

# The 9 Best Ski Movies of all Time: The Good, the (Very) Bad... and Aspen Extreme

FROM TOP: SONY PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; BUENA VISTA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; EVERETT COLLECTION; ROD WALKER



You call yourself a skier? Then you should be fluent in these nine films. **Some of these are legitimately great.** Others are so bad, that they're, well, kind of good. And all of them are worth a viewing—for the first time or the tenth. We turned some professional film critics loose on the list. Here's what they found.  
**By Eric Butterman**





**Director Michael Ritchie**

is assessed by many as simply a commercial director—from *Bad News Bears* to *Fletch*, most of his films weren't risky but often were box-office successes. *Downhill Racer* was the opposite. It's a poignant, insightful study of an athlete consumed by competition and is now seen as a landmark sports film.

The film is adapted from the novel *The Downhill Racers* by Pulitzer Prize-nominated writer Oakley Hall. Roger Ebert called it nothing short of the best sports film of all time. From Ebert's original 1969 review: "Some of the best moments in *Downhill Racer* are moments during which

nothing special seems to be happening. They're moments devoted to capturing the angle of a glance, the curve of a smile, an embarrassed silence. Together they form a portrait of a man

Having Hackman battle the Sundance Kid himself was a calculated risk—and a brilliant one.

Redford's David Chappellet is not going to let anything slow him down—not women, not rules and definitely not the best interests of the team. Hackman plays his coach, and their relationship explores the clash of individual victory versus team

# Downhill

who is so complete, and so tragic, that *Downhill Racer* becomes the best movie ever made about sports—without really being about sports at all."

The lead was a casting coup with golden boy Robert Redford. But just as key was the selection of a lesser known actor named Gene Hackman, who had a small but acclaimed role in *Bonnie and Clyde* a few years prior.

success. When Redford's recklessness leads to an injury in the film's opening, Hackman barely registers an expression; the racer doesn't have to be named. "Nobody races unless I say so," Hackman spouts. "That's why they made me the coach."

Chappellet's flaw might be that he knows how good he is. It also might be the single key quality for becoming a champion.



**FAST COMPANY**

The suspected inspiration for Robert Redford's David Chappellet in *Downhill Racer* (top) were American racers Spider Sabich and Billy Kidd. The radical plot line of an American winning the men's Olympic downhill gold wouldn't be realized until 15 years later with Bill Johnson's victory in the Sarajevo Games.





#### HOT AND STIRRED

Teen beach movies were the rage in the 1960s, so Hollywood relocated the genre to the slopes in *Ski Party*. In James Bond films, such as *The Spy Who Loved Me*, everyone skis fully armed.



## Ski Party 1965

Who said Frankie Avalon only digs the beach? In the answer to what those crazy surf-loving kids do come winter, Avalon hits the slopes, and we get to hear hits from top artists of the day. To underscore the film's beach-movie bloodline, Annette Funicello even makes a cameo appearance. But the show-

stopper? James Brown entering a lodge on skis and belting out "I Feel Good" while wearing a Norwegian ski sweater. The film is full of classic B-move hijinks and innuendo—including its own take on *Some Like It Hot*. Do the outdoor scenes look familiar? They were filmed in Sun Valley.

## The Spy Who Loved Me 1977

When you consider the great cinematic moments of the James Bond oeuvre, there's no shortage of fiery explosions and audacious derring-do. But the opening scene of *The Spy Who Loved Me* approaches perfection, both for Bond films and, perhaps, for opening sequences in general. Tongue-in-check, Roger Moore's Bond takes off on his skis. "One of the best Bond openings ever, when he goes off that slope and the British flag opens in his parachute," says Bob Ross, who was a film critic for the *Tampa Tribune* for more than 20 years. "I'll watch the first five minutes of the movie every

time to catch the Union Jack parachute after that huge terrific chase." Nevertheless, Chris Lloyd, a former film reviewer for the *Indianapolis Star*, admits the viewer must suspend disbelief to accept the famous ski chase scene: "Roger Moore racing down a treacherous mountain slope pursued by Soviet agents with guns... It may seem hokey that the bad guys are able to maneuver effectively with their barrels blazing. And one wonders when James Bond had time in between bedding women and shaking martinis to acquire such world-class downhill skills."





