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THE WINTER ISSUE

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SUPERFLY

Freeskiing's king of
cool, Paddy Graham



King of the wild frontier

How a city kid from Britain's industrial north helped shape the future of backcountry skiing

Words HUGH FRANCIS ANDERSON Photography GIAN PAUL LOZZA

Stelvio glacier, Italy, 2019:
Paddy Graham in his element
– the mountain air



“I learnt to ski on dry slopes, which is a lot different to growing up on snow like most of my competition”

On Japan's north island of Hokkaido lies Mount Kariba.

In winter, its 1,520m peak becomes blanketed in dense snow. This is Shimamaki snowcat country, so-called because only these big-tracked snowmobiles can take skiers to the peak for some of the world's deepest powder skiing. If you had journeyed to the top in January, you would have witnessed a mesmerising sight: skiers exploding from the thick drifts, launching through giant balls of pow nested in the trees, and blowing cold smoke in their wake as they carved, buttered and jumped through this untouched backcountry, all sporting the same unmistakable blue-and-orange skis.

These guys are ski-film collective Legs of Steel, and you can marvel at this majestic moment in their latest production, *121*, named after the revolutionary ski they're all using. One of the film's stars, Italian Markus Eder, wore the ski to become this year's Freeride World Tour champion. It seems like destiny – his Red Bull profile page reads: “Like every little kid from the smallest town in the mountains, he learnt to ski right after learning to walk.” For another of the film's protagonists, it wasn't quite so preordained...

“I learnt to ski on dry slopes, which is a lot different from growing up on snow like most of my competition,” says Paddy Graham in his gentle, fading Sheffield accent. “Coming from a nation that doesn't have skiing in the back garden was a struggle at first,” the born-and-bred Yorkshireman readily admits. But Graham has demonstrably proven otherwise. Over the past decade, he has ascended to the pinnacle of his sport, becoming Britain's number-one freeskiier and co-founding Legs of Steel. Today, Graham shreds mountains with the best of them.

It's October and the snow season is still months away, but Graham has been shooting *The Red Bulletin's* cover story at Prinoth X Camp, a year-round ski resort 3,450m up the Stelvio glacier in northern Italy. He fires up his old Land Rover Defender and, as the afternoon light and deep mountain shadows filter through the windscreen, we descend the highest road in the Eastern Alps, the Stelvio Pass. Moustachioed, with tufts of dark hair emerging from beneath his sun-faded Red Bull cap, Graham's face wears a cheeky, ever-present smirk.

“My girlfriend gave me that cat,” he says, pointing to a small figurine on the dashboard. “And that's Chad,” he chuckles, this time pointing to a miniature



Snow patrol: Paddy Graham, an adrenalin-chasing multiple champion, is Britain's top freeskiier

Game-changer: Paddy's
Revolt 121 skis have been
developed by the skiers
with the R&D team at Völkl



plastic lifeguard doing a pull-up on his rear-view mirror. “They’re my mascots.” Paddy Graham’s life, as we’ll discover, has been filled with mascots.

It wasn’t until the age of 11, and a school trip to the USA, that the notion of skiing first presented itself to him. “I wanted to go because I’d seen pictures of my dad skiing when he was younger, but obviously I had to go and learn,” Graham recalls. “I was always active as a kid, but was never into playing football. Every summer, my parents would send me and my brother to sports camps to keep us off the streets, but I never had that one thing that I really liked, so my parents took me to the dry ski slope to see if I actually liked it.” That was the famed Sheffield Ski Village, one of Europe’s largest artificial ski slopes, which included a freestyle park equipped with a half pipe, quarter pipe, kicker, hip jump and grind rails before it burned down in 2012. “I saw people doing airs and tricks and I was like,

“This is sick, I want to do this.” By the end of the three-day beginner course, he was hooked.

