

A Telemark Pilgrimage

In Which Our Shaggy, Wool-clad
Correspondent Travels to Norway
on Bended Knee

Story by David Goodman
Photos by Pat Morrow

It was a cold, overcast day in 1981 when the freight car pulled into the railroad yard of a sleepy North Dakota town. As I huddled in the back, peering out at the bleak scenery, a black-on-white sign reading MINOT flashed by....just another rail town I'd never heard of.

The hobo sitting across from me suddenly let out a loud grunt. "Look out for the yard

dicks—they're mean," he offered sagely, then bolted out the creaking steel door. I was left to cower alone in the corner of the rusty car, trying to avoid the attention of a railroad detective who was scouring the yard for freeloaders like me. The detective popped his head in the car, looked in the opposite corner, and withdrew, continuing his patrol. It was my lucky day in Minot—wherever that was.



At Kvitavatn, Trevor Dowe makes a point of following the techniques of Sondre Norheim.

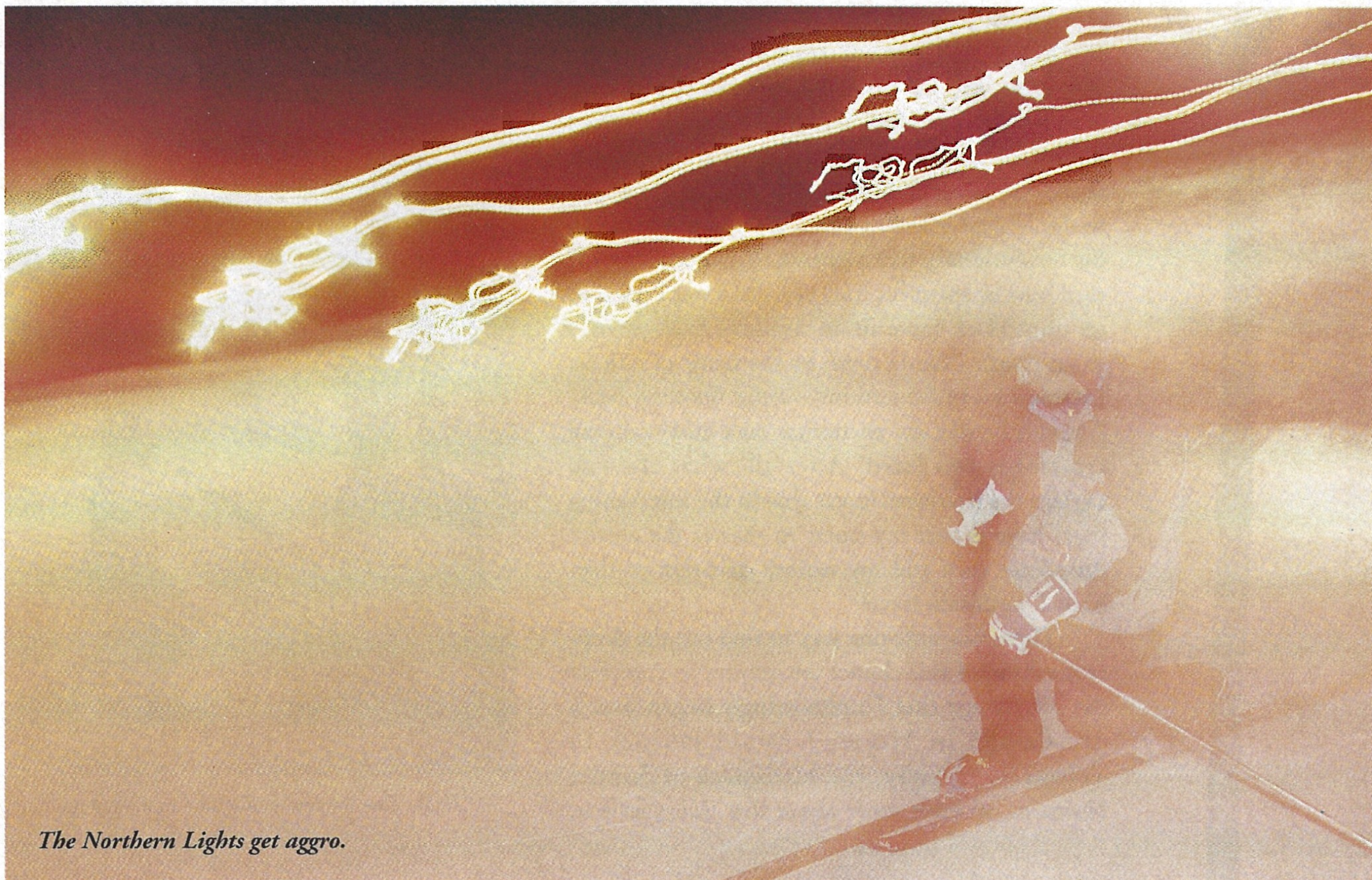
Eleven years later, I was sitting comfortably in my home in Vermont reading about Sondre Norheim, the farmer from Telemark, Norway, who invented modern skiing in the mid-1800s. I knew Norheim developed the telemark and christiania turns, but I didn't know that he emigrated to the United States in 1884, where he introduced his revolutionary techniques to American skiers. I read how he spent his final years and was buried in an unmarked grave in an unlikely backwater: a small North Dakota town by the name of Minot. Memories—and questions—came flooding back. Could it be that my encounter on a dusty railroad crossroads was fated? After all, what else can explain the irrational forces that in the intervening years have driven my quest to master the elusive drop-knee turn and my zealous devotion to free-heeled mountain travel?

