

Unforgettable lines – on a board, by foot

By Alyssa Roenigk, ESPN

He has come here to complete his journey. It's taken almost two years to reach this place, hidden deep within the backcountry of California's Sierra Nevada mountain range, and even deeper within himself. But it's taken Jeremy Jones a lifetime – 35 years – to accumulate the knowledge, skill and desire to find it.

It's shortly before 5 a.m. on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, a day most people begin by incapacitating their alarm clocks. Jones, on the other hand, needs only anticipation to stir him from his sleeping bag. He dresses in the deep dark of the great outdoors: well-worn yellow snowboard pants, a sky-blue jacket and a white beanie he pulls tightly over unruly auburn waves. He laces into his snowboard boots and calls out to his crew – a photographer, a videographer and up-and-coming big-mountain snowboarder Ralph Backstrom – to make sure each is awake and vertical. Once they are, the men gather around the camp's makeshift kitchen and fill their bellies with warm coffee and oatmeal.



Jeremy Jones

As Jones lays out the day's objective, his voice – which is deep, paced by long, thoughtful “um”s and almost indistinguishable from movie star Christian Slater's – is the

only sound echoing through the canyon. But as the time comes for the crew to depart base camp, even that sound disappears. Later, at dinner, Jones will be animated and chatty, as he toggles between conversations about the lack of role models in pro sports and the vacation he's taking to Disneyland on Monday with his wife, Tiffany, and their two kids, Mia, 5, and Cass, 2. But this morning, as he fills his daypack with food and water, he becomes intensely and inwardly focused.

A few moments later, Jones sets out on the day's hike, urging Backstrom and the crew to stick close behind. Then he offers an observation: "I woke up last night thinking the snow might be soft in areas because it warmed up during the day and got cold last night." The 27-year-old Backstrom nods, but doesn't appear to grasp the seriousness of his mentor's message. "I know the avalanche danger is low, but we need to be careful up there," Jones says. "I know I'm obsessing, but I can't shut off my mind on days like these."

You need to spend only a short time around Jones, the most accomplished big-mountain snowboarder in the world, to understand that his mind never shuts off. In the weeks leading up to a trip, he spends hours each day worrying over every imaginable detail. He watches the weather and monitors snowfall using apps on his iPhone. He consults avalanche websites and checks in repeatedly with local guides. He analyzes maps of the mountains to select the safest area to set up camp. He also spends weeks each year tuning up his avalanche and first-aid training. In the off-season, roughly July through October, the 5'8", 145-pound Jones maintains his fitness by "playing in the mountains," which includes hiking, climbing, biking, yoga and Pilates.

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