

THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

The high flying Chase brothers

Story by David Goodman

Photos by Mike Riddell

“Ya wanna hit a cliff?”

I'm riding a deliciously slow double chair up the flanks of Mad River Glen when the person next to me interrupts my reverie with his cocky query. I peer quizzically at him for a moment, then return my rhapsodic stare to the ice-plastered rocky drop-offs that litter the landscape below. “Actually,” I reply, “I try to avoid hitting them. They hurt.”

My chairmate is perplexed by the notion of passing up the chance to air. So he ignores me. “How bout that one. Ya wanna hit it with me? How much air do you think we'd get?” I look down at the snot-colored ice fang that slices the rock face and ends in mid air.

“Ten feet. Maybe 20 for you. I'll watch and let you know.”

“COOL!” declares Morgan Chase, the high flying tele whiz from West Virginia who can ski circles around people five times his age. That's because Chase is 11. And along with his two brothers from the West Virginia hollers, these kids are setting the standard for where tele skiing is headed in the next generation.

Take, for example, what Morgan likes to do most on his humble boards. “A 360,” he chirps without hesitating. Before I can hit him up for a pointer or two, he adds, “with a tail grab.” Johnny Moseley's got nuthin on this tyke. And neither, for that matter, do I.

Morgan is a pint-sized tiger with a non-stop smile who barely comes up to my shoulder. He's been skiing since he was 3, and tele skiing since he was 8. I meet him at the annual North American Telemark Organization festival at Mad River Glen, the “world's largest telemark party” as organizer Dick Hall likes to say. He is joined by his brother Adam, 16, and Corey, 17. The kids already have a rep and legacy to defend: they've won the kid's bump contest for three years



straight, and are here to defend their title. Sort of. Mostly they just wanna hit those cliffs, and trees, and the powder.

What kind of kids telemark? Morgan flashes a maniacal grin. “The crazy ones,” he declares. He says he likes all kinds of skiing, but telemark “is more fun.” Doesn’t he mind that the downhill skiers can go faster? “Yeah,” he comes back quickly, “but the run’s a lot longer when you telemark.” With that, he bolts for the trees with his buddy Karl Waite, and vanishes.

I find Adam Chase standing with a small cadre of disciples around him. He’s been designated to be the kid’s clinic instructor, ordered to impart his wisdom to the gathering group of pre-teens. He’s used to the guru role—the laid-back and affable kid does it all the time in soccer and in school. The handsome teenager with the Patagonia baseball jacket and the boyish grin is unassuming about all this. He tells me that he’s been skiing since he was approximately 18 months old, and tele skiing since he was 8. Or 10. He hasn’t really kept track.

I ask Adam what he likes about tele skiing. “Freein’ your heel,” he says with relaxed West Virginia lilt. He says he has skied downhill, but prefers tele skiing. “I just like the flow, the style. And I like to rip the powder.” As for his advice to the seekers who have gathered to hear the young master, he offers two words of advice. “Have fun,” he says, flashing a quick smile.

Nellie Reid, a 12-year old tele skier from Vermont, has come to Adam’s clinic. What’s your favorite thing to do on tele skis, I ask her. “Turn right,” she says matter of factly. “I can’t turn left, so I like to turn right,” she quips. She only knows one other kid who tele skis—a 6-year-old. So they ski together whenever they can.

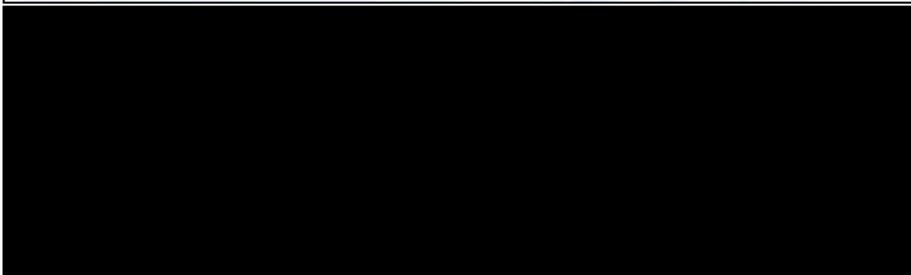
Cory Chase, a high school senior, is the elder statesman and poet-in-residence of the Chase brothers. A lanky 17 year old, he’s been skiing for 16-and-a-half years. Freeheel skiing, he muses, “is like a dance. It’s just so fluid and beautiful looking. And you have the freedom to go anywhere.”