**To know 1980s teen angst movies** was to understand a universal need to be the outcast who conquers the establishment. Karate had Daniel-san, school dances had Molly Ringwald and skiing had Lane Meyer. Played by John Cusack, Meyer has been dumped by his girl, Beth, for a nar-

only way to get his girl back is to get the fastest time on K-12, the local peak. Of course, everyone thinks he'll die. Even

story with no apologies. "I'm a big fan of this movie," he says. "It's one of the stronger ones from that period of teen angst. It sets up John Cusack as this sort of charming, slightly dejected everyman. It just struck a chord, even through those moments of absurdity—there's almost a Ferris Bueller feel to it."

Critic Bob Ross says the mix of believable skiing action and comedy makes it as accessible as any ski



## Better Off Dead... 1985

cissistic skiing stud and now spends his days pining away for the one who got away.

That is, when he's not trying to escape the paperboy who insists Meyer owes him two dollars, or escape his old man who reads from a book of awkward teen-speak in order to even more awkwardly communicate with his disinterested son. Bottom line, Meyer knows the

Meyer. Still, it helps when the ultra-cute French exchange student next door tutors him in the ways of skiing.

The final ski competition, predictably, comes up between the outcast and the stud, but then there's a third competitor, the paperboy, yelling, of course, that he wants those two dollars. Chris Kelly, film critic for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, loves this

film around: "It was just goofy stuff, but I think there must have been a pool of good stunt men so they could make the movie look so good. The skiing shots played well; you admire it, even as you're laughing at the next comedic moment. Cusack is as an actor who doesn't take himself too seriously. He takes a ridiculous role like this one and makes it a winner."

**TEEN TRIUMPH** The ski scenes in *Better Off Dead* were shot in Little Cottonwood Canyon, including Snowbird and Alta, whose parking lot is featured. Pay attention: Snowbird's Mid-Gad lift is clearly visible in the film.



# Hot Dog... The Movie 1984

**David Naughton is** known for two lifetime achievements: singing “I’m a Pepper” in the popular 1970s Dr. Pepper TV ad campaign and playing the half-man, half-beast in *An American Werewolf in London*. But to skiers, he’s one of the leaders of the skiing spectacle that was *Hot Dog...The Movie*. The film is an ode to every teenager who wanted to conquer the slopes and fulfill his hormonal fantasies. Even Playmate Shannon Tweed is in on the raucous fun—forever solidifying the hot tub’s role in ski culture.

But there is also actual *skiing*. Aerial flips in slo-mo, including a cool stunt jump in the opening sequence, catch the beauty of skiing. A twisting triple, showing the flips from every angle, is probably the best of them.

A race between the good guys and the bad guys—the Chinese Downhill—will end it all, but it’s anticlimactic compared to other skiing shots. Then again, the sport, to the film’s credit, does not take a backseat to the hijinks.

This was before the popularity of snowboard-



ing and extreme skiing, “so the idea of pulling off these jumps and flips was a big deal for commercial films,” Ross says.

Critic Chris Kelly sees a resemblance to a classic ’80s film. “It’s like *Revenge of the Nerds*, but designed to get women naked,” he says. “The recent *Hot Tub Time Machine* was parody of it, so no matter how you feel about the movie, it’s still clearly relevant.”

**SQUAW VALLEY SERENADE** The cast and crew of *Hotdog* moved to Squaw Valley, Calif., for 52 days to shoot the entire production. The result: the *Casablanca* of ski films, which the *New York Times* reviewer praised as “less moronic than it might have been.”



**We're not gonna lie—** this isn't a critical darling. But neither was *Out Cold* or *Ski School*. Still, a top ski-film list without one of them would be cinema snobbery. The *New York Times* found it one-dimensional, and many critics

## Aspen Extreme 1993

didn't even find it at all. The *Seattle Times*' John Hartl was more open-minded, comparing it to, at times, "Top Gun on the Colorado ski slopes."

If the shots and speed seem real, you can thank a crew of expert stunt skiers and the experience of writer-director Patrick Hasburgh, a one-time ski instructor who found a steady television writing career in Hollywood.

Although this film wouldn't exactly catapult him to the A-list, this former *A-Team* writer cap-

tures the true-to-life story of how good looks and charm can allow you to mingle in high society with skiers who can be more about style than substance. And it forces the question of whether you can ever really grow up living the ski-bum life.

Hasburgh's exterior shots and ski sequences make you feel the snow under your skis and the seductive pull of the ski-town fast lane. The movie's characters might be going nowhere—but they're having fun doing it.

