

Embracing the Challenges and Gifts of Big Mountain Free Skiing: An Interview with Jonny Law - World Tour Champion

Jonny Law, John Coleman and Terry Orlick, Canada

Jonny Law is one of the world's most accomplished Big Mountain Freeskiers,

Email: jl@jonnylaw.com

John Coleman completed his Masters Degree on Big Mountain Freeskiing with Terry Orlick and is currently focusing on his PhD work with extreme sport athletes at the University of Ottawa

Email: apusiak@hotmail.com

Terry Orlick is a writer, focus coach and professor at the University of Ottawa.

Email excel@zoneofexcellence.com

Abstract:

Big-Mountain (BM) freeskiing is a high-speed, high-risk, alternative sport. BM freeskiing takes place in alpine regions of mountains, where the terrain for a “normal” run includes severe exposure due to the steepness of the slope, tight chutes, trees, cliffs, and snow pack that is usually difficult to predict there is an ongoing risk of avalanche. Jonny Law is one of the most electrifying elite BM freeskiers on the planet. His strong technical background grounded in alpine ski racing, combined with his love for challenging himself to continually progress, both as a person and a BM freeskier has helped him enjoy success as a professional athlete. Jonny has won 3 events in the N-A tour, as well as the world tour, and finished 2nd in the world standings two years ago. He has won and been nominated for many “sick bird” awards, which are awarded to the skier who is pushing the boundaries of the sport to new levels. Jonny comes from Halifax and now resides in Whistler B.C.

Jonny was one of nine elite BM freeskiers interviewed by John Coleman for his masters thesis entitled Success Elements of BM freeskiers. This article is the transcribed version of the interview conducted with Jonny Law. It identifies some of the elements used by Jonny to increase his likelihood of performing successfully while immersed in the dangerous and unpredictable sport of BM freeskiing. Aside