



Opposite page: Sons of Freedom using public nudity, one of their more popular protest methods, Shoreacres, May 1, 1954; this page: Freedomites demonstrate outside the Nelson Courthouse, 1954. Photos: Stevens Studio/Touchstone Nelson Archives

FREEDOM FIGHTERS

The Sons of Freedom and their unusual protest methods in the fight for their beliefs

By Greg Nesteroff

"No matter how we judge them, we all must acknowledge that the Freedomites did not sell out to the dollar system, nor stray from their beliefs."

— William A. Soukeroff, "The Origin of the Freedomite Movement," *Vestnik*, April 1959

"How did bread, water, and salt mix with nitroglycerin and ammonium nitrate?"

— Gregory J. Cran, *Negotiating Buck Naked: Doukhobors, Public Policy, and Conflict Resolution*, UBC Press, 2006

Removed from the context of their times, the Sons of Freedom are usually only remembered for bizarre behaviour including public nudity, burnings and bombings that brought notoriety to the West Kootenay for over 60 years. But behind their actions has been a sincere desire to protect their traditional values from what they saw as corrupting influences. They felt so strongly about it they were willing to risk going to jail and losing their children.

Why did they do what they did? The Sons of Freedom are a minority sect within the Doukhobor populace, and radical members are a smaller number still. The attention these radical members drew in the past was much to the consternation of peaceful Doukhobors who felt their faith

was being perverted by a handful of fanatics. Most found the Freedomites' actions impossible to reconcile with their pacifist beliefs. Today, many Doukhobors are reluctant to discuss this chapter in their history, cringing at images of nude parades and public burnings.

The seeds of the Freedomite movement were planted in Russia, where the Doukhobors had a long history of civil disobedience against the Orthodox Church and the Czar. For refusing military service, they were imprisoned, flogged and exiled, only to make another pacifist statement by piling and burning their guns.

Thousands of Doukhobors left Russia and came to Canada in 1899 to escape state persecution and settled on the Prairies.

Three years later, a group of dissenters among them released their domestic animals and began a trek in search of a promised land. They were called "seekers of freedom" and later *svobodniki*, or Sons of Freedom.

The reasons for the trek were complex but included difficulty surviving on prairie soil, an anarchist in their midst and misinterpreted letters from Doukhobor leader Peter Verigin, who was still in Russia. Upon his arrival in Canada in the winter of 1902, Verigin quelled the discontent but only temporarily. The zealots saw the industrialization of the Doukhobor community through mechanized farming as straying from their idyllic vision and rejected the use of animals for food, clothing and work.

They tried to gain support for their cause



Volodya Stepanow teaches Russian to children in a barn-turned-classroom, Krestova, 1959. At the time, home schooling was against the law, so the Doukhobors started their own school system. The provincial government, however, claimed Doukhobor schools didn't meet educational standards. Children between the ages of 7 and 15 were in constant danger of being picked up by the truant officer on the way to school. Photo: Stevens Studio/Touchstone Nelson Archives

and convince others of their beliefs, but having little success, they resorted to a new tactic: public nudity. This attracted attention and offended onlookers so successfully that

PUBLIC EDUCATION OFTEN BROUGHT THE SONS OF FREEDOM INTO CONFLICT WITH GOVERNMENT, ALONG WITH THEIR REFUSAL TO SUPPLY VITAL STATISTICS.

it became their standard method of protest. To show their opposition to material prosperity some of them also trampled a field of grain and burned farm equipment—acts that crossed the line from dissent to fanati-

cism. The contradiction of using violence to espouse non-violent beliefs was lost on them.

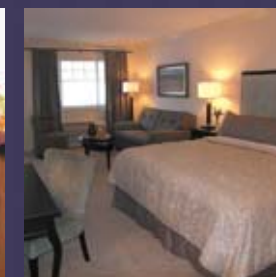
In 1907, the federal government issued an ultimatum to the Doukhobors: swear an oath of allegiance to the Crown or lose your land. In response, a group of zealots began another wandering trek, which ended when a number were arrested for staging a nude parade. This did nothing to help the Doukhobors' image in the minds of an already-suspicious Canadian public.

