

RISKING IT ALL

By Simon Harrington

For dedicated thrill-seekers, risk is nothing more than an occupational hazard. Here, MOJEHMEN looks at what motivates extreme sports enthusiasts and why they are here to stay.



For many of us, the thought of violent winds whipping our faces at 160kph while grazing precariously across jagged canyons will forever remain a foreign concept. For some it's another day at the office, and for yet others it's simply not enough. Indeed, the ever-evolving world of thrill-seekers and extreme athletes is becoming more daring by the day. Aside from sports like freestyle snowboarding and skateboarding seeing half pipes double in height over the past decade, a surge of popularity in wingsuiting, jetpack flying and free solo climbing has resulted in some of the most death-defying stunts ever seen, staged in some of the most remote places on earth. Facilitated by improved technology, sponsored by the likes of energy drink giant Red Bull and promoted on YouTube, there has never been a greater opportunity – or incentive – to push the envelope; and that's exactly what today's adventure pioneers are doing. Perhaps the greatest example in recent history is the record-breaking supersonic skydive of Austrian daredevil Felix Baumgartner. Back in

2012, the BASE jumper was carried 120,000ft into the earth's stratosphere by a helium balloon –that's roughly four times the height of Mount Everest – before jumping into the abyss and plummeting to the ground at speeds upwards of 1,350kph. Despite enduring potentially fatal complications, including an uncontrolled minute-long spin and a complete loss of visibility due to visor fogging, Baumgartner landed safely and became the first man to break the sound barrier during his dive. The Austrian's triumph was written in his jubilant celebration; on bent knees with both arms raised in victory. But conquering the unknown has never come without risks. A lesser-reported story is that of Nick Piantanida's 1966 attempt of the same record, during which the American parachute jumper would sustain fatal injuries. Today branded the "Magnificent Failure", the jump saw Piantanida's suit unexpectedly decompress during ascent at 57,000 feet, exposing him to atmospheric pressure that left him comatose with severe brain damage. Piantanida survived the incident, but died four months later in hospital.

Unfortunately, for every awe-inspiring success story in the world of extremes, there is a similarly tragic counterpart: a macabre yin and yang. The exceptional achievements of rock climbers like Royal Robbins and Warren Harding, the first men to conquer the great walls of Yosemite National Park, for example, are tragically rebalanced by the unexpected deaths of similarly inspirational figures on the Yosemite scene. Seemingly invincible alpinists and BASE jumpers like Dean Potter and Graham Hunt, both of whom passed away during a wingsuit flight accident in 2015, and exceptional free climbers like John Bachar and Dan Osman have all lost their lives in the pursuit of greatness; spurred by an inherent competitiveness, a culture of one-upmanship and a desire to be the first. Of course, it is easy for us to distance ourselves from these accidents. Most of us will never attempt to climb Everest, jump from the stratosphere or launch ourselves from the ledge of a mountain. But the psychology behind these activities, often branded as sheer lunacy, hits closer to home than you might think.

A TASTE OF THE EXTREME

If you've ever strapped on a snowboard, taken up your ski poles or attempted a half pipe on a skateboard, you've had a small taste of what extreme sportspeople seek every day. Evolutionarily, our bodies are physiologically hardwired to react to fear-inducing experiences, releasing dopamine, the body's happiness hormone. This gifts us with a heightened sense of elation and is often linked to a feeling of achievement and optimism. It's this feeling that

encourages us to push it on the ski run from time to time, take part in a tandem skydive or tip the speed limit in our cars. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, dopamine also happens to be the most important nerve signal involved in recreational drug use. In one study, titled *Dangerous Sports and Recreational Drug-use: Rationalizing and Contextualizing Risk*, by Michael Larkin and Mark Griffiths, a sample of ecstasy-users are compared to bungee-jumpers, concluding that both groups "draw upon a complex cultural and relational understanding of risk and pleasure, and are thus able to deal quite effectively with the contradictory experience of taking 'non-volitional' action." In short, there is very little difference between the physiological pleasures and psychological rationalisations of drug addicts and extreme sports enthusiasts. And there are plenty of incidents to demonstrate addiction among daredevils.

Perhaps most poignant is the story of world-class snowboarder and Olympic-hopeful Kevin Pearce. Immortalised in the 2013 Emmy Award-winning documentary film *The Crash Reel*, Pearce was a contemporary of two-time Olympic gold medallist and X-Games medal record holder Shaun White, widely regarded as the best freestyle half pipe snowboarder in the world. In the mid-2000s both men were making a name for themselves, outdoing one another by attempting some of the most daring and acrobatic aerial tricks ever seen on a snowboard. Naturally, a fierce rivalry ensued. In his prime Pearce was the only competitor to beat White on the competitive half pipe, garnering a deserved reputation as the future face of the sport. Suddenly, however, his skyrocketing success was curtailed. A mid-trick accident during pre-Olympic training in 2009 saw Pearce incur a life-changing brain injury. Confined to a wheelchair for months and barely able to speak, the sportsman battled admirably to overcome the odds and get back to his feet, but his dream of Olympic glory would remain nothing but that; a dream.