There was only one way to find out the deeper meaning of this chance encounter: to complete the pilgrimage that I unknowingly began over a decade ago in Minot. I would journey to Telemark, Norway, the birthplace of Sondre Norheim, to learn more about this skiing farmer.



"Help, I've telemarked and I can't get up."





The Northern Lights get aggro.

And I would seek out Norheim's latter-day Norwegian disciples to see how the traditions are being carried on. Perhaps they could offer a humble telemark pilgrim a bit of enlightenment from the motherland of skiing.

Skiing is Norway's national passion. The love affair dates back at least as far as the world's first depiction of a person on skis, a 4,000-year-old rock carving found in northern Norway. Probably the best modern example of Norway's passion for skiing are the 1,500 miles of cross-country ski trails that begin on the outskirts of the capital city of Oslo. Like all cross-country ski trails in Norway, they are free of charge and heavily traveled.

Upon arriving in Norway, I was eager to experience a culture where skiing was so integrated into daily life that it was just another stop on the subway. As I clomped through the Oslo subways clad in Lycra tights and clutching skating skis, I assumed I would blend right in with past and future Olympians on their way to a lunchtime workout. Instead, I found myself flying solo in a car full of pinstriped businesspeople, sticking out like Bozo the Clown at a black tie dinner.

As the train moved to the outskirts of town, my embarrassment was relieved when other passengers sporting square-toed shoes and skis finally began trickling aboard. By the time the train neared the end of the line, the transformation was complete: Suits were replaced by wool knickers, rucksacks, and skis. The final stop was a snow-covered subway platform with a set of ski tracks down the middle. I got off, snapped on my boards, and was instantly lost in the hundreds of miles of trails. I skated among school kids, old folks, couples, workers, and racers, all of whom shared the trails. Several hours later I re-emerged, dazzled by the sight of more cross-country skiers than I had ever seen in one place.



Norwegians are a very literal-minded people.

The next day I met up with veteran Canadian telemarker Pat Morrow, and we headed directly for Morgedal, the small village in the Telemark region where Sondre Norheim was born. In the course of the four-hour drive from Oslo, the landscape changed dramatically from dense urban sprawl to beautiful open fields speckled with red barns. A road sign sporting a telemark skier announced our arrival in "Morgedal: The Cradle of Skiing". The only problem was that there was no skiing in the cradle:

A rope tow sat idle on the lone, snowless ski hill. Such was the plight of most of Norway last winter. As consolation, the local ski instructor offered to introduce us to the great-grandson of Norheim's brother, who would show us to Norheim's cabin.