Meanwhile, Verigin looked for land to establish another colony and found it in the West Kootenay-Boundary. He bought property on behalf of all Doukhobors outright, and thousands migrated to BC to build a new life. What started as a generally peaceful and prosperous existence was shattered in

1924 when a train explosion claimed the lives of Verigin and eight others. Although radical factions were blamed, there were many other suspects; it is a mystery that remains unsolved.

This act was preceded and followed by a spate of bombings and burnings, mostly of Doukhobor property, with schools a common target. Public education often brought the Sons of Freedom into conflict with government, along with their refusal to supply vital statistics. Neither side showed much willingness to compromise.

Following Peter Verigin's death, his son Peter Jr. came from Russia to assume the Doukhobor leadership. At first he extended an olive branch to the Freedomites in hopes of reconciliation. While not condoning their



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actions, he praised them as “bell-ringers” of the faith.

However, when the depredations continued, he took a much harder line, expelling them from the community. Using twisted logic, the Freedomites interpreted Verigin’s public condemnations of their irrational

FREEDOMITES FREQUENTLY APPEARED ON THE DOCKET AT THE NELSON COURTHOUSE AND SOMETIMES DISROBED DURING PROCEEDINGS, BUT JAIL TIME WAS UTTERLY INEFFECTIVE AS A DETERRENT.

behaviour as tacit approval. They considered him their leader but refused to obey him. Land was set aside for them in Krestova, at the southern edge of the Slocan Valley and in the Boundary at Gilpin, but isolating the Sons of Freedom was counterproductive; it only fanned the fanatical fervour.

In the early 1930s, hundreds of Freedomites and sympathizers were arrested for public nudity and sentenced to three years. They were incarcerated on Piers Island, near Victoria, while their children were placed in orphanages and industrial schools. If authorities thought this would end what became known as the “Doukhobor problem,” they were mistaken. Instead, it caused considerable bitterness, inspiring a new generation of fanatics.

Following Peter Verigin Jr.’s death in 1939, the Sons of Freedom were without clear leadership. There were several self-proclaimed contenders, but most Freedomites pledged allegiance to Stephan Sorokin, a Ukrainian who came out of nowhere in 1949. His swift acceptance as spiritual leader rested on the false rumour that he was, in fact, Peter Verigin Jr.’s long-lost son. Sorokin maintained his status among the Freedomites until his death, even after absconding to Uruguay with the community’s money.

The Sons of Freedom continued to perplex the government, which established a special RCMP squad and formed committees and commissions but failed to stop the trouble. Freedomites frequently appeared on the docket at the Nelson courthouse and sometimes disrobed during proceedings, but jail time was utterly ineffective as a deterrent.

In 1953, the BC government forcibly removed over 100 Freedomite children from their homes and placed them in a dormitory in New Denver. They hadn’t been attending school, the authorities said, which was against the law. In private, the government



Doukhobor leader Peter Verigin Sr., circa 1910. Verigin moved to Canada in 1902, where many Doukhobors regarded him as a Christ-like figure. Despite this adoration, he still had little influence over the Sons of Freedom who saw him as a “machine man.” Verigin died with eight others in a suspicious train explosion in the Monashee Mountains near Grand Forks in 1924. Photo: courtesy of Special Collections, Simon Fraser University Library

also reasoned it was necessary to prevent the children from being further indoctrinated by their parents. Even without the horror stories of police raiding homes to catch truants, the results were disastrous: while some children had pleasant memories of attending school in New Denver, many more were severely traumatized. After six years of enforced education, parents relented and agreed to send their children to school.

A final significant event was the 1962-63 protest trek of about 800 Freedomites from the Kootenays to Agassiz, where some of their brethren were held in a specially built prison. They established a support camp nearby while seeking work in Vancouver and the Fraser Valley. From that point on, radicalism began to wane as Freedomites became less insular and started associating more with the general population.

