

Squaw Valley patroller tests her endurance in outdoor reality TV show based in Alaska



Lel Tone of Tahoe City is one of two women on “Ultimate Survival Alaska” TV show. Photos/National Geographic channel

By Kathryn Reed

Lel Tone bounced like a ragdoll on the frozen tundra of Alaska as the dog sled team forged ahead; oblivious she was no longer in control. But she wasn't about to let go. You never let go of the sled.

That is the lesson she learned as a ski patroller at Squaw Valley – and the mantra she maintains today when she is

carrying someone downhill in a toboggan.

She is a force to be reckoned with, but that's not obvious just by looking at her.

Don't be fooled by the 44-year-old Tahoe City resident being barely 100 pounds. Her strength, tenacity and mental fortitude were put to the test this past summer when she spent three months participating in "Ultimate Survival Alaska". The next season of the reality show airs Jan. 4 on the National Geographic channel.

"It was such an adventure ... to have an opportunity to run around the wilderness in Alaska, to sleep under the stars (for 90 nights) in one of my favorite places on the planet," Tone said. "It did feel really weird in mid-August to be under a roof again. I ended up sleeping on my porch to acclimate."

Tone was picked for the show's third season because of her heli ski guiding experience, mountaineering skills and avalanche forecasting abilities.



Lel Tone, right, holds her own with her male teammates.

She grew up in Switzerland, started skiing when she was a toddler, moved to the East Coast where she started ski racing while in college in Vermont and has been in Lake Tahoe for nearly two decades.

Tone was part of Team Endurance which consisted of two-time Iditarod champion Dallas Seavey, 27, of Alaska and mountain

guide-rope access supervisor Ben Johns, 32, of Banff, Canada. But they didn't know each other until they were thrown together in this adventure.

She is used to being on expeditions, like climbing Denali, where it's a team, where you understand each other's strengths and weaknesses.

A week before they met, Tone sent an email to the guys saying what gear she had and asking them what they had. Knowing they were about to entrust their lives to each other, the lack of coordination seemed a bit daunting.

Four teams of three participated in 13 challenges that required them to cross glaciers, raft whitewater, face predators, use means of travel – like dog sleds – they aren't familiar with, scale mountains, bush whack and live off the land. They have the packs on their back – Tone's being about one-third her weight and equally as heavy as the guys'. No GPS, no phones.

At one point Tone whips out a .454 Casull, which makes one of her teammate's weapons look like a child's toy in comparison.

"My biggest concern was bear abatement and protection so I chose a gun that would do that job," Tone told *Lake Tahoe News* as she took a break in the patrol shack at Siberia lift at Squaw. "I knew we could forage for food and fish for fish. The only thing in season for game was porcupine and ground squirrel."

Large swaths of Alaska are bear country – and not the garbage variety black bears Tahoe is known for. She kept that .454 close by for quick, easy access.

"I have so much respect for big breasted women because I carried a chest harness. It weighed 7 pounds," Tone said.

Her shoulders and neck were sore from carrying the gun and at

times running with it strapped on.



Lel Tone in a snow cave for the night with her teammates.

It was the water, though, that truly tested her grit.

“We ran a class 5 river at the end of the summer. That was probably one of my most frightening moments,” Tone said. “I have respect for fast running water, a respectful fear. I had to confront my fear of crossing rivers.”

Trusting her instinct got her through those sketchy situations.

Her ski patroller and guide jobs have taught her how to make cuts, when to throw bombs and when to hold back. Listening to her intuition when things didn't feel right served her well during the filming.

Each team had a cameraman and producer. But they were extracted at the end of the day, able to eat real food and sleep off the ground. The teams were left to their own. If it wasn't raining, they staked out a spot a little farther from one another; otherwise they were all under a tarp for protection.

On one of the more solo sleeping nights Tone was tempted to pull out her monster gun to eliminate a squirrel that wouldn't

stop squawking, but she knew it would freak her teammates out.

With it staying light out for hours, the production crew made sure each team took a mandatory four-hour break.

One of the hardest parts for Tone was making sure she had enough to eat. As an athlete competing in mountain bike and paddleboard races, Tone knows the importance of nutrition. But she didn't have the luxury of well-balanced meals with unlimited ingredients at her disposal.

Rice, beans and foraging – those were her staples.

She came back 10 to 15 pounds lighter, but said it wasn't a problem to put it back on since returning home.

Tone is happy to be back in Tahoe, but said she would jump at the chance to do something like "Ultimate Survival Alaska" again. For now she is part of Squaw's patrol team. She will also be teaching avalanche courses this winter.

"I'm really passionate about teaching people how to be safe in their environment," Tone said.

In mid-February she is off to Alaska where she is a heli ski guide for Chugach Powder Guides and Trudillo Mountain Lodge.

Summers find Tone racing paddleboards, being a mountain bike guide, piecing together guide work that often takes her to the Southern Hemisphere.

This year *Outside* magazine nominated Tone as one of the world's top 10 guides. She was featured in the 2011 Warren Miller film "Like There is No Tomorrow".

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Notes:

- "Ultimate Survival Alaska" two-hour season premiere is Jan. 4 at 9pm on National Geographic channel.