Graham dedicated himself to practising on the dry slopes; slight and sure-footed, he took to park skiing quickly. By 13, he’d attracted his first sponsor, US manufacturer Line Skis, and joined a local team of fellow British skiers – a feat made more impressive by the fact that at this point Graham had only ever skied snow on that US school trip and a summer holiday at France’s Tignes glacier. “I was tiny and just skiing around. I didn’t have any race training. The others, who’d all done racing, were like, ‘Oh God, we need to teach you how to ski.’ We called ourselves the Kneesall Massive, after the [Nottinghamshire] town that one of the guys, Andy Bennett, now a coach on the British team, came from,” Graham laughs. “My coaching came from skiing with these guys.”

“I was tiny and just skiing around. I didn’t have any race training”



Airs and graces: Graham caught the skiing bug early



Up in the air:
"Freeskiing is all about
enjoying the mountain,"
says Graham

**“There are no rules
and no one can tell
you what to do or
how to do it”**

With these comrades, who Graham affectionately names Bungle, Noddy and Slave Monkey, a community was born. Another trip to Tignes ensued and, once he hit 16 and his GCSEs were done and dusted, a season in the French ski resort of Serre Chevalier beckoned. “My learning curve accelerated, since snow’s easier and more forgiving than plastic matting. I learnt how to jump on 20m kickers rather than 5m ones, doing cork 720s, 900s and the half pipe,” he says. “As I got older, I started powder skiing rather than cheeky runs next to the slope, so I had to really concentrate on my style and technique.” Meanwhile, back home during summers, he was making ends meet collecting trolleys at Asda and landscape gardening in a local caravan park. “I strived to outgrow the UK scene. People took me more seriously when I came second in slopestyle at the Austrian Open – it was one of the biggest events at the time and the whole scene was there watching, so that made some noise.”

At this time, Graham appeared on Christian Stevenson’s Channel 5 show *RAD* and Discovery’s *Snow Patrol*; it was the perfect moment for him to start making films himself. “When I started spending more time on snow, my friends and I would always go filming. To get standout shots, you have to venture further than the terrain park,” he says. “We’d always ski powder, small lines, in the streets and urban spots. I realised the park had boundaries that the rest of the mountain did not – taking tricks into powder and hitting natural features created a new challenge.”

He wasn’t the only one coming to this realisation; it was a moment of huge change in the skiing community. With the development of powder skis – wider and more capable of tackling deep backcountry snow – a new discipline was born. “Freeskiing is all about enjoying the mountain,” says Graham. “There are no rules and no one can tell you what to do or how to do it.”

Graham’s newfound freedom on the slopes demanded a lifestyle to match – he



Paddy Graham

REVOLT 121 SKIS

"When you see the ski being made, it's like a big puzzle: all these layers of material go into a big press that bakes them together"