Assimilation — something Doukhobors long worried about — ironically accomplished what nothing else could: it ended the “Doukhobor problem.” There were still sporadic bursts of violence, but the path to peace had begun, reinforced in the 1980s by a lengthy public hearing process.

While some insist that anyone who

engages in violence ceases to be a Doukhobor, the Freedomite saga is nevertheless a significant part of Doukhobor history. It’s also a wound that has not entirely healed; a group of Freedomites recently petitioned the government to apologize for removing them from their parents, but only received a “statement of regret.”

After so many years of tumult and strife, most orthodox Doukhobors and Sons of Freedom would rather focus on the positives than dwell on the negatives. While they take pride in the courage of ancestors who stood up for their beliefs, they are relieved the radicalism and religious mania that infected the movement is gone. Finally, the Sons of Freedom have never been closer to being at peace with themselves and the world.

Further reading:

The Doukhobors of British Columbia, Harry B. Hawthorn, UBC Press, 1955

The Origin of the Freedomite Movement, William A. Soukeroff, 1959, available at <http://www.doukhobor.org/soukeroff.htm>

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Grand Forks, BC



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Dinghy in a Waterfall

The reckless life of a badass creekboater

By Ray Schmidt

It's Mud Bog weekend in Nakusp and whitewater kayaker Cian Brinker can't ignore the bright orange object shining through the squeegeed window of the Nakusp General Store. As if still a kid in Edson, Alberta, with a pocketful of allowance money, the now six-foot two-inch, 21-year-old rushes inside, his spine contoured meekly, like a question mark. His slender index finger directs the storekeeper's attention to the window display. Nodding approvingly, the retailer produces a shiny box from a lower shelf of the sporting goods aisle.

Twenty-six bucks. That's all that stood between Brinker and a new boat. He knew his brand new rubber dinghy would soon produce viscous spittle, ripe for smearing in the faces of any boater who

to have a good time and go hard," quips Brinker. Then he found Spencer Cox and saddled up with his Kayakwest.com gaggle of creekers, a group of filmmaking paddlers from Jasper, Alberta, who spent every weekend in glacial sluices. Brinker introduced them to Edson drinking games, and in turn, they brought Brinker to BC's steeps.

They found a willing student with juvenile jubilation underneath a five-pound army helmet—a student without fear. "I had my first serious swim on the [West Kootenay's] Kuskanax. My spray deck imploded under this waterfall. It kinda sucked. But I didn't really care that much." Such class V beatings are well beyond the mild swims that incite would-be creekers to drop the sport. Brinker was fuelled

BRINKER WAS FUELLED INSTEAD OF FAZED AND FELT READY FOR SUTHERLAND FALLS, AN 18-METRE PARK-AND-HUCK, A LIQUID ELEVATOR SHAFT INTO A CIRCUS-ACT POOL.

has turned away from an 18-metre waterfall with wobbly knees and shit-stained shorts. Unlike the rest of us, Cian Brinker gets his rocks off by running steep and dicey mountain rivers in his kayak. He's a creekboater: the liquid equivalent to skiing big Alaskan couloirs in the middle of an avalanche. Running small-volume, hazard-ridden creeks in a \$26 dinghy? That's where the radical part comes in.

The mountaineering community carries this maxim: "There are old climbers, there are bold climbers, but there are no old bold climbers." An adequate truism for rock rats, but in kayaking's creeking underworld, a cult sport that challenges the raging recesses of the earth, there is only room for the bold. Old or young, it's just not possible to run a steep creek without iron gallantry. For Brinker, there's no better place to be young and bold than on a derailed liquid locomotive.

Four years ago, this shy kid from the mountain-challenged muskeg of Edson was looking for an outlet. His buddies turned to oil rigs or crystal meth. Brinker found kayaking. He was, and still is, the only kayaker in town. The surrounding stagnant sloughs and rocky shallows meant he had to drive to feed his habit. He spent his first summer playboating (creeking's chicken-shit cousin), but it wasn't until he participated in a kayaking festival on the Fraser River that he found his community. "I could never find people that wanted

instead of fazed and felt ready for Sutherland Falls, an 18-metre park-and-huck, a liquid elevator shaft into a circus-act pool.