**THAT DUDE SURE CAN SKI** The most realistic aspect of *Aspen Extreme* isn't the portrayal of the ski-bum life, but of skiing itself. Credited stunt skiers include ski legends Scot Schmidt and Doug Coombs.



FROM TOP: BUENA VISTA PICTURES/PHOTOFEST; BUENA VISTA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION

# Deep and Light 1950

**This is the movie that** started it all. More than six decades later, the opening title sequence still works: a cigarette butt is dropped into the snow, and a ski boot appears from out of the frame to quickly snuff it out, revealing the film's title, "Deep and Light." Yup, the viewer is in for a cheeky ride. What follows are dramatic sequences of this exotic niche sport of skiing—and of life in equally exotic mountain towns. Cars are buried in snow, athletic men—and women—float down steep mountainsides of powder and weird mechanical devices, such as ski lifts and boxy primitive snowcats, sweep skiers up and climb craggy peaks. And

there are babes. Yeah, Miller knew what worked.

He drove to each of the film's screenings, operating the projector and narrating the movie live. It was a one-man show. And what a show.

The hand-lettered movie poster promised an audacious "color motion picture," featuring "the French technique, the blind skier, chin deep powder, thrilling jumps and comedy." It was an infectious mixture of carnival sideshow and exotic travelogue—all fused with a deep love of the mountains and of living life to the fullest. And Miller's venture did nothing less than create a new genre: the adventure sports film.

## BREAKING TRAIL

With creative POV footage, exotic international locations and extended ski scenes, Warren Miller's first film, *Deep and Light*, created a format for future filmmakers. *The Performers* was as much about style as terrain—and skiing's first wet T-shirt contest.

# The Performers 1972



## Finally, ski film pioneer

Dick Barrymoore had some real cash to make a movie—real cash for him, anyway. The result is the story of five skiers, sponsored by K2, who toured the U.S. in a red, white and blue van, which matched their skis. They traveled like a pack of joyful wolves, devouring powder and looking for challenges. Just 26 minutes in length, the film offers ferocious detail, with ski footage that still holds up today.

The film revealed the ski culture as a pseudo family. In an interview years later, skier Charlie McWilliams recalled how people came up to him to explain how they deeply identified with this happy-go-lucky skiing clan.

He saw the film as a groundbreaking portrayal of skiing as a tribal experience. "It was the first time anybody had gone out and made a film of a group of guys traveling around the country having a great time skiing."



**The only thing outdated**

about the style in *The Blizzard of AAHHH's* is the clothing. Okay, maybe some of the music. Regardless, this was as it was meant to be. As Greg Stump makes clear from the get-go, there's much to be owed to the Warren Millers and Dick Barrymores, but this is a time capsule about skiing in 1988—and, as it happened,

and bushy beard. A film standout, Steve explains the culture of Telluride from his own perspective: "It's important for people like me to be here 'cause this is what Telluride's all

# The Blizzard of AAHHH's 1988

about changing the history of skiing. *Blizzard* launched the extreme skiing phenomenon into mainstream ski culture, as Stump instinctively knew that film and radical skiing would be a perfect marriage.

*Blizzard* is about speed, courage and skiers in flight, but it's also about Rasta Steve, all dreadlocks

about. Funky culture, you know." You find yourself nodding along with him as he goes ever deeper in his take on the haves and have-nots.

Then there's Glen Plake, in a stark blonde mohawk, showing the casual attitude and natural confidence of a born daredevil, explaining how he just sort of fell off a 40-foot

Schmidt and Mike Hatrup battle ridiculously steep couloirs, the camera capturing the trio's grunts, spills and triumphs. Schmidt may have provided the film's best moment, flying through the air, landing just past a crevasse, maybe trying to remember how many times you're allowed to cheat death on the slopes.

cliff and ever so slightly broke his femur. This leads into a battle at Squaw between Tom Day, Mike Slattery and Plake for one plane ticket to Europe and more chances to be immortalized on film. All are gifted, but the most intense may have been the charismatic Plake, not just for his daring moves and showmanship, but for his helmet-mounted camera's fearless point of view. Plake packs his bags.

Europe will outdo Squaw for drama, with a sense of possible doom looming in the Chamonix segment, as Plake, Scott



**NEW CLASSIC**

Greg Stump's *Blizzard* is considered the godfather of today's post-modern, can-you-top-this independent ski film. *Blizzard* inspired countless young skiers to consider a camera as mandatory ski gear.

ROD WALKER (4)