"Alpenglow lights the summit of Mt. Hunter as seen from the Sultana Ridge, with the Kahiltna Glacier approximately 7,000 feet below. This photo was taken at dawn, or about 1 a.m., as we were about an hour into the climb from our second camp on the ridge at the foot of the Sultana, and on our way up to the summit of Mt. Foraker." Photo: Fredrik Marmsater

TRIFECTA

"EVERYONE HAS TALENT. WHAT IS RARE IS THE COURAGE TO FOLLOW THE TALENT TO THE DARK PLACE WHERE IT LEADS."—ERICA JONG

In horse racing, a trifecta is when a bettor correctly picks the first, second, and third-place finishers in a race. It's a dubious wager for even the most experienced high roller. Three horses may look good on paper, but track conditions, jockey experience, and plain old bad luck can throw educated guesses out the barn window. Thus a trifecta is very rare, but the payout can be lucrative.

A Trifecta can be more broadly defined as a trio of major accomplishments. In 1995, a noted ski mountaineer tried his luck on Denali. Adventure morphed into obsession, and the stakes grew higher.

Alaska can be benevolent or unforgiving, a roll of the dice. Careers are made or broken on North America's highest and most iconic peaks. Some lose it all. Others win the prize. Here is one man's story of placing his biggest bet of all.

To my left I could see the crevasse fields where the bodies of Sue Nott and Karen McNeil were still buried. Straight ahead was a view of the Orient Express on Denali, where I had helped evacuate the broken remains of a Spanish climber. To my right was Sultana's "Japanese Death Route," named in honor of the six climbers it has claimed. Suddenly I felt like I was skiing through a graveyard.

All I had to do was survive the next 11,000 feet to base camp to complete my goal of skiing the Alaska Range family—father Denali, mother Sultana, and wild-child Mt. Hunter. I had envisioned this moment for years and expected to be throwing high-fives and whooping for joy. Instead, I was overcome with regret thinking about the years I've spent chasing these lines and the number of mountaineering friends who had died in the interim.

I explained to Courtney that this wasn't a judged event. That every turn counted. That we all had to keep it under control and ski our own game—even if it meant side-slipping the entire way. Don't ski, or fall, above anyone else, and spread out in case of crevasses.

We quickly glanced at each other and dropped.

Skiing any one of these three mountains is a challenge, but as a family, it's almost a career. Denali (Mt. McKinley, 20,320'), the highest point in North America, is renowned for high winds, deep crevasses, and extreme cold. Sultana (Mt. Foraker, 17,400') is perhaps the most underestimated peak on the continent with a 1 in 36 success ratio. The *enfant terrible* of the trio is Mt. Hunter (14,573'), which has been called "the most difficult 14,000-foot peak in North America," and is best known as a technical climbing peak.

All told, skiing this cluster of peaks took me four trips over 14 years, with a total of 63 days to ski 67,000 feet at a total cost of $8,750, or roughly a dollar for every seven feet of vertical.

UNEXPECTED SUCCESS

The seed was plauted in 1995 when Mark Holbrook and I decided climbing and skiing Denali would be a good idea, despite the fact that neither of us bad ever been above 14,000 feet. Most of our prep work for the trip came from books, and when we arrived in Talkeetna, reality set in. There's no shortage of Denali experts there, and most of them told us we stood little chance of making the climb, let alone skiing off the summit. One expert told us he had tried the peak 10 times and had yet to summit. Another was more pointed: "You'll die."

With that, we clipped into our sleds and started up the glacier. Ironically, our loads were so big we had to haul them up in two trips rather than one, which slowed us down and helped us acclimatize. Five days later, when we finally made it to the 14,300-foot camp, we were rested and ready to go.

Within a day we joined a rescue team headed up the West Rib to search for a missing group of Spanish climbers. Our real intent was to go skiing and also to see how the altitude treated us. Things were going great until the unexpected happened—we actually found the people we were looking for. The Spaniards' tent was perched on a ledge; from a distance you could see the outlines of bodies pressing against the fabric, and windblown streaks of raised yellow sustrugi from pee bottles being dumped out the door.

We approached the tent expecting to find frozen corpses, but were shocked to find everyone alive. We spoke no Spanish and they spoke one word of English—"rescue"—so we hurriedly skied down the Orient Express in surreal midnight snn to get help. Following a day of bad weather we were called to help identify a mysterious "rock" near our tracks, which turned out to be the body of one of the Spaniards who had fallen 3,000 feet while attempting to adjust the tent.

The sight of a dead body did little to quell our newfound high-altitude enthusiasm. Three days later, we repeated the West Rib ascent, this time all the way to the 20,320-foot summit. To avoid poling back across the 19,000-foot plateau, Mark dropped the summit headwall in three turns and blazed past a long line of staggering climbers. From behind, it looked like a shock wave passing throngh them as he flew by.

Sliding into the top of the Messuer Couloir, I was snre we were lost as it was so vast and expansive. By linking five cautious turns at a time, we dropped altitude and found ourselves in shin-deep powder. I have no idea where it came from, but soon we were cranking turns and letting our skis run as we shot over crevasses back to camp.