Paddy Graham

MULTILAYER WOOD CORE
Durable, hard beech at boot area; lighter poplar surround

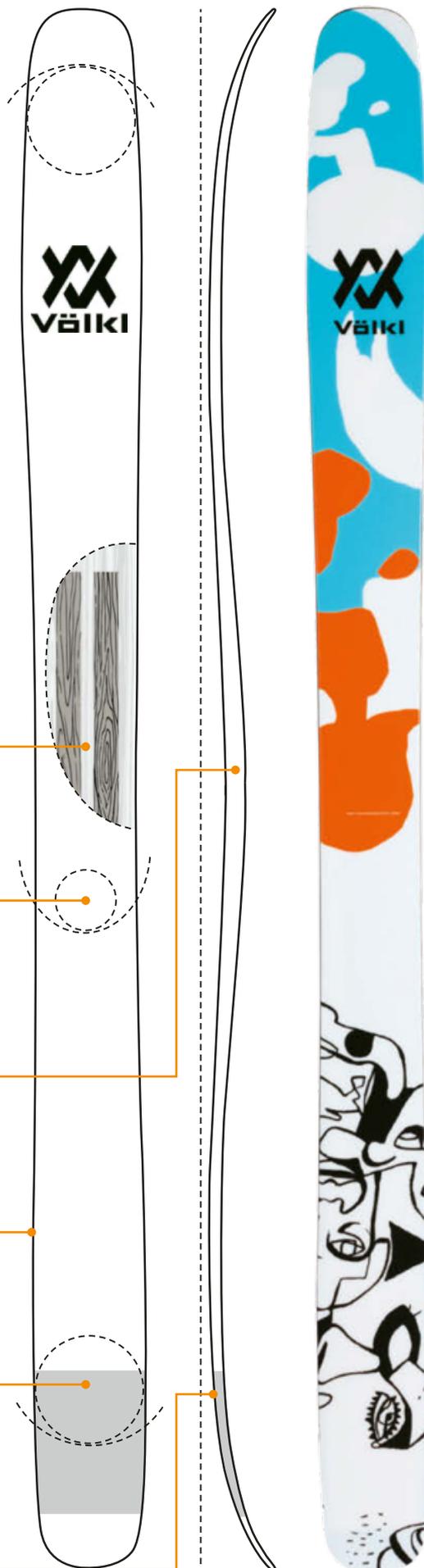
TIGHT RADIUS AT CENTRE
For short, aggressive turns

ARCHED FOR POP AND GRIP
Underfoot camber adds edge-hold when carving

TOUGH CASING
Core is wrapped in a composite and fibreglass sheath

WIDE-RADIUS TIP AND TAIL
For long arching turns at high speed

ROCKERS FOR DEEP SNOW
Tip and tail contact points float through powder



needed to find bigger sponsorship to go full-time. "We always had a photographer with us on trips; brands liked this as we could create content for them," he says. "When I was 18, I got picked up by Völkl and never looked back."

With the German ski manufacturer's support, in 2009 Graham moved to the Austrian town of Innsbruck and, with fellow skiers Bene Mayr, Thomas Hlawitschka and Tobi Reindl, co-founded Legs of Steel. "We were filming for another European movie at the time, but wanted to do our own thing so we could go on the trips we wanted and have the music we wanted." Their first film, *The Pilot*, was released in time for the 2010-2011 season. "There was a lot of powder skiing and backcountry, then we organised our own crazy park jump to do something special, which has become our trademark," says Graham. Numerous films followed, including 2015's multi-award-winning *Passenger*. But it was 2017's *Same Difference* that left a particular impact on Graham. "I just wanted to make a jump where I was in the air for longer than four seconds," he says, matter-of-factly, of his attempt to achieve the longest-ever air time off a freestyle jump.

It's May 12, 2017, and Graham is staring down the face of his creation. First conceived on a piece of paper the year before, the monolithic mountain of snow before him in Livigno, Italy, is twice the size he originally envisioned – the largest freestyle ski jump ever built. Working 24/7 over four weeks, a fleet of diggers and snowcats moved some 100,000 cubic metres of snow into position; so much snow, in fact, that the locals called the police, fearing it would slide down and destroy the village.

With conditions perfect and speed checks complete, Graham rockets towards the jump at a blistering 117kph, landing a tantalising 3.8 seconds later. He attempts it again, this time launching too fast. After 4.5 seconds of air, he falls almost 30m to the ground. "I ruptured my ACL and meniscus, and broke my ankle on the other foot," he recalls.

"We organised our own crazy park jump to do something special. It's become our trademark"



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Paddy Graham



Still on the rise: at 31, Graham believes he's at his physical peak

It puts Graham out for the rest of the season. "I'm going to get back up and I'm going to get back out there, no matter what," he said at the time. "With skiing and everything in life, you want to do it the biggest and best you can."

Today, Graham is at the peak of physical fitness. His 1.85m frame is slight, save for robust tattooed thighs, primed for the upcoming season – the result of a summer spent cycling through the Tyrol mountains that surround his home. "You're always your fittest at the beginning of the season," he says as we cross the border into Switzerland. The scent of winter lingers in the air, the chime from a cow's bell drifts on the crisp breeze and the setting sun paints the mountains mauve. Graham smiles. "Just look at these mountains. I've never seen them like this before."