"It was a bad day. I lost my boat on the Pingston River and I felt shitty. Then we stopped at Sutherland. We weren't there for too long, so I went for it." Since then, he's continuously been hitting as many class V creeks as possible: from the West Coast to Quebec's fabled big volume runs. Where water runs fast downhill, you'll find Brinker.

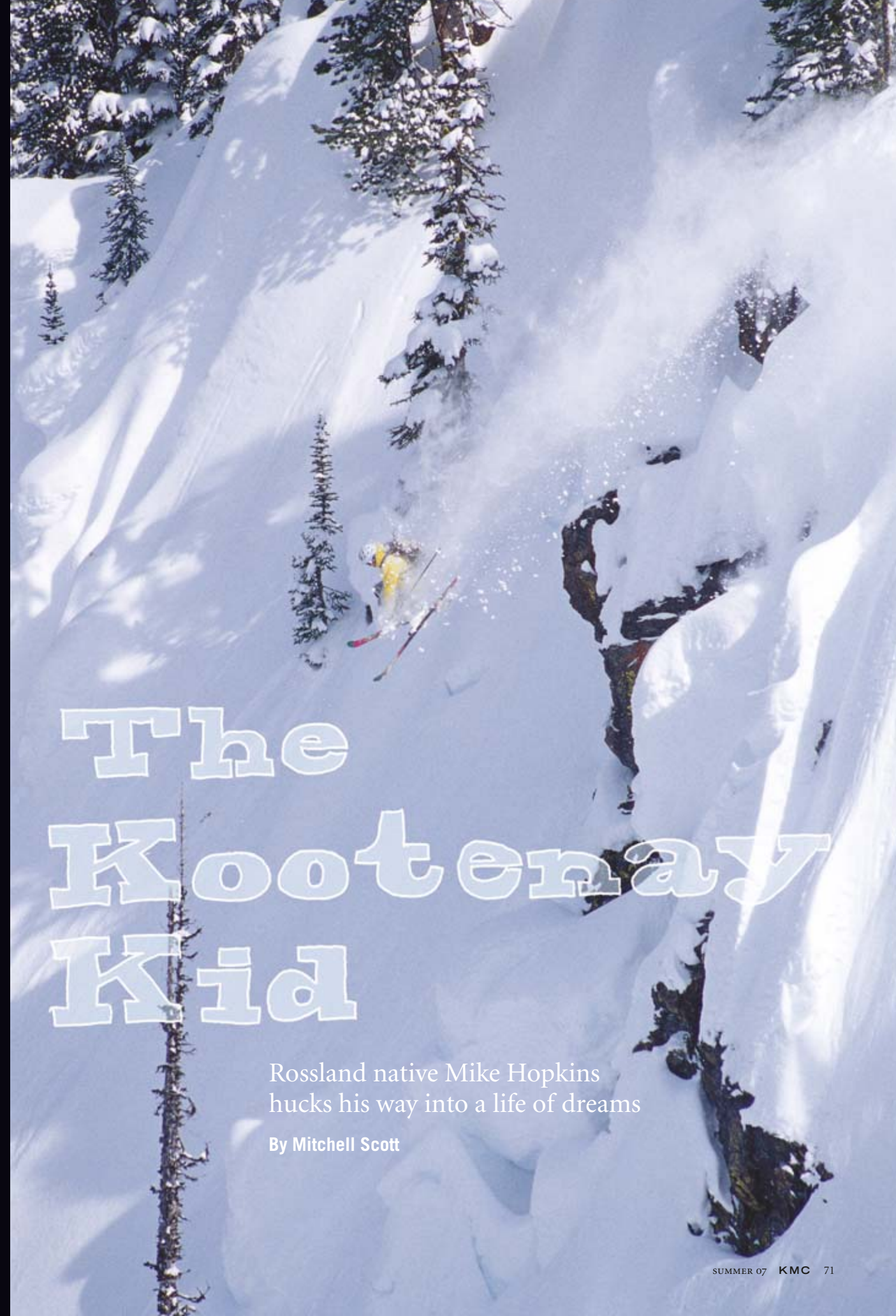
You're sure to find him at places like Nakusp's annual Mud Bog weekend too. "It's the best," he beams. "All the rednecks from all over the place are there—the craziest ones. They hire the fire department to hose down the whole field, so the rednecks can rip around and get drunk. It's crazy, kinda like Edson on Rodeo Weekend. I can put all the non-paddling skills I learned in Edson to practice." Thanks to Mud Bog's clientele, he was inspired to purchase an orange rubber raft.

