

Film captures the short life of Shane McConkey

By Mina Hochberg, Outside

When freeskiier Shane McConkey of Squaw Valley passed away at age 39 during a ski-BASE accident in 2009, he left behind an inspiring legacy that's deftly captured in the documentary "McConkey".

The film leads you through the many phases of McConkey's career: After an unsuccessful attempt to join the U.S. ski racing team, he forged his own path as a freeskiier, then a BASE jumper, then a ski-BASE jumper—all the while documenting his exploits on camera, becoming an adventure film star. Directed by a team of his friends, "McConkey" is as heartfelt as it is gripping. We spoke with two of the directors, Rob Bruce and David Zieff, about the film.

When did the documentary first start coming together?

Bruce: Pretty much the moment he passed away it seemed like a logical thing to do. It seemed like it would be a wonderful living tribute to him, his family—and a great thing for his daughter [Ayla] to have. The fact that Ayla has a film about her father that she can refer to throughout her life is fantastic.

David, what did you know of Shane before doing the film?

Zieff: I didn't know him and I really didn't know of him, frankly, beforehand. Little did I realize that I'd come to love him indirectly through the footage and all the stories that everybody told about him.

The cliché, and it's not such a cliché in his case, is living life to the fullest. He truly did that, but what was almost

more attractive to me was the fact that he knew how to laugh with himself. He was self-deprecating and humble and he knew how to enjoy life and not take it too seriously.

It's been a motivator in my own life, taking each day as a challenge to do more and enjoying myself and living life to the fullest and not taking things so seriously. That, in addition to learning how to ski better by way of footage through a point-of-view camera.

Rob, how far back did you and Shane go?

Bruce: Shane and I knew each other ski racing [as teenagers]. We both quit ski racing at the same time and we both pursued figuring out a way to be professional freeskiers at the same time – him as a skier, me as a cameraman.

More importantly, every day that I was with Shane, regardless of whether we were shooting, or hanging out, or in an airport, was always a great day. And that's what he really gave all of us. When we were around Shane, everybody was elevated. It was impossible to be having a bad time because nothing got Shane down. If you started whinging, or complaining about having to climb something, or the snow wasn't good, or that we've been in Alaska waiting for shoot day for three weeks, Shane would just laugh at you. He's like, "Look guys, we're living our dream, this is part of it." He was able to overcome fear to have fun no matter what was going on.

Seeing the 80s ski rockumentary "Blizzard of Aahhhs" seemed like a real pivotal moment for Shane. What changed him?

Bruce: Our last ski race was at U.S. Nationals. We were in the lift line and he looks at me and he's like, "Have you seen that movie "The Blizzard of Aahhhs"? And I looked at him and I was like yeah. He's like, "Can you f— believe that? Those guys are doing that? They're getting paid to do that? We do that when we're not training. That's what we do on a powder day when they're setting the course."

We were probably supposed to train that afternoon but we went out with his mom and practiced skiing like those guys. So for me and a lot of other people, seeing that film was an example of an alternative way to keep playing in the mountains and possibly getting paid to do it. We were all really good skiers and we felt we could ski like that. We just had to figure out how we could make our own films and find a sponsor and figure out the business of it.

There are so many milestones in his career. How did you decide which ones to highlight?

Bruce: I sort of took the responsibility of tracking things in his life that would be relatable to audiences, so that became a matter of finding the events in his life where he overcame something. Because he was sort of Superman. The sports he was doing and inventing and his interests are not of the mainstream, so that's not very relatable to a lot of people. What is relatable is having a difficult childhood. What is relatable is having a goal and failing – but then overcoming. That's ultimately the message of the film.

How many hours of footage did you have altogether? Shane shot a lot of video throughout his life.

Zieff: I estimated it's probably a thousand hours of footage. So there was a fair amount of work just in labeling and getting through it all.

When people talk about who directed this film, Shane directed it. It started 20 years ago when he was 18 years old with a yellow handycam camera capturing everything.

I wanted to ask about the footage of his fatal accident in the Dolomites. Did you know from the start that you didn't want to show any of it? Can you talk about editing that?

Zieff: I think all of us knew that was something we would be very respectful about. The footage has been destroyed of the

actual accident. I don't think anybody would want to see that. In fact, I never did. I was given censored footage myself.

I think this is a film about his life, and that's what matters. Obviously there's a logistical issue that we'd have to deal with – people need to know something. So we only show the lead-up to it and not the actual moment, out of respect for the family and obviously for Shane's wife, Sherry, and daughter. That's not something they need to see. No one really does.

Rob, as someone who knew Shane for so long, was it difficult editing that whole sequence in the Dolomites?

Bruce: Yes, it's hard. It's hard for all of us, and it's hard for audiences that are watching that portion of the film. It's incredibly sad. So it was a hard film to make in that regards. Every time I see the film I come out a little bit rattled.

Do you guys have any favorite shots from the film?

Bruce: The college sequence I found hugely important because that's a common time in a lot of people's lives where people are trying to find themselves. And if you think about making the U.S. Ski Team and getting dropped early, that's like having a mid-life crisis when you're 18, 19 years old, right? It's like, oh, now I have reinvent myself, and I'm in this academic environment and I haven't really gone to school. There's not a lot of footage from that period, and I was just so pleased with how it worked out because it shows him overcoming a tough spot.

Did his mother, Glenn, ever express regret that she hadn't tried to restrain him from becoming a daredevil?

Bruce: She is obviously incredibly sad that her son is gone, but she never held him back. It's so clear that the mountains and skiing – and eventually skydiving – were the things that he loved so much, and you just can't ask people to stop doing

what they love.

He only lived 40 years, but the way he lived them is so incredible. That's much better than spending 70 years unhappy and without passion. I'd take the 40 years in a heartbeat.