"I hope I'll still be skiing when I'm 80, but I've got a lot more to do before then"

A short while later, Graham's Land Rover pulls up outside the house of Jean-Claude Pedrolini, product and team manager of Vökl and a man Graham fondly calls *Schinkä* (Swiss German for ham). Graham is here to collect a van to drive the team to *121*'s premiere at the Leo Kino Cinematograph in Innsbruck. The two immediately embrace and Schinkä welcomes him into his home, where Graham hugs his wife and children. Paddy is almost part of the family –

for 13 years, since he was a teenager, he's been with this team. They've grown up together, and now they've created a child. This season, Graham and his teammates have produced a revolutionary new ski with Vökl: the Revolt 121.

"Schinkä said, 'What we want to do is make a new powder ski for the riders, and who's going to design it? The riders themselves,'" recalls Graham. The idea was to build a single ski that would work across multiple disciplines; the result (see explanation on page 42) is the evolution of a mode of human transportation that's existed for about 6,000 years. "It handles big mountain freeride, deep powder, backcountry freestyle jumps, ski touring and also slope skiing," he explains. "It's a game-changer."

With teammates Markus Eder, Fabio Studer, Colter Hinchliffe, Ahmet Dadali, Tanner Rainville, Sam Smoothy, Tom Ritsch and Vökl's lead engineer Lucas Romain, Graham rode numerous iterations of the ski last season before the final version was perfected. "We tested it in so many different conditions, we knew it was going to be good," he says. "These skis make me feel happy when I look down at them."

The film is more than merely a celebration of a product. At its premiere, hordes of ecstatic beanie-wearing freeskiers watch on as Graham and his teammates traverse the globe finding the best lines, all with Revolt 121s affixed to their boots. The movie, like the ski, like Paddy Graham himself, is the culmination of not just one person's passion, but the dedication and continual refinement of a brilliantly talented team. Graham would humbly agree. "At the premiere of *Same Difference*, my parents came over to watch and got all dressed up. They could see where I'd come from – the little kid who they took to the ski slope, now hosting this big event. That was really nice."

While filming *121*, Graham turned 31, something he ruminates on. "Everyone's saying, 'Oh, it's downhill from here.' I was like, 'No way.' I went out with a chip on my shoulder to show people that I'm still an athlete. The performance I was able to put down this year was one of the best feelings. I hope I'll still be skiing when I'm 80, but I've got a lot more to do before then. Skiing has let me see the world while doing something I love, accompanied by my best friends.

"There's so much more exploration to be done."

121 is available to stream for free from November 18 at voelkl.com/watchtogether

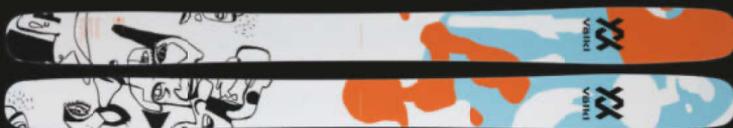


VOELKL

RIDER: PADDY GRAHAM
PHOTO: GRANT GUNDERSON

BUILT TOGETHER

THE NEW REVOLT 121 - INCREDIBLY VERSATILE



LENGTH (RADIUS): 177 (17.4), 184 (19.2), 191 (21.7) SIDECUT: 143_121_135



»BUILT TOGETHER« results from the impassioned teamwork of our best athletes, skilled engineers, renowned artists and product management team. »Incredibly versatile« - that's one of the most often heard comments from people riding the Revolt 121. This is made possible due to the 3 radius construction and a specially shaped tip that works great for nose butters and drift turns in soft snow. The Multi Layer Woodcore makes the ski strong enough to go where dedicated freeskiers dare to go.

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