"Cold water," Brinker philosophizes "sobers you." Ready to run rivers after a night of debauchery, his crew stops again at Sutherland Falls. This time, instead of unstrapping his creekboat, Brinker inflates his dinghy with toxic tequila breath and starts hiking. From the top, he gives his pals the Ebert thumb. Settling quickly into his floppy vessel—one more suited to a brackish pond—he manages a few frantic strokes with his port-a-paddle. Eighteen metres and a few tons of water later, he almost sticks the landing. □

Creekboater-turned-dinghy-test-dummy Cian Brinker drops in on the 18-metre (60-foot) high Sutherland Falls on Blanket Creek, near Nakusp, BC. Remarkably, he almost stuck the landing. Photo: David Faubert



Two seasons of sending it: Mike Hopkins airs it out in Kamloops during the summer and Meadow Creek's Selkirk Wilderness Skiing in winter. Photos: (this page) Derek Frankowski; (opposite) Dave Heath



The Kootenay Kid

Rosland native Mike Hopkins hucks his way into a life of dreams

By Mitchell Scott



Photos: Peter Moynes

Mike Hopkins is looking for a big air. Not a medium-sized air, or even a decent-sized one, but a sphincter-puckering, heart-fluttering drop of doom. The 22-year-old Rossland, BC native and professional skier and mountain biker is deep in the mountains of Selkirk Wilderness, a cat ski operation high above the tiny outpost settlement of Meadow Creek, BC, on assignment for *Powder Magazine*. He's been brought along as "the athlete," the guy you see in the pages of glossy action sports magazines. Hopkins is the kid with the perfect form, the new gear, the sick grab and the good looks. But right now it's not about all that. Right now he just wants to huck.

This is the well-mannered, chronically smiling youngster's new job. A vocation that crept up on him over years of ripping around his snow-draped, mountain-blessed backyard. "I've been skiing and

riding bikes since I was a little kid," he says, his blonde curly hair spilling from an oversized toque, ultra-baggy pants hanging around his ankles. "Being a pro athlete wasn't something I necessarily thought I'd be doing, but I'd be lying if I didn't say it's been in the back of my mind for some time."

A normal kid by any measure, Hopkins was raised by ski bum parents who moved to Rossland for the lifestyle of a small mountain town. "My dad didn't want us to grow up in the city," says Hopkins, who also has two sisters and a brother. "But he also wanted to ski a lot; that's how we ended up here."

As the years went by, Hopkins emerged as a prodigy of sorts. His talent as both a mountain biker and slopestyle/big mountain skier quickly separated him from his Rossland ripping peers. "He's a beauty," says Derek Frankowski, a celebrated mountain bike photographer



A NORMAL KID BY ANY MEASURE, HOPKINS WAS RAISED BY SKI BUM PARENTS WHO MOVED TO ROSSLAND FOR THE LIFESTYLE OF A SMALL MOUNTAIN TOWN.

based in Rossland. "He's a true rider, into it for the love of the game. He might not be the best slopestyle competitor out there—he's not going to be the guy who wins everything—but he's a very talented rider with great energy."

