



Justin Franz/Montana Kaimin

BROTHERHOOD

Three brothers try to save a sport and one saves himself

Story by Justin Franz

ROLF WILSON looked tired. Weeks of preparation led to this day, and as the late evening sun sank over the western Montana mountains, it was coming to an end.

"I think I skied pretty well," Wilson said, sitting on the deck of the Snowbowl lodge. "I jumped well."

It had been a long weekend of ski runs and jumps, part of the 2010 Snowbowl Cup Gelande Championship, often called the "Montana Olympics."

Journalists from local newspapers and television stations prodded Wilson and other ski jumpers with questions, hoping to get that one key quote to wrap up their stories. He wrestled free of his gear and wondered how he did. All he knew is that he jumped 205 feet on one of his three runs that afternoon. He didn't know what points he got for style or form. He didn't know where he placed in the rankings. He didn't know if he beat out his younger brother Erik, who took top prize at the event a year earlier.

What he did know is it was a long journey to get here.

For Rolf Wilson, 31, Gelande jumping wasn't something he, or his two brothers, just stumbled upon. In fact, it was Brent Wilson, 41, who first discovered Gelande, a style of competitive ski jumping that is similar to that seen in the Olympics, which uses different equipment. Rather than free-heeled Nordic equipment, jumpers use fixed-heeled alpine skis.

Brent, like his two younger brothers, grew up in Whitefish and learned how to ski on the nearby slopes of Big Mountain. In keeping with their Norwegian roots, most of the older family members were skiers, and the three sons followed suit.

It was Brent who taught his younger brother Rolf how to ski. Rolf said he was only a few years old at the time, and the story goes that his mother drove Rolf up to Big Mountain and found Brent, then in his early teens.

"Teach him," she had said.

Soon, all three brothers were speeding down the slopes, competing in high school ski races and hitting the powder as much as they could.

It was there that they first learned to fly.

"We always had a few jumps up at Big Mountain that we'd go off of," Rolf said. "I remember, as a little kid, skiing and jumping off anything I could find."

It was also there that they first saw Gelande skiers like Glen Flake get "big air."

"He inspired us to go with our feet tucked behind our bodies," Rolf said. "I had never

seen anyone do that."

In time, the three brothers Wilson would be doing just that.

In 1993, Brent took to the sky. At the time, Gelande skiing had big payoffs.

"More often than not, they'd give away cars, and there was a lot of money," Brent said.

Soon enough, Rolf and Erik followed suit.

"My brothers definitely looked up to me as a big brother and followed in my footsteps," Brent said.

In 1996, both younger brothers started jumping. But for Erik, who was 16 at the time, it was still a little early.

The first time he jumped was at Snowbowl that winter. At the time, the owner

Because it was a sport that didn't require more equipment than what skiers already had, many participated. In fact, the only thing a skier did need was the nerve to jump. This culture of extreme thrill harbored another culture: one of extreme partying.

"School wasn't really my thing," Rolf said. "Gelände jumping for me was a big party scene, and eventually that was the reason I dropped out of school."

Rolf dove into this lifestyle and he said he "experimented" with many drugs, mainly marijuana and alcohol. It was a low point for the middle son.

"It eventually consumed my life," Rolf said.

It soon became too much and he was forced to take a year off from what

were a bunch of party animals just leaving a trail of empty beer cans in our wake."

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were 10 jump events a year, but by the early 2000s, that number had fallen to three in the United States. The decline was due to the dangers of the sport and the culture, Rolf said. One event was shut down after an organizer tried to pay a ski area owner with drugs. Another folded after a jumper broke his neck and died on the slopes.

But even with just three events a year, the brothers kept busy, dominating the sport to the point of pure dynasty. Since 1998, at least one of the Wilson brothers has won the top prize at the Snowbowl Gelande every year, and added many more victories on the road. On more than one occasion, the three brothers swept the podium — something they did for the first time at Steamboat Springs, Colo., Brent said.

"It was a proud moment," Brent said. "I still have that picture sitting on my desk."

Rolf and Erik aren't Brent's only brothers. With the decline of the sport in recent years, the number of professional competitors has decreased, and as of 2010, that group numbered around 20. With such a small group, it isn't surprising they call each other "Gelände brothers," and Brent feels the same toward his brothers in sport as he does his brothers in blood.

"There are no outcasts," Brent said, but added with a laugh that, "talent and ability are required."

Rolf said the skiers travel with each other and call often.

"It is a family of guys who are doing this thing, and we pick up guys along the way who become part of this family," Rolf said.

Erik agreed, and for him, the reasons to jump have changed over the years.

"When I first started, I was just a poor college student and needed the money," Erik said. "But now that I have a job, it's to see friends ... It's the one time of the year I get to see my brothers in one spot."

Erik also said lending a helping hand to his fellow "Gelände brothers" is never out of the question.

"We'd go out of our way to help our friends," Erik said. "I don't have one guy on the tour that I don't like."

Rolf said the family isn't exclusive to those who are active on the slopes, but includes veteran jumpers who help as judges, coaches and promoters. That group now includes Brent, who last jumped in February 2009, but has been unable to compete because of a knee injury.

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It was a time for me to find myself, to see where I wanted to go, to see if I wanted to ski again, to jump again.

-Rolf Wilson, professional Gelände jumper

was adamant that no one younger than 18 was going off the ski jump at the base of the mountain. But being two years too young didn't stop Erik as he made his way to the top of the jump and headed down.

