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THIS PAGE Marcus Caston let's his skis do the talking in Bella Coola. OPPOSITE The Three Amigos speak for themselves. MLA 2018/2019

L'Histoire

THE START OF SOMETHING BIG



If you followed ski movies in the new millennium, you know Bella Coola Heli Sports, a one-of-a-kind operation in British Columbia's rugged Coast Mountains. Owned and operated by the ski-bum triad colloquially known as The Three Amigos—Beat Steiner, Christian Begin, and Pete "Swede" Matson—BCHS has played an outsized role in recent ski history: the fat ski was perfected on these peaks, and descents filmed here set a benchmark for big-mountain freeskiing. Known for shockingly big terrain and deep snow, BCHS operates an additional tenure in the nearby Pantheon Range surrounding Mount Waddington, B.C.'s highest peak at 4,019 metres. Here, among 2.64 million-acres so mind-boggling and Himalayan in scope that they warp puny human perspectives, films like *K2, Steep*, and *Seven Years in Tibet* were shot and first descents lurk on every horizon; those who pass through here not only experience ski history, but help write it.

With this kind of terrain, snow and track record—plus a comfort and operations level as high as the peaks they soar above—it shouldn't have been a surprise that BCHS was handed the title of #1 heli-ski operation in the world in 2017 by the World Ski Awards. Surprise or not, for the Amigos it was validation at the end of a long, hard road.

Accolades like "world's best" don't come every day. And eighteen years slogging it out in the heli-trenches hadn't exactly been a holiday for the trio whose friendship was forged in the active outdoor filmmaking industry around Whistler, B.C.

In the late 1990s Whistler media circus, Begin and Steiner were cinematographers who could claim a string of high-profile movie credits, while Swede served as guide and safety coordinator for many of their backcountry shoots. The boys often found themselves working together but competing for terrain with other crews, setting them on a



Marcus Caston puts some million-year-old ice in his drink at Bella Coola Heli Sports. MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON PHOTO

search for less-crowded venues. Swede had previously been to Bella Coola to hike and climb, finding big mountains, huge vertical, and a deep, stable coastal snowpack of up to 30 metres annually. That sounded good to Steiner and Begin, and West Coast Helicopters—with a solid reputation and the right machines—just happened to be putting in a base there. With choppers available, the boys made a deal with the owner of a funky 1920s hunting and fishing lodge that did no business outside of summer: they'd pay him a fee for every head they brought in. When they started in 2000, the freeski revolution was in full swing, and industry clients lined up to make Bella Coola's decidedly steep-and-deep terrain their brand, as if some new cosmic big-mountain spigot had gushed open beside the well-known trickles of Alaska and Europe. The world's top snowsports photographers beelined to Bella Coola, and imagery from a new nirvana circled the globe.

With so much attention came worry that someone might swoop in and push them out; to protect their turf, the boys reluctantly applied for an official heli-ski tenure, vaulting these dirtbag ski entrepreneurs into the world of serious business.

Their fears were justified; before it even opened, BCHS was competing for tenure with an unscrupulous operator who'd literally copied their public filing. In Swede's estimation they had but one choice: to funnel all available resources into winning. They eventually prevailed, but having tapped out their finances, had to rely on their first clients' deposits to buy key equipment like shovels, probes and transceivers. Then, after three winters working with athletes and film crews in massive snows, their first commercial season was the boniest on record.

The snow may have disappointed that year, but clients were blown away by the terrain. It would be slow and steady, but BCHS would eventually be known the world over, a nec plus ultra operation with four unique bases in some of the Coast's remotest mountains—a true bucket-lister for heli-ski aficionados.

In a place that you couldn't drag tourists to in the summer, suddenly a steady stream of people were arriving in the winter. Few in town knew what was going

on above treeline because they'd never been up there, so the goings-on were a bit mysterious. But it all made sense when BCHS became the biggest employer in the valley: 70 staff—30 of them guides—not including contract workers like pilots and engineers.

Bella Coola's golden era came early, beginning before the business was fully operational and lasting some seven years. Their helicopter program was revolutionary, employing a high-powered A-star B2 to carry a guide plus 4-5 guests instead of the industry standard of 12. Small-group heli-skiing was the future, and ace pilot Richard Lapointe-who flew all the early movie crews—helped redefine heli-skiing so that the A-star became the high-end standard.

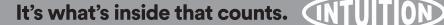
It wasn't just radical mountains and radical operations that made Bella Coola special: there was the

deep history and culture of the valley's Nuxalk First Nations; the excellent fishing on nearby rivers; the abundant wildlife, including eagles, moose and grizzly bears. A prodigious imagery output created an aspirational black hole that sucked at the entire global snowsports industry. Film segments by the likes of Seth Morrison, Hugo Harrisson, and Mark Abma made history. Shane McConkey invented and tested his revolutionary reverse-camber fatski here. It got crazy enough that the Amigos consciously backed off filming to work on developing a viable and lasting business. The musty, kitschfilled lodge was renovated and modernized to be the central hub of a base constellated with comfortable new guest cabins, an outdoor hot tub, sauna, fitness room and firepit. Culinary and wine offerings—which had always been stellar—went off the charts. They opened more exclusive, small-group bases elsewhere—Pantheon Heli Ranch, Mystery Mountain Lodge, and Eagle Lodge. And then, just as they were getting good at what they did, the World Ski Awards decided they were the best.

And just as they reached that apogee, the ground was also shifting. Swede and Begin were cashing out and moving on, and Steiner would stay on to work with new owners. It was, as always at Bella Coola, the end of an era but the beginning of something big.

On my last trip there in April, during the short plane ride from Vancouver I had an unobstructed view of the Monarch ice cap, where a torture of mountains and valleys swirled in every direction. At its centre, ice stretched between peaks like a sheet pulled taut on a giant bed, glaciers rippling at its corners like scrunched blankets. The next day I stood at its edge on my skis. The runs that morning had been life-changing; high-fiving had ensued and skiers were having the time of their lives. The loud, loquacious group I was with seemed particularly excited. And with good reason: the enchanting terrain was theirs, so to speak. Begin, Swede, and Steiner were enjoying an infrequent day out together, quite probably their last. I was privileged to share their élan and, in the end, it was one of the best ski days of my life. Though that didn't automatically qualify BCHS as the world's best heli-ski destination, another transcendent day in these incomparable mountains went pretty far towards convincing me. —Leslie Anthony







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