

GURU DAVE

AND THE TAO OF SNOWBIRD

ONE HIGHLY
SPIRITUAL
SKIER FINDS THE
CENTER OF
THE UNIVERSE
AT A CERTAIN
MOUNTAIN
IN UTAH.

By **JACKSON HOGEN**
Photographs by KEVIN ZACHER

THE KEY TO ROUNDNESS IS
BEING IN THE MOMENT.
—GURU DAVE

WE'RE JUST FINISHING A ROMP DOWN THE FAR REACHES of Snowbird, Utah's Mineral Basin, where Dave Powers has somehow, miraculously, managed to find us a stash of untouched powder days after the last storm. Wispy puffs rise from his edges as he etches perfect semicircles in the snow. Dave, you should know, is into round turns. This makes him the ideal guide, since you can always predict where he's going next. No less importantly, it also provides him a handy opening to expound on the teachings of New Age philosopher Eckhart Tolle and a concept called "the power of now." Tolle argues that focusing deeply on the moment opens a path to the infinite. "You stop time," Dave explains. "You go there and kind of be there. The moment can be forever. It makes the day longer." In Dave's eyes, skiing is a fundamentally spiritual activity. Harness the power of now in your skiing and "it's not really you who's doing it," he says. "It's the entire universal creative thrust that's actually doing it." And you wonder why the slopes feel so crowded these days. >>



WING NUT Guru Dave soars with the aid of a pair of airfoil 'wings' he's been perfecting for more than a decade.



HIGHER POWERS Clockwise from top left: Guru Dave scouts conditions from Snowbird's tram; lunch conversation can touch upon an array of subjects, but usually circles back, somehow, to skiing. 'Rosicrucianism, Carlos Castaneda, sorcery and whatnot—all those types of elements are certainly contained in skiing,' he says; a contemplative moment, for the Guru (here with wings), skiing

is all about turning. 'I get on a powder descent and I'll make turns while other people just go straight. They think that's where it's at. Everybody emulates what they see in the ski movies,' he says. 'I'm in my own movie, so I don't really care.'

Blessed with a thatch of charcoal and silver hair, a thick walrus moustache and an irrepressible spirit, Dave, 53, carries a business card—crafted by a buddy—that looks like this:

Forklift Restaurant
10:45 to 11:30 a.m. daily
Snowbird, Utah/Planetary Office
crop circles, conspiracy books
ski reports & things that don't matter

Dave "the guru" Powers
the foremost authority on nothing

His friends may tease him—and they do, mercilessly—but Guru Dave remains unabashedly eccentric. His lunch conversation will ricochet among the implications of string theory, the importance of skeletal skiing (stacking one's bones to take stress off aging muscles) and tales of men who made the leap across space/time only to return embedded in the hull of the ship they traveled in. He reveres Frank Zappa, recites liberally from the Firesign Theater oeuvre, holds forth on the Rosicrucians and plays a mean electric guitar. He also knows every millimeter of Snowbird, which he's been surveying on skis since the mid-1970s, when he migrated from a patrol job at mighty Nashoba Valley, Mass. Indeed, there's no questioning Dave's dedication to the sport he loves. For Guru Dave, skiing is religion—quite literally. "Skiing is not dissimilar to Sufi dancing," he says. "It's enlightenment through movement and dance." Guru Dave is, in short, a character.

The Guru grew up in Acton, Mass., and spent his childhood skiing Vermont and surfing the Maine coast. ("Most people don't realize that Maine has good waves," he says. "You just wear a wetsuit, like in San Francisco.") His father was a postal worker and owned a frame shop. His mom raised Dave and five siblings. In college, Dave took his first steps to guruhood as a self-directed major in comparative belief systems (U. Mass., 1974), exercising his refreshingly open mind as he pondered how the universe might be organized. "The philosophy department rejected my proposal," he says. "They wanted everyone to be an existentialist. But the English department took it on because, I guess, everything was going to be in English." These days, Dave catches first tram at Snowbird six days a week, and sometimes acts as an impromptu mountain guide. He subsidizes his winters by leading a road-paving crew in the summer. And somehow he makes even this aspect of his life sound interesting. I have seen him hold young waitresses in rapt attention over photos of his paving crew on steaming tarmac. He has that effect on people.