I ask Cory who he admires most in the world. He has a quick answer. “My mom and dad,” he says with a smile. “They put us on cross-country skis and fed us good food.” His mom, Laurie, is standing nearby, and glows with the compliment. “They grew up thinking this is what everybody is supposed to do. Now,” she says, “I’m in awe of them.” That’s clearly mutual.

The high flying Chase boys inherited their skiing affliction from their father, one Chip Chase, the owner of the legendary epicenter of West Virginia backcountry skiing, the Whitegrass Ski Touring Center. Chip runs the ski center, which is located on and around a former downhill ski area, while his wife runs the Whitegrass Cafe, a fabled crossroads for musicians, skiers, and other fellow travelers.

I first met Chipper in the mid-80s. I had come to West Virginia to ski, but encountered a small problem: there was no snow. Chipper took pity on me, and took me up to the new downhill ski area near his home called Timberline. We took the lift up and skied down a closed trail with large mounds of manmade snow that we leaped between on our tele skis, as Chip yodeled, “Ski the whales!” We were greeted at the bottom by the local bluegrass fiddler, who also happened to be the head of the ski patrol, who wasn’t amused.

“You know what I gotta do Chip,” declared the pony-tailed man. Chip’s face broke into a huge grin. “COOL!” Chip replied, as he and I became the first skiers to have our tickets pulled at the ski area. We’ve been friends ever since.



How do you raise a gang of tele fanatics? Chip, the Appalachian freeheel gnome, offers his homespun advice. "Make sure you start 'em super super young, as soon as they can walk. Let 'em walk around the house with skis on. Don't make any rules—let em snowboard, downhill, cross-country. The secret is a loose reign."

Dick Hall is standing nearby and can't resist tossing in a pearl of wisdom. The father of two kids himself, and the stepdad to Chip's oldest daughter Erin (Dickie married Chips ex-wife), the NATO general insists that when skiing with kids, "Throw away any semblance of rightness or wrongness when it comes to how to make a turn on skis. Take 'em out and have fun with 'em. If they ask how to do a turn, tell them, 'I don't have time to show you cuz we're having too much fun right now!'"

Hall adds, "The universe changes for a parent the day that 'follow me!' turns to 'wait for me!'"

Chip has a similar approach to teaching. "It's important that you don't try to teach your kids," he declares, evidently unconcerned that overzealous school officials might misunderstand him. "Let 'em ski as a posse without adults. That's a secret too: keep 'em away from any organized instruction. They'll create their own style." Which is about to go on display.

The annual kid's bump competition is about to begin. A line of kids is assembled at the top of a snowy slope that resembles a crate for dinosaur eggs. The course is a typical Mad River affair: man-eating bumps with piles of snow shoved willy-nilly in every direction ending in a huge kicker where contestants are required to launch. The thought of competing here makes my knees knock. But the kids are jonesing.

Alyssa Norton, age 9, a third-grader from New Hampshire is studying her line. Clad in a pink helmet with braids sticking out the sides, she says she's thinking about what to do off the jump. "I might do a spread eagle. Then I'll bow at the end," she offers cheerily.

Adam is the first of the Chase brothers to go. The lanky teenager launches down into the bumps with a set of graceful deep knee bends, then picks up the pace as he rebounds off the bigger and bigger moguls. He lines up the kicker and pulls a huge spread eagle off the top. The crowd roars its approval.

Dickie Hall bellows from the judge's table, "The winner of the adult contest ten years ago didn't look as good as this!"

Next it is Morgan's turn. Dressed in an oversized hand-me-down parka, he looks barely big enough to stay afloat in the monstrous

bumps. He drops in at the top, launches a rapidfire set of turns, then disappears into the trough of a huge mogul. He's like the hapless boat in the Perfect Storm, getting swallowed up and spit out between 100 foot waves. Just when you think he's vanished, he pops back up and poles furiously towards the jump. The baby of the Chase clan rips a huge 360 and sticks it directly in front of the judges' table, showering them in powder. The crowd explodes in cheers, as if Britney Spears herself had just strutted half-clad down through the bumps.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the new face of telemarking!" Dickie Hall declares hoarsely, "the tele heli from West Virginia!"

It's a good payday for the high flying Chase boys: Morgan wins the bump contest. Followed closely by both of his brothers. I go over to congratulate Morgan, but he has no time for the kudos. He's scrambling after his brothers and friends. "We're gonna go hit those cliffs!" he declares as he charges back for the lift. "Wanna come?"