Not being the best is okay as far as Hopkins is concerned: it's not about X Games gold. There's a niche in the freeski and freeride mountain bike world where athletes earn sponsorship based purely on how their skills come across on the printed page.

"He makes everything look good," continues Frankowski. "Even when he's hitting something small. He has a lot of style and that translates onto film well, which is really important for me as a photographer. There's a reason he's getting so much stuff published. Part of it's me, but a big part of it's him. For example, when we're out shooting he'll hit one move 35 times just to get it right, which is another great quality from my perspective." The two have combined for the cover of *Dirt*, UK's most popular mountain bike magazine, content shots in *Freeride Germany*, *Bike Magazine*, and ad campaigns for Scott Bicycles and Titec, a mountain bike component manufacturer.

While the film athlete niche is nothing new, with Kootenay athletes like mountain bikers Robbie Bourdon, Mike Kinrade and skier Peter Valesik having success as sponsored athletes purely on the virtues of being able to rip in front of the camera, Hopkins is unique in that he's found success in both skiing and mountain biking, something not too many athletes in today's highly competitive, adventure-infatuated marketplace have been able to pull off.

The 2006-07 season was Hopkins' first as a fully sponsored skier. He's been mountain biking professionally for two years. Back in Meadow Creek, it's easy to see why his skiing career is taking off. He's throwing something wacky off of every cliff, always a grab in the mix. Lincoln loops, big 360s, baggy pants flappin' all the while. Between the two sports he has secured a gaggle of sponsors, enough to make any kid feel the pangs of gear envy: Rossignol, Scott Bicycles, Shimano, Titec, Giro, Mavic, Marzocchi Suspension, Smith Optics, and Dakine.

And like most athletes of his ilk, gear rolls through his house like junk mail does for the rest of us. For many athletes, making the jump from gear sponsorship to cash deals is usually the crux of a

viable career, and it's a hurdle Hopkins recently negotiated in the last 12 months.

"I left university after two years to give this a shot," he says. "At first my parents were skeptical, wondering how I was going to support myself just on free stuff." But hard work and staying healthy in the face of significant risk has enabled Hopkins to sign cash deals with both Scott Bicycles and Rossignol, his two main sponsors. "By September I hope to be making \$40,000 [a year] between biking and skiing," he explains, a modest grin spreading across his face.

It's a goal he'll most likely achieve, entirely due to the fact sponsors recognize his talent. "There's a lot of kids hucking their meat these days," says Paddy Kaye, Rossignol's North American team manager. "In order to sign with a major company like Rossignol in this day and age, you've got to be world-class and Hopkins is. He can definitely hold his own on an international stage."

Not bad for a 22-year-old from a town of 3,500 people. And this is just the start. It's possible for the world's best ski and bike film athletes to be making upwards of \$70,000 to \$100,000 a year. It's estimated that the industry's most prominent skiers, riders like Tanner Hall or Simon Dumont, are well into six figures between endorsements (from both inside and outside the industry) and contest winnings. Primo mountain bikers like Darren Berreclough or Paul Basagoitia might be making well over \$100,000. Not bad for travelling the world on someone else's dime and riding epic locations on all the latest gear. Make no mistake though—this is work. And it's risky.

Which brings us back to the big air. Hopkins has found himself a doozie: maybe 14 metres from takeoff to landing. The light is perfect, so is the snow. *Powder Magazine* Senior Photographer Dave Heath is ready. So is this fresh-on-the-scene-kid from the Kootenays. Hopkins is a young gun with a bright future filled with the promise of pursuing his passions, roaming the wild places of the world, testing his physical and mental limits and making a living at it. There's a palatable, nervous energy you can feel. Undeterred, with stalwart confidence, Hopkins drops in and hits it perfectly, leaping high into the wide blue sky. □

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Eight standout kids from the Kootenays gunning to be the next big thing

Edited by Katie Nugent

Michael Brush

Age: 14
Hometown: Panorama, BC
Specialty: Slopestyle skiing
Favourite trick: Bio 720 (corked out 720)
Next big move: Lincoln loop
Sponsors: Syndicate Board Shop
Inspiration: Swedish slopestyle skiing star Jon Olsson
Five-year dream: "Being a pro skier in the winter and a pro wakeboarder in the summer."
Kootenay factor: "There are a lot of talented kids out here. It keeps me sharp."