Every ski town is home to folks like Dave; people who make

life in the mountains seem just a little more colorful, a little more vital, who show the rest of us that, yes, it can be done—it is possible to devote one's life to skiing and be better off for it. Even if reality interferes with our dreams, as skiers we can take satisfaction in knowing that there are others who are living out the ideal—that the base is covered, the post is manned. In some sense, Guru Dave and people like him are fighting the good fight on behalf of us all. And the sport is far richer for it. Shake Dave's hand, thank him, follow him down the hill—but don't, whatever you do, call him a ski bum. "I have a nice house, a nice car, nice gear," he says. "I work seven months and take five months off to ski. Even though I don't get paid for it, I consider myself a professional skier."

I first met Dave a few years back when he guided me out-of-bounds into a slice of the White Pine powder preserve that he somehow knew was untouched by the several hundred souls who had preceded us. And now I've come back to learn the nuances of skiing Snowbird. It's not that I haven't been escorted around this mountain before. I've chased many a Snowbird legend—from speed record-holder Kristen Culver to extreme diva Kristen Ulmer, from Flyin' Brian to Johnny V—but the accent of those guided tours has always been on *chaos*. Most of my etched-in-memory images of Snowbird are of multiple plumes of spray fusing into an off-white wall into which I hurl myself headlong, as if diving blindfolded down a white elevator shaft. But in Guru Dave I sense a kinship, a comfort with pace and style that permits close-formation skiing without any impingement on one's chosen line. In skiing, as in life, it's soothing on the soul when you discover someone with whom you can safely entwine arcs at speed.

GRAVITY IS THERE ALL THE
TIME, BUT WE ONLY FEEL IT
WHEN WE JUMP INTO ITS
STREAM.—GURU DAVE

This is nowhere more apparent than in the oblivion of a whitout deep in the heart of Mineral Basin, the immense, nearly treeless bowl on Snowbird's backside that opened three years ago. In this sensory deprivation tank, the only connection to the planet lies in the shifting sensations underfoot, and time indeed seems to swell and contract with each plunge into the abyss. It's more an exercise of faith than skill; it's metaphysics as sport and, by divine providence, I have the Guru to lead me.



THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT SKIING SNOWBIRD THE GURU DAVE WAY

Guru Dave is about making turns, not straightlining to the bottom, so enrolling in his ski school of higher learning will pay handsomely. The first lesson is to listen for what the tram operator doesn't include in his or her litany of run closures. That non-announcement will tell you where the pack is going, so you can pick someplace else. Bear in mind that hunting Snowbird powder is still a crapshoot, with conditions and visibility varying wildly by the hour. Admitting that, skiing in the Guru's tracks on his home hill is always a smart move. His counsel:

» **In poor light, head to Mineral Basin.** True, at the top you can't tell up from down, but neither can anyone else, improving your odds of stumbling into some super snow. When the main drag is ravaged, take the highest traverse allowed and climb the short Hillary Step out to the tree lines below the Sunday Cliffs.

» **When the wind whips over Hidden Peak,** it stockpiles snow on the Upper Cirque faster than the tram can disgorge skiers. We skied Macaroni and Silver Fox over

and over and over one afternoon and every run it got better. Very weird and very wonderful.

» **Don't overlook lines on either side of the massive boulevard of Regulator Johnson.** The fall line directly under the Little Cloud chair is sweet, and on the opposite side of Regulator, near the bottom of the main pitch, look for a gate that leads to the oft-overlooked little playground known as Eddie Mo's.

» **It takes a while after a storm for High Baldy to open,** so even if you miss the opening bell you can still be right on time to hit this visually stunning, physically challenging terrain. The uphill hike is only about 10 minutes (you can do it), then there's another five minutes of traversing before you're in an expert skier's paradise.

» **If the tram line is long,** don't be too proud to use the chairs. Gadzoom to Little Cloud gets you summitside, and some of the best skiing on the hill is off of Gad 2 — JH.

He lures me hour after hour through impossibly abundant powder along the back alleys and into the untrodden corners of Snowbird. But it's during a lift ride that I learn definitively—despite my nearly 25 years of skiing here—how pathetically shallow is my grasp of one of my favorite mountains. Guru Dave reveals that he's working on a rebel trail map of the place. Not a traditional trail map—those tend to do a better job of defining the lift system than the trail system—but one that pinpoints and IDs every single run on the hill. So far he has 296 names.