We hiked up a steep hill to a tiny log cabin tucked among some trees, where we were greeted by 71-year-old Eivind Strondi. The kindly old man looked elegant in his traditional Telemark garb, which consisted of a black wool top hat, black and white sweater, wool bibs, and a knife strapped to his waist. "Sondre Norheim is de fadder of modern shee-ing," he declared proudly as he showed us into the small, grass-roofed cabin.

Norheim was born in Morgedal in 1825. He was a tenant farmer, but not a very good one. Eivind struggled to explain in broken English why Norheim had trouble earning a decent living. "His work suffered, ya, because each time de shnow came he would stop work and ..."

I interrupted, sparing him the difficult translation I was very familiar with poor Sondre's problem.

What Norheim did brilliantly was ski and design skis. Before Norheim, ski equipment consisted of stiff parallel-sided wooden skis with a flimsy toe loop. This setup was only practical for sliding across flat ground. Norheim's heart was set on finding a way to ski the steep hills of his beloved Telemark. He came up with the novel idea of combining the toe loop with a stiff heel strap made of braided vine. Then in 1850, he designed a "waisted" ski with a turn-friendly 100-70-80mm profile—the world's first skis with sidecut. With these innovations, the world of skiing downhill opened up to him, and to everyone.

At the same time that he was busy reinventing skis, young Sondre was also revolutionizing ski technique. He invented the telemark turn, which for the first time gave free-heel skis stability in deep snow and on steep terrain. He also devised the christiania turn (for Christiania, the name of Oslo until 1924), the basis of modern parallel ski technique.

Norheim's prowess as a skier

was legendary. As a child, he would jump off the roof of his house and ski away through the village. In 1868, he skied 124 miles to Christiania to compete in the first national jumping and skiing competition. He won handily, and his \$10 prize established him as the first professional ski racer in history.



"Guess what? I'm not wearing any pants!" "Ho, ho! Me neither."

Eivind's eyes twinkled with pride as he showed us the silver Olympic torch holder sitting in Norheim's cabin. It was used to hold the torch for the 1952 Oslo Winter Olympics and the 1960 Squaw Valley games, both of which were lit in Norheim's fireplace. This tradition will be revived for the 1994 games. The Olympic torch will be lit in Norheim's cabin on

November 23, 1993, and then skied around the country for 70 days before being used to ignite the Olympic flame in Lillehammer to start the games. Norwegians hope to make the Morgedal torch lighting a tradition in all future winter games.

We paid homage to Norheim with a few celebratory telemark turns on the thinly covered slope below his house. Petter, the local ski instructor, demonstrated the technique in tradi-

tional style, swooping turns on old wood skis with vine bindings and clutching a long wooden staff across his body and a spruce bough in his outstretched right hand. Full of inspiration, we retired to the hotel to plan a ski trip through Norway and see how the locals were making use of Norheim's gift.

On our way out of Morgedal, we passed a statue of Norheim clutching his skis and looking skyward; the same statue also stands in Minot. We stopped, bent before it in the telemark position, and prayed for the godfather's blessings on our noble efforts to lead a free-heeled life.

We found Eldar Medhus running the mountain shop in Lillehammer, the town that will host the 1994 Winter Olympics. He was a bespectacled lad with a Marine buzz cut, the image of a quiet, unassuming, bookish Nord. As we were about to learn, first impressions can be grossly mistaken.

DETAILS, DETAILS

Skiers can organize their own pilgrimage to Norway. Scandinavian Airlines (800-221-2350) flies to Copenhagen and Oslo from Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, and Newark.