Andreas Unterberger

Age: 15
Hometown: Kimberly, BC
Specialty: Big air skiing
Favourite trick: Switch cork 900 tailgrab
Next big move: Switch cork 1080 tailgrab
Sponsors: Rocky's Ride and Glide
Inspiration: Brother Franzi and the mountain lifestyle
Five-year dream: "Live in the backcountry and ski powder every day."
Kootenay factor: "Backcountry right outside my door and the snow rules."

Dustin Greenall

Age: 16
Hometown: Kimberly, BC
Specialty: Freeride mountain biking, slopestyle skiing
Favourite trick: Switch cork 1080 with a grab
Sponsors: Smith Optics, Maylay, Deity
Inspiration: My grandfather rules
Five-year dream: "Going pro and being a role model to those with similar passions."
Kootenay factor: "My friends and the people around me are important; they're supportive and push me hard."

Evan Schwartz

Age: 16
Hometown: Nelson, BC
Specialty: Freeride mountain biker
Favourite trick: Backflip
Next big move: 360 tailwhip
Sponsors: Smith Optics, NRG, Sombrio
Inspiration: Riding every day, freeride superstar Cam McCaul
Five-year dream: "A pro rider living in Vancouver."
Kootenay factor: "Riding with locals helps me push myself because everyone here kills it."

Connor Butler

Age: 13
Hometown: Nelson, BC
Specialty: Sport climbing
Favourite moves: Overhangs and bouldering
Next big move: Lead climbing
Sponsors: Taking applications
Inspiration: My mom, Caryn Malabar
Five-year dream: "To be a dentist living in Nelson, with lots of time for climbing."
Kootenay factor: "Nelson is a great town to grow up in. I can climb with great people who know what they're doing."

Scott Alleyn

Age: 18
Hometown: Cranbrook, BC
Specialty: Freeride mountain biking
Favourite trick: 360 tabletop
Next big move: Flipwhip (backflip tail whip)
Sponsors: Specialized, Osiris, Straitline Components
Inspiration: Darren Berrecloth
Five-year dream: "Travelling the world, getting paid to do what I love: bike."
Kootenay factor: "In the city there's no room. Out here I build jumps because there's not much else to do. Biking is my cure for boredom."

Tessa Parry

Age: 21
Hometown: Golden, BC
Specialty: Big mountain skiing
Favourite trick: Switch cork 720
Next big move: Backflip off a massive cliff
Sponsors: Phenix, Carrera, Kicking Horse, Therm-ic Boot Heaters, Conform'able Liners, Canadian Powder Adventures, Petex Ski Services
Inspiration: God
Five-year dream: "Married, a REV 800 Ski-Doo and running a B&B in Revelstoke. I'd like to build ski lifts for Eskimos, too."
Kootenay factor: "Small towns and big mountains are the answer to all of my dreams."

Lucas Roach

Age: 17
Hometown: Wardner, BC
Specialty: Big air skiing
Favourite trick: Switch cork 720
Next big move: Switch cork 1080
Sponsors: Working on it — any takers?
Inspiration: Gnarly friends
Five-year dream: "Have my own place and be able to ski whenever I want because I'm getting paid to do it."
Kootenay factor: "This place keeps me level-headed, and I can pretty much ski whenever I want."

The Next Generation. Evolution makes them stronger, bolder, faster and better than their predecessors. In mountain towns around the Kootenays, youth are gearing up to make their mark, seeking the fame, fortune and adventure of being a professional outdoor athlete. Born and bred on mountain culture, these kids are living, breathing mountain sport junkies clawing their way to the top, one adrenaline-drenched moment at a time.