I'm a little shocked but not surprised: Snowbird is, first and foremost, a skier's mountain. There are 11 lifts serving 2,500 acres that fall 3,000 vertical feet. If you take the aerial tram from the Plaza to the summit of Hidden Peak, you'll spend a mere eight minutes onboard, which translates into a lot more time spent skiing. Multiply by 500 inches of annual snowfall over a 200-day season and you could probably come up with a Grand Unifying Equation of Skiing of the sort that Dave might scrawl on the back of a Tram Bar napkin.

The calculus of Snowbird's nightlife, however, is rudimentary. This is not to disparage the Tram Bar, which provides the après-ski pulse in the small base area, or the Aerie, where hot jazz and cool sushi are A-list experiences, but there's no denying that Aspen and Whistler offer more varied nocturnal niceties. Here's the way it works in the Wasatch: If it snows, you'll be so whipped after a daylong diet of powder that nightlife won't be an issue, it being hard for Jell-O to party. And if it's powder-free, so is the road to Salt Lake City, where evening options abound.

Perhaps the most underappreciated of all Snowbird's virtues is the abundance and quality of its intermediate terrain. Mineral Basin is Disneyland for the casual skier, full of lilting, manicured boulevards served by two high-speed quads. Mineral Basin is also the easiest egress to Alta, another legendary powder preserve that can be skied on a joint AltaBird lift pass. And it is here, in Mineral Basin, that I have another singular experience courtesy of the Guru. I ski with wings.

Guru Dave, it seems, is also Inventor Dave. Inspired by an airfoil introduced to Snowbird by French skiers decades ago, he set out to make a set of stubby wings that a skier could carry in lieu of poles. "My buddy at a surfboard shop cut the shape out of foam, I stuck a couple of handles in them, slapped duct tape on the outside, and there they were," says Dave, recalling the construction of his prototype some 15 years ago. Today, the superlight three-ounce wings are designed to generate eight to 10 pounds of lift at somewhere between 35 and 40 mph. Before my maiden voyage, Dave promises me the sensation of lift will be tangible. "It's like skiing with handrails for support," he says.

"Your feet pendulum underneath you. And once your speed increases, you can bank into your turn and really dig in."

The sensation is more than interesting; it is almost miraculous. I press on the nothing beneath the next-to-nothing wings I hold in my hands and air that has failed to support me for years now provides almost enough buoyancy to lift me off the snow. It's absolutely laugh-out-loud cool. Who'd have thought?

YOU HAVE TO CREATE YOUR OWN REALITY. YOU HAVE TO VISUALIZE WHAT YOU WANT, THEN DO IT.—GURU DAVE

A good deal of Guru Dave's charm lies in his openness to all of life's experiences. That they may be incredible or impossible does not disqualify them from consideration. It doesn't matter if it's a turn, a run, a day, a life—or even the ability to ski with wings: If you want it, you have to visualize it first. That, amid the Sufism and raps about suspending time, is really Dave's central message, his overriding philosophy. And he lives by it.

Dave is convinced that there are powerful forces at work in the world. Some concepts, like travel to a parallel universe, are poorly understood but no less likely for being so. Others, like gravity, suggest a world beyond our current understanding. Since all we have to do to harness gravity is to defer to its pull, why can't other natural forces, like electricity, be just as accessible? To illustrate his point, the Guru cites the work of the electromagnetism pioneer Nikola Tesla, inventor of wireless communication and alternating current, who envisioned a world in which electricity would be as freely tapped as gravity.

Yet after a week in Dave's company, the deepest residual impression I have of the man is not of his fluid, weightless turns, nor his agile mind nor his love of ideas, but of his warmth. He is, as skiers often are, a true egalitarian: It doesn't matter what you do or what you choose to slide on, we're all bozos on this bus. "That's the beauty of skiing," he says. "Whatever you want to put out there, if it works for you, it's great." And Dave, perhaps more than anyone I've met, appreciates the opportunity to slide down a mountain every day. "Look at the slice of time we're living in," he tells me one day as we ascend the mountain. "How many people throughout history have had the leisure time we enjoy? In our lives, we have a 60- or 70-year window. Yet people take living for granted. Here we are in a gleaming tram with gleaming equipment. We get to ski. We are blessed." ♦