For those on a tight budget, the Kvitavatn Fjellstoge (011-47-36-91-174) near Rjuken in Telemark is an inexpensive, full-service mountain hostel surrounded by miles of backcountry ski trails and is adjacent to a downhill ski area. It is also home to Trevor Dowe, who makes modern handcrafted versions of Sondre Norheim's wooden skis that are remarkable powder tools. From here, Sondre Norheim's birthplace in Morgedal is an easy day trip away.

Lillehammer is a pleasant tourist town, much like a less glitzy version of Aspen. It is located near Havfjell and Kvitfjell, the two Olympic alpine skiing venues. Stay at the Hammer Home Hotel if you're in the neighborhood.

For more information, contact the Norwegian Tourist Board, (212) 949-2333.—D.G.

Eldar got off work and met us for night skiing at Hafjell, the site of the 1994 Olympic slalom, GS, Super G, and women's downhill. The snow was sparse, but there was enough man-made snow to supplement what Mother Nature had overlooked. The slopes were crowded with skiers, about half of whom were telemarking—a scene repeated at every ski area on our journey.

Riding up the chairlift, Eldar turned to me and popped the question: "Do you yump?"

I was a little surprised; it seemed an intimate query to someone you don't even know.

"You mean ski jumping? No," I explained, "I'm a law-abiding citizen, and the first law I was taught to obey was the law of gravity."

Eldar pondered this for a moment, and then announced determinedly, "We must show you how to yump." I thanked him for his concern, and was thrilled to see the end of the lift approaching so I could end the discussion.

When we reached the top, Eldar suddenly handed me his poles. "Now I fleep," he announced, pointing to a small nubbin of snow on the trail. A moment later, Eldar was off, hurtling through the air in a full somersault. To my astonish-

ment, he landed in a perfect telemark position, and continued with some warp-speed GS turns. Joined by several of his equally airborne friends, he continued flipping and jumping all the way down the slope. He concluded the run by descending through an icy mogul field "double dog" style: skiing on all fours with his friend Bjorn riding on his back and barking. I graciously declined their invitation to one-up them.

Sondre Norheim's heirs made their point well on this first outing: They gave the most impressive display of telemark acrobatics I had ever seen. I learned later that evening that my hosts were all former Norwegian national ski team members, now retired so they could "take it easy."

That explained their superhuman behavior, but it also left me increasingly concerned for my well-being as they made clear their intent to shape this unassuming pilgrim in their mold.

Eldar joined us again at Kvitfjell the next day, which has been built expressly to host the Olympic downhill, but it had only been open a month when we arrived.

Riding up the mountain, Eldar regaled us with lurid stories from his past as a racer. "I use my tele skis to speed ski,



Telemarking may not be as big an export as herring, but it smells better.

THE GREEN GAMES

How psyched is Norway to host the 1994 Winter Olympics? So psyched that a large electronic billboard set in a replica of a Viking ship stands in the center of Lillehammer counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds to the start of the games at 1 p.m. on February 12, 1994.

Norway plans to make this a memorable Olympics in more ways than one. First, holding the Winter Olympics in Norway is like throwing a Christmas party in Bethlehem—this is the motherland of skiing, and the entire nation hangs on the outcome of each race.

It may also be memorable for the performances of the hometown kids. You may recall that the Norwegian men's cross-country team graciously helped itself to four of the five available gold medals in the 1992 Winter Olympics. Norway is working hard to ensure that this international rout continues in front of adoring local crowds.

In contrast to the French Olympic extravaganza which saddled the hosts with a staggering debt and numerous white elephants (POWDER, October '92), Norway is touting its approach as the "Green Games." According to Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, "Our

aim is not to stage the most gigantic Winter Games ever. Our ambition is to give Lillehammer an environmental profile which will set an example for future Olympic games."