By the time he launched off the jump, soared through the air and hit the ground, one of the ski area managers was already running out of the lodge screaming he was too young. Erik was kicked off the hill. But that didn't stop him.

Sneaking into his brother Rolf's ski suit, Erik headed back up the hill and made two more runs before the same manager came running back out and banned him from Snowbowl for two years. But even that didn't dampen Erik's enthusiasm.

"I was hooked after that," Erik said.

And so was Rolf, who was living in Missoula and competing with the University of Montana Alpine Ski Team while attending the UM College of Technology; it didn't take long before skiing and Gelände jumping consumed his life.

he loved most.

"That's when my life changed," Rolf said.

During that year he got "clean and sober." He left Missoula and moved east, living with Brent in Bozeman. He started working in construction and got his life back in order.

"It was a time for me to find myself, to see where I wanted to go, to see if I wanted to ski again, to jump again," Rolf said. He said the drugs, alcohol and partying took him away from his true love: the slopes.

After that year, he came back to skiing and headed for Steamboat Springs, Colo., where he made a record jump.

"I set a record, and my life got better," Rolf said. "I owe it all to staying clean and sober."

But while Rolf was gone, the party scene that had consumed him also consumed his sport.

"The ski areas wanted to see more professionalism," Rolf said. "They thought we

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"They gave up the ghost," Brent said. "My knees just wore out."

That hasn't stopped him from hitting the road with the skiers who remain and helping out in any way possible, including being a judge at Snowbowl.

All three brothers have been heavily involved with promoting the sport and keeping it alive.

"If it keeps going the way it's going, there won't be anything but an old group of busted-up guys looking back," Brent said.

To do this, Brent said they are developing a Web site and gathering sponsors for various events. But one of the toughest challenges is finding new people to join.

"Gelande is so intimidating for novices to get started, and it is intimidating to make that first step," Brent said.

Yet they have seen progress, Rolf said. In 2009, only a dozen professional skiers jumped at the Snowbowl event. In 2010, that number rose to almost 20.

One of the biggest things Rolf has done to keep the sport alive is organizing the Snowbowl jump every February. The job was forced on him three years ago.

While sitting with Dave Everingham, then-president of the Missoula Gelande Association — the group responsible for putting on the annual event — Rolf listened to the struggle of organizing the spectacle.

Everingham said he couldn't keep doing it.



Greg Lindstrom/Montana Kaimin

Rolf Wilson soars through the cool Montana air at Snowbowl on the afternoon of Feb. 28, during the 2010 Snowbowl Gelande Championship. Rolf and his two brothers have dominated the sport of Gelande for over a decade. Most recently, Rolf won the Gelande jump at Cody, Wyo., setting a hill record of 138 feet.

"Then he looked at me and said, 'Rolf, you're the new president of Missoula Gelande,'" Rolf said.

While Rolf protested, the now ex-president wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

"He said 'Rolf, you know everybody, you know how it works,'" Rolf said.

A month later, Rolf got a call from Snowbowl asking how the event was coming along, and "the rest is history," Rolf said.

Snowbowl has held the event

since the 1970s, and Ronnie Morris, owner of the ski area, said they always enjoy hosting it.

"It's a good fit with our mountain," Morris said. "It's always successful."

Since then, more and more volunteers have offered their assistance at the annual event, Rolf said, and every year is closer to returning the sport to its former glory.

"It'll be a while before it is as big as it once was," Rolf said. "But

I don't know if we want it to be as big as it once was, so it doesn't become the party scene again."

Brent hopes that he and his brothers can save the sport for future generations, including the next Wilson on skis: 4-year-old Jens Wilson.

"He's a little shredder now," Brent said, in a voice booming with fatherly pride. "But it'll at least be 10 years before he steps off any jump, and hopefully I can be there."

Not only does he want to be there for his son, he wants to jump with him.

"I always have that thought in the back of my mind that, once my knees are rehabilitated, I could do it again," Brent said. "I'd be very pleased to jump with him."

Even a year after his last jump, Brent hasn't forgotten the rush.

"That feeling of flight, there's nothing like it. It gets the juices

going," Brent said.

It's the same feeling that Rolf felt as he flew through the crisp Montana air just a few weeks ago.

Sitting on the porch at Snowbowl as the evening shadows painted themselves across the snow, Rolf was moments away from learning he won the 2010 Snowbowl Cup, beating the defending champion, brother Erik, in something so much more than a game to them.

"It's definitely not a hobby anymore; it's turned into a passion," Rolf said.

Tired but satisfied even without knowing the final score, he seemed happy with how things have turned out.

"I wouldn't change the route I've taken because I am where I am now," Rolf said. "I have a great life."

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SUDOKU

THE SAMURAI OF PUZZLES *By The Mephram Group*

1	4			7	2		
3				2			1
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Level:

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4

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 box (in bold borders) contains every digit, 1 to 9. For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, visit www.sudoku.org.uk

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7	3	5	2	9	6	1	8	4
8	6	4	7	1	5	3	9	2
2	9	1	4	8	3	5	7	6
3	8	6	1	4	9	2	5	7
9	1	2	6	5	7	4	3	8
5	4	7	8	3	2	6	1	9
1	7	8	3	2	4	9	6	5
6	2	9	5	7	1	8	4	3
4	5	3	9	6	8	7	2	1

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