

Ingrid Backstrom

Words by: Kristy Davison

This freeski phenom broke the mold once, leading the way for women in the ski film industry and shaping the culture of the industry along the way. Now she's at it again, showing us that growing a family and pursuing your passions don't have to be mutually exclusive — the two can enhance each other if you get creative, embrace the chaos, and follow your inner wisdom.

“So...I may be getting bonked by a pool noodle while we're talking.”

On cue, a foam saber swings into view, right on target. I'm on a video call with Ingrid Backstrom at her home in Leavenworth, WA, and it's off to a fitting start.

“That's real life,” she laughs. “You can't make that up.”

Her daughters Betty and Clover are home from school and she's keeping them fed and entertained while blasting through her email inbox, planning her ski season, doing interviews and hoping to get outside at some point. “I hate to burst anyone's bubble who thinks that the life of a pro skier is all glamour,” she laughs. “But yeah, if it's good skiing, I'll ski as much as possible. That's really my job and I still love it as much as ever.”

For a world-class athlete with segments in over 20 major ski films spanning almost two decades, first descents on steeps around the globe, and who's been called “the world's most iconic female skier,” her career trajectory is remarkably familiar and relatable for women and working parents of all kinds, and especially for those who have built their life around their passions.

At the height of her success and leadership in the ski world, when it became obvious to her that she wanted to start a family, she wondered: how would things be different on the other side of having a baby? Would her sponsors drop her? Would she fade into obsolescence? Would she even want to ski at this level anymore?

On that note, I ask her if she's ready to get the interview started.

"Oh yeah, for sure. I just need to go check in on someone in the bathroom, I'll be right back."

For a decade from 2005-2015, Backstrom was the most influential and decorated female athlete in the ski world. She was thrust into the role of heroine for women around the globe who had rarely seen themselves represented in freeskiing or in ski films, and she continues to lead the way, pushing for greater inclusivity for all people in the mountains and in the industry. I wanted to know what set the stage for her to achieve this level of excellence and drive to create a culture where other women, and people not typically represented in the ski industry, could feel more welcome.

"Growing up, I had a lot of amazing women in my life. I definitely always looked up to my mom because she was just out there shredding all the time. And as a kid when I ski raced, the girls I skied with were just incredible natural athletes and great friends," she remembers.

"I was also pretty influenced by some of the books that found their way to me as a teenager. *Annapurna: A Woman's Place* by Arlene Blum is one that blew me away. And Barbara Savage's *Miles From Nowhere*. These are stories of women overcoming incredible obstacles in order to even be allowed onto the playing field, and I felt like I wanted to be a part of that effort, of removing those boundaries."

In her college days, Wendy Fisher and Jamie Burge (both legends in their own right) found their way onto her radar through ski magazines and movies. She was inspired and began to wonder if reaching those ranks, being featured in magazines and ski films was a possibility. "My parents had always told us kids that we could do anything, and I guess I just wanted to see how far I could take that."

She completed her geology degree at Whitman College in 2000, then faced a critical decision that would end up changing the face of women's skiing forever: she set aside expectations of getting a job in geology and followed the voice inside telling her she needed to pursue skiing first.

"I really wanted to prove that women could ski as hard as men in some areas, and I wanted to see how far I could push myself. I had something to prove and that was definitely a driving force."

The choice to pursue skiing paid off at the age of 25 in the form of a segment in Matchstick Films' 2004 "Yearbook." The only woman in the film, Backstrom rubs elbows with the likes of Mark Abma, Mike Douglas and Shane McConkey. "I definitely felt like a rookie," she says in the film. But if she's intimidated it doesn't show: her segment features a front flip over a cliff face and multiple heart-racing, hard-charging Bella Coola couloirs where she appears to be as comfortable as if she were skiing her favourite run at her home hill.