The crew works down the west ridge of Mt. Hunter—fully exposed with no room for error. Photo: Lorne Glick

"Andrew McLean lets loose after being cooped up in tents for over 10 days while riding out a storm. Besides the opportunity to play endless rounds of Scrabble, the storm had additional benefits, what was heinous, waist-deep unskiable penitentes—tall, thin growths of ice found at higher elevations—on the southeast flanks of Mt. Crosson, turned into steep, knee-deep spring powder. By the time we had waited out another storm, and finally climbed and skied the Sultana, sun-cup hell was back in full force. On our final descent of Mt. Crosson, by now the 4th or 5th time we skied it, Andrew declared that he will never, ever ski that mountain again." Photo: Fredrik Marmsater

A FIRST DESCENT

Bolstered by our success on Denali, four years later we set our sights on skiing Tibet's Shishapangma (8,027m). But things went differently this time. By the end of the trip I had experienced explosive diarrhea and projectile vomiting, high-altitude pulmonary edema, and the death of two close friends—Alex Lowe and David Bridges—who were buried in an avalanche and never found. Another member of the Shish trip was Hans Saari from Bozeman. Hans was on fire with ski-mountaineering passion, yet a year later he would fall to his death in the Gervasutti Couloir in Chamonix.

In 2003 Lorne Glick invited me to attempt Mt. Hunter, which had never been skied. My skiing expectations were low, but confidence in Lorne was high, especially since he had been denied on Hunter once before and was hungry for seconds.

Hunter holds no obvious ski line, and, in this regard, Lorne masterfully pieced together tidbits of topography to connect the dots to the summit. The crux of the climb, like most everything in the Alaska Range, was weather. Following days of heavy snow, we popped our heads out of our tents to see our proposed route get swept by avalanches so large that they triggered sympathetic slides across the valley. We gave it another day to settle out.

Our first obstacle was getting through a massive ice fall. By pure luck we made it on our first try and were suddenly poised at the business end of the route. Average ascents for Hunter take two to three days, but by going "night naked" (climbing all night with minimal gear) we thought we could do it faster than that. In the end, we surprised ourselves with a 16-hour round trip to the summit.

Hunter looks worse than it is from a distance, and the steepest terrain is at the beginning. After front-pointing a 2,000-foot, 40-degree headwall in twilight, we alternated between booting and skinning along the West Rib. As the temperature bottomed out and the sun started to rise, I looked to the west and saw the Sultana Ridge on Foraker beckoning in a spotlight of alpenglow, looking very skiable.

The upper flanks of Hunter were deep, soft, and moderate, but once we returned to the top of the headwall we had no choice but to centerpunch (i.e. ski straight down the center of a large, exposed slope) the steep rollover warming with high avalanche potential. It was too long to rope down and didn't respond to ski cuts, so we crossed our fingers and skied it. It held and we made it to base camp to celebrate.

MIXED EMOTIONS

Completing the family trio now seemed a foregone conclusion. But Mama Sultana proved difficult, and my first attempt in 2005 ended in miserable failure. I returned in May 2009 intent up on ending the quest at last.

"Consummate camp cook Andrew Mclean instructs on how to make backcountry Swiss Röschti—according to Andrew, a proper pototo breakfast is necessary for a big day of climbing." Photo: Kip Garre

"Ragged and glass-eyed, Andrew McLean settles in for the evening at our first camp on the summit of Mt. Crosson en route to the Sultana ridge. We waited over two weeks on the Kahiltna Glacier for the weather window needed to begin the climb. We were all elated to finally get a crack at Foraker, but, at the same time, somewhat nervous, as the weather window was forecasted to close approximately 24 hours too soon." Photo: Fredrik Marmsater

In the ensuing four years, Carl Skoog and Doug Coombs had fallen to their deaths while skiing. Karen and Sue had been blown off the top of Sultana. Shane McConkey had perished while ski BASE jumping. Additionally, I now had a two-year-old daughter and another kidlet on the way. Much as I wanted to believe we'd be safe, the statistics were getting harder to ignore. All of my friends who have died in the mountains were skilled and cautious. Yet the mountains always have the final say.

Eight days into our Sultana adventure, the weather socked in. When it finally cleared, we climbed the Sultana Ridge, tagged the summit, and skied down, all in a four-day marathon. It was up there on the summit that Courtney had semi-seriously asked for advice, but it was too late to tell him to quit mountaineering and take up tennis.

I contemplated how different my life might have been had we been shut down on Denali 14 years earlier. I probably would have gone into a more conventional career. I couldn't change the destinies of all the great people I've known who have died in the mountains, but at that moment I wasn't eager to join them. I found myself repeating the most-often-broken promise of my life: "Please, just one more. Then I'll stop."

Staring at Denali and Hunter from the summit of Sultana brought back a flood of memories of those specific peaks and the hundreds in between. The Alaska Range family formed the bookends of a huge and unintended odyssey that started with a gleeful beginning and slowly morphed into a loss of ski-mountaineering innocence. This sport comes with a stiff apprenticeship, brutal penalties for mistakes, and too little mercy.

Once we started making turns, the magic of skiing took over, as it always does. If skiing is a gift, spending it on magnificent peaks like these is the ultimate way to enjoy it. Even if it may come with the ultimate price tag.

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Author Andrew McLeon finds an open flank and pins it into the clouds