Despite being told that it was a miracle he survived, that his sight would never be fully functional, and that his balance would be permanently off-kilter, Pearce vowed to get



Felix Baumgartner smashed the BASE jumping world record in 2012



BASE jumpers Dean Potter and Graham Hunt were killed in a tragic accident at this spot

back on a snowboard and restore his former glory. His family mourned for his addiction. Gut-wrenching scenes depict the once-great athlete take to the slopes two years after his accident in a series of clumsy fumbles and uncoordinated slaloms, physically unable to complete a simple run. As his doctor predicted, Pearce would never partake in a high-level snowboarding competition again; but the competitive fire of an extreme athlete still burned and the remnants of his addiction remained – despite his capabilities being almost wholly diminished. In an interview with *National Geographic* four years after his accident, Pearce says it best himself, "I love risk. It still lights me up and gets my heart beating. And I love that feeling of taking a risk and doing something scary. It was those moments that I loved the most in snowboarding."

Snowboarder Kevin Pearce had his accident immortalised in the film, *The Crash*





Two-time Piolet d'Or-winner Ueli Steck is the proud holder of numerous speed ascension records



MAN VERSUS NATURE

Although near-death incidents like that of Kevin Pearce may cause pause for thought, there is something that keeps extreme athletes coming back for more. Regardless of inherent dangers, the need to go faster, farther and higher outweighs the potential for disastrous consequences. In a true battle of man versus nature, this unrelenting perseverance is a trait shared by many, if not all, successful, boundary-pushing icons in the world of adventure sports, from the first high climb without safety ropes to the first BASE jump from the Eiffel Tower. One man who understands this better than most, having endured his fair share of close calls, is world-famous Alpinist and two-time Piolet d'Or winner, Ueli Steck. The Swiss rock climber and mountaineer claims numerous speed and solo ascension records, and boasts the likes of Pakistan's Gasherbrum II and Mount Everest among his impressive list of mountain summits. Branded as "the man who runs up mountains" and the "Swiss Machine" in the media, Steck has enjoyed a career spanning more than two decades and shows no sign of slowing down.

"I love to play in nature. For me, alpinism is a great challenge. But I don't consider myself an adventure guy," explains Steck when asked about his mountaineering motivations. "I look to take on projects that are interesting because of their difficulty, not because they are remote or incredibly far away from civilisation... to me, extreme means out of control and I'm a control freak." There have been incidents, however, when control has been difficult to maintain. In 2007, Steck was attempting to summit the notoriously difficult Annapurna massif in the Himalayas when he was struck by a rock fall that knocked him unconscious and saw him slipping some 200ft down the mountain face. "I try to analyse what happened in situations like that," he calmly explains. "And you can always find a solution to avoid it as best as possible in future. The rock fall was bad luck, but you have to accept it. Of course, it could happen again, but that's the risk you take in the mountains." Steck's nonchalant brushing aside of his near-death experience is both admirable and concerning. His philosophy on life becomes

all the more clear as he goes on to explain that he doesn't dwell on his achievements and is forever looking to the next challenge, not "living in the past" – a trait shared by all high-achieving adventure-seekers. When we look beyond what most people would term the 'unnecessary risks' taken by those with a penchant for the extreme, it's hard to deny that there is something quite freeing about their existential attitude. "For me, life is all about the adventure," explains wingsuit flyer Jocke Sommer, whose daring videos have had millions of hits on YouTube. "The moment you step off that edge or the split second you're inside the barrel of a wave, that moment is priceless and worth the risk... there is nothing more giving than this lifestyle." Indeed, there's a reason that

Sommer's flight videos have racked up more than five million views; that the film Everest took over US \$203 million at the box office; and that audiences at the X Games have been growing exponentially since 2002. Just as extreme athletes get a buzz from their stunts, we as viewers enjoy a contact high. Awestruck by their ambition and apparent disregard, we feel part – albeit briefly – of an otherworldly experience. As audience appetite continues to fuel extreme sports, and one-upmanship remains part of its cultural fabric, the lust for increasingly daring stunts will only continue to grow, as will its commercial backing. Far from reaching its peak, thrill seeking is only just getting started. In the famed words of T.S. Eliot, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."