Some of the "green" touches in Lillehammer include building the ice hockey hall inside a rock cave to improve its energy efficiency and minimize the visual impact on a nearby small town; installing retrieval devices behind the biathlon targets to prevent up to 50,000 lead bullets from polluting the environment; and building the bobsled/luge track so that it does not destroy the mountain where it is located. The Norwegians had actually hoped they wouldn't have to build a bobsled/luge track, having athletes use the Albertville track, instead. But the International Olympic Committee insisted, and Lillehammer is now home to northern Europe's only sled track.

The Lillehammer games will be far more compact than the Albertville games, which were spread out over 10 different resorts. The sporting events will be staged at six different sites spread along a 62-mile section of valley, with Lillehammer in the center. Most athletes and half of the media will be in walking distance from the opening and closing ceremonies. For those needing to travel, 900 Volvo buses will be dispatched to get them to the starting line on time.

For information on tickets to the 1994 Winter Olympics, contact Cartan Tours (800) 841-9094—D.G.

you know," he quipped. "The fastest I've gotten is 142 kilometers per hour."

The thought of reaching such a sickening speed (88 mph) on such frighteningly frail gear gave me chills. "What do tele skis do at 142 kph, Eldar?" I asked.

"Oh, they just float, like this," he demonstrated, imitating windshield wipers on a Saab 9000 doing 200. "It's very nice." I suggested that we settle for the delayed wipe speed on our descent of Kvitfjell.

Typical of Norwegian mountains, Kvitfjell has a flat summit plateau and steepens dramatically about two-thirds of the way down. From the top, we could see the plateaus and rounded peaks of Rondane National Park to the east. The soft contours of Rondane had cross-country skiing written all over it; the park is in fact renowned for its hut-to-hut touring. To the south of us lay the broad valley leading to Lillehammer.

Kvitfjell's downhill race course was one of the only completed trails on the mountain when we showed up. The course has been controversial since it was created, with some racers insisting that it is dangerously steep for a downhill event. My experience led me to echo that sentiment.

It had recently been used for a Europa Cup race, which left it polished with ice and hard as rock. Our descent was uneventful until we reached the top of the final drop, a steep rollover hemmed in by orange security nets on one side. Looking downhill, the nets resembled spider webs full with the day's catch. Unlucky skiers of all shapes and sizes were squirming, screaming, and trying to disentangle themselves, while bolder skiers blazed by in a meteoric tuck.

I dismissed the misfortunes of the writhing riff-raff below me and chose a line near the nets, where I calculated that the ice was gritty enough to

hold a few turns. I was jump-turning happily down the narrow snow ribbon when a helmeted youngster and his screaming mother hurtled horizontally across my path. Without warning, I went from skiing to sliding head first like a rocket-propelled luge. Seconds later, my face ground into the hard plastic mesh, both skis skewered the net, my camera wrapped around my neck, my sunglasses were ripped off my face, my watch was broken, and my fingers were shredded from a futile attempt to use the net as a brake.

When I finally reached my partners, they stared at me in horror. Unbeknownst to me, blood oozed from my forehead and raw scrapes decorated my face. I thought it best not to see for myself, and instead I insisted that we keep skiing. But after the Norwegian gods of sport had feasted on my carcass, the most Olympic courage I could muster was a few gentle cruising runs to end the day. If it was humility I was searching for on this pilgrimage, I had certainly found it at Kvitfjell.

Sondre Norheim could never have predicted what would

become of the techniques and equipment he developed to ski the snowy hills of Telemark. He would rest well knowing that his disciples are carrying his torch with such talent and gusto. And I would know better than to ever dare a person with a Scandinavian accent on telemark skis to strut their stuff.

But there is far more to Norheim's legacy than a quirky turn that so strongly resists mastering. What the farmer from Telemark gave us is a life-changing gift, a way to travel in wild places in the most graceful and joyful synthesis of movement that I have ever experienced. It is the same thing I was looking for 11 years earlier when I passed through Minot riding the rails, and today as I shoulder a pack and head into the mountains. Call it the gift of freedom. ❄



Morten Aas gets his airborne with a yump at Geilo.