

Movie Review: 'Steep'

by David_Elliott

Like some surfer movies of recent vintage, "Steep" is buzzy in a jock way but also quaintly solemn, as if saluting the final conquistadors.

'STEEP' - Chris Davenport leads the hard climb up before the downward ski thills that really count in the documentary film 'Steep.' CNS Photo courtesy of Nigel Beildeman. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) And, why not? Few of us would have the guts to do as "extreme skiing" wizards do in this documentary. Often they seem a bit nuts, in a happily adrenalized way, but as one of the slope kings says, reflecting on the odds, "If you were not scared, you wouldn't be crazy. You'd be dead."

The dead are mentioned in "Steep," though no fatal falls are shown (most fatalities at this level of the sport are swallowed by avalanches). What matters is the courage, and the thrill surplus it brings, as driven by men (and some women) with a hooked high on big peaks and soft snow.

Getting away from the standard resort runs is a major incentive. Away from the rules, the limits, the insurers, the clods.

That can mean the sheer heights of Mont Blanc, where French daredevils like Jean-Marc Boivin and Anselme Baud made the Chamonix high runs a Mecca. And where the great Stefano De Benedetti, king of the massif, achieved rushing and twisting descents as none had before.

Director Mark Obenhaus is most in love with American snowdogs. There is the legendary 1971 run down the most daunting slope of the Grand Teton in Wyoming by Bill Briggs, still alive to tell. Some old photos prove that he mastered a slice of the Teton nobody had thought possible.

Helicopters have opened obscure, lofty runs to those who can pay, but mostly just want to be out there with a pal or two, spraying powder like crystal spume. Rick Armstrong, Doug Coombs and wife Emily, Mohawk-haired "rebel" Glen Plake, Canada's Eric Pehota, downhiller and base-jumper Shane McConky, the aerial genius Seth Morrison - the group is, to use this era's favorite superlative, awesome.

Even if you would no more climb such places and ski them than you would scale the Washington Monument in greased pajamas, the beauty of the copter shots and body-cam views is thrilling. As skiers trace arcs and arabesques over terrain both pacific and loaded with pitfalls, the film is more exhilarating than exhausting.

At the end, along with some sad news about one star, there is paradise: the Alaskan crags where powder piles with extraordinary depth and softness, "like velvet."

A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director, writer: Mark Obenhaus. Cast: Doug and Emily Coombs, Bill Briggs, Stefano De Benedetti, Seth Morrison, Glen Plake, Rick Armstrong. Running time: 1 hour, 31 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

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