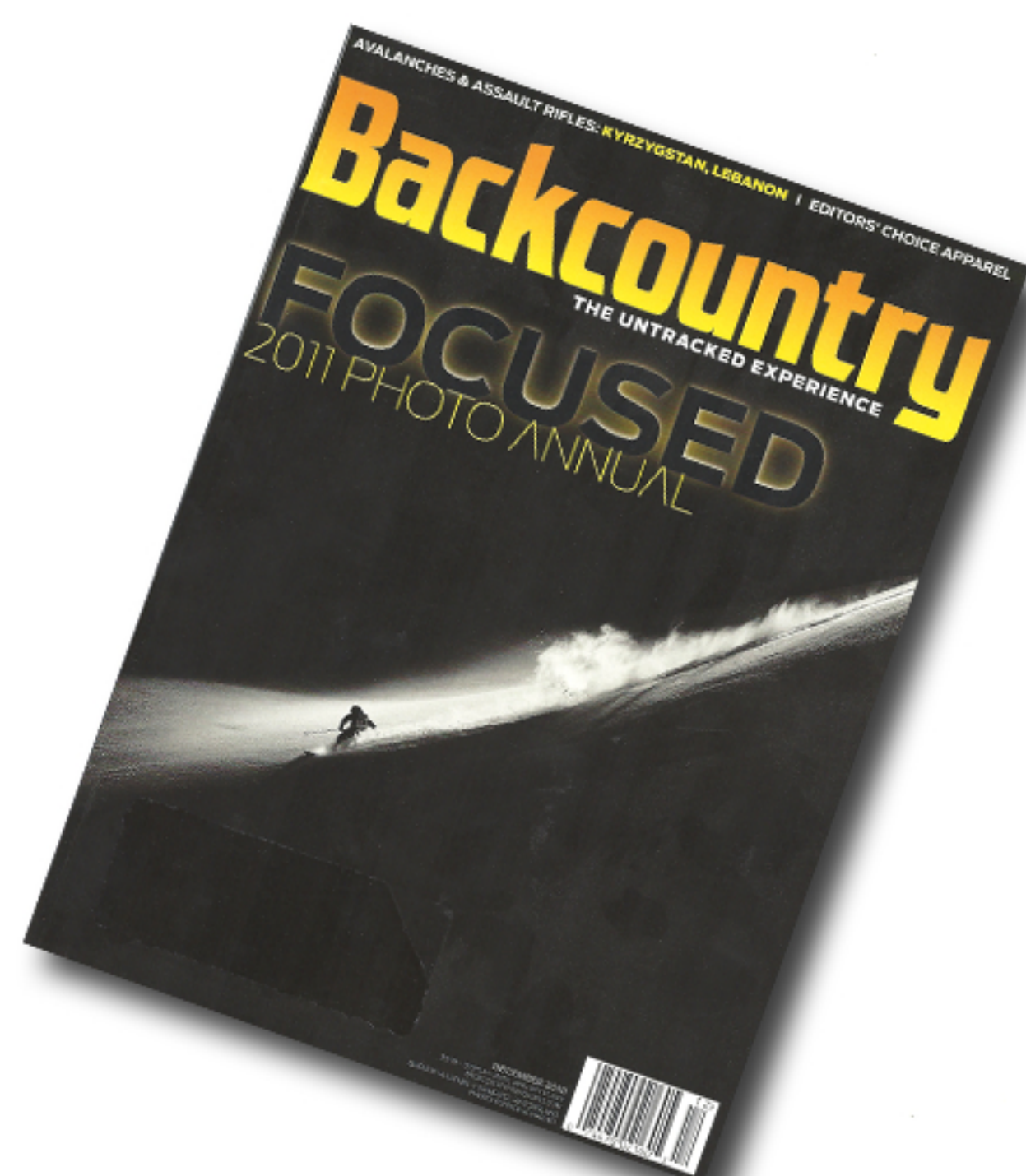
At best, backcountry photo shoots are like touring topless—fun in a strange way, and slightly embarrassing, but you really don't do much actual skiing. At worst, they're comically bad, and you're lucky to escape with your life—let alone your dignity—intact.

Posed photos should never be confused with reality. It's not happenstance that a professional photographer, next year's top-of-the-line jacket, a sponsored athlete, a puppy, horse, and new-born baby calf all came together in Montana on the first powder day of the year, all beneath the evening alpenglow. It's implied, however, that if you just buy that jacket, it *could* happen to you....

The best bc shooters are not only solid photographers, but also great skiers. They can get into any position, don't mind waking up early, and have a genuine appreciation of the backcountry. Additionally, they possess an almost mystical ability to make a pile of poo look like a chocolate truffle.

Two weeks after the last storm, on a grey-bird day, they might find an untracked, but crust-infested patch of snow at a resort, and somehow make it look like an epic powder run deep in the backcountry. The best of them can do this without cropping or Photoshop—a skill most closely related to sorcery.

The other side of the coin is, of course, the photo shoot from hell. Personal examples include being buried up to my waist in a snowpit and blasted in the face at point-blank range with frozen slush from a snow-making cannon in order to simulate a savage winter storm on a bluebird day; hauling a 200-pound duffle bag of expedition batteries for 20 miles and 10,000-vertical feet—and never using a single one of them; being asked to “be more playful” while I skinned back and forth



over the same 100 feet eighteen times; donning rabbit suits for the Easter edition (snow bunnies... hahaha); being adjusted into contortionist poses to deliver maximum Logos Per Inch (LPI); and having to look directly into the sun without blinking, squinting or sunglasses.

Finding a location is often the crux of bc shoots: as backcountry skiers favor remote, steep, and often dark locations, and photographers want sun, instant access and fresh powder with no tracks or people. This magical backcountry photo kingdom often seems to exist on the closed side of a rope, 50 feet from the top of a chairlift. Similar “remote basecamps” can be found within shouting distance of popular trailheads. Like riding a Vespa, these situations are fun—as long as your friends don't see you.

Photographers usually have a vision of what they want and how to get it, and some believe that skiers should be seen and not heard. The end result is almost always more a reflection of the photographer than the skier. But contrary to popular belief, skiers always have the last say on safety, and I've declined many invitations to ski loaded slopes or huck my meat. Conversely, if you choose to jump off the Chamonix tram into an electrified pool of sharks, there will be no shortage of professionals willing to photograph you.

For all of their folly, however, photo shoots are still one of the most effective ways to communicate what the backcountry is all about. They require a lot of work—and very little skiing—but it's rewarding to be part of a creative process that builds excitement for a sport I'm passionate about. Being flash frozen with super-chilled slush is a small price to pay for turning someone onto a lifetime of backcountry skiing. At least that's what the photographer told me, just before he turned on the spigot.

Andrew McLean lives in Park City, Utah with his trophy wife, two red-headed daughters, one good dog and one bad dog. He's racked up first descents all over the world and laid arcs on all seven continents. In a past life he was an outdoor gear designer, and his current favorite color is burgundy. Photo: Andrew McLean