She wasn't just on the radar now, she had forever altered the face of big mountain skiing. Seeing a woman go that big and that hard in the mountains has inspired others to believe in themselves, to see themselves in the mountains in a way they hadn't been able to imagine before.

Since her first film, Backstrom's had major features with Matchstick, Sherpas Cinema, Warren Miller and others. But something was nagging at her. She realized she had her own story to tell, and it involved bringing more women and underrepresented skiers and riders into the industry and onto the screen.

"I remember when I was traveling a lot and my winters were spent doing expeditions for films almost always with men. I started feeling pretty lonely one winter and just not really loving it and I couldn't figure out why," she recalls.

"I'd been kind of isolating myself up in Pemberton, when one day a friend who I hadn't seen in a while called me up to go skiing and we just had the best day and I was like, oh my gosh, I need to seek out and cultivate these relationships with women."

She began to make a point of reaching out to women wherever she went, and seeking out trips where women could ski together.

"There's something about the support, about the comradery, about the silliness when you find the right group of women. It's supportive and it's a really healthy, competitive environment where you think, oh, you're going to do that? Yeah, you can totally do that and I'm going to try it too!"

With this in mind, she began planning and producing a ski film with filmer and director Anne Cleary, and six talented athletes. "The Approach" (2021) puts people of color, women, and

adaptive skiers in the spotlight. It's a refreshing contrast to the traditional ski film in an industry with a known diversity problem.

"I'd like to help change the culture of snow sports in a small way, if I can, towards being less about the raddest line, the most extreme shot. To show that it's okay to be scared and to talk about that and make a safe decision, to choose to come back another day," she says. "If we can shift that culture it'll go a long way towards helping more people feel welcome in the sport."

Leaning towards greater inclusivity and the feminine benefits everyone, including men. Feeling safe to speak your truth, to admit your fears and feelings out loud is imperative to staying safe on the hill, in avalanche terrain, and in everyday life.

"I think we're wired to support each other and lift each other up when we're in the right environment," she says.

"For me, I was in the right place at the right time to be able to do some awesome big mountain skiing, and I've gotten really lucky over the years to be able to continue to do that and be given those opportunities. I want to make sure that those chances are available to others. And I think skiing can be a way to find common ground."

These days, balancing motherhood and family life with a demanding, often risky career poses its challenges.

"It's a day-to-day thing," she says. "I mean, right now I'm supposed to leave on a trip on Monday and I'm panicked about it. I don't like to leave. But I've chosen this life and it helps me to remember that: *I've chosen this*. I did wonder at one point if it would be possible for me to give up skiing, but it turns out I'm not capable of that," she laughs.

If there is one bit of wisdom she hopes to pass along to her daughters on the path to becoming women, it's the importance of listening to and trusting yourself, to resist pressure and to follow your own truth. It's something she's working on. "I've made all the mistakes there are in the mountains," she says. One of the more memorable ones was rupturing her patellar tendon on a filming expedition — while four months pregnant — and having to undergo emergency surgery to repair it. "I'm super lucky that I've gotten away mostly unscathed. And I really believe that if we can all listen to and trust our inner voices, we will all be better off."

Many of us grew up consuming the same ski and snowboard culture that Ingrid did, and it's obvious now looking back that there was very much a boys-will-be-boys vibe to almost every film from the 90s and early 2000s. If you wanted to be in the snowboarding or skiing scene, there was a feeling as a woman that you either had to act like "one of the boys" or somehow be willing to become a sex symbol if you wanted to join the club.

Ingrid has stayed true to herself within the pressures of that context. She greased the track so that other women could also aspire to be more than an objectified afterthought in the funny outtakes at the end of the yearbook. The distance this industry has traveled towards valuing equity at every level, and the influence women like Ingrid have had on this new approach to ski films is something we can all be thankful for.

Backstrom's not done yet. She's got a lot more good work and good skiing left in her, but her life is already testimony that if you rise to the challenge, embrace the chaos and follow your inner wisdom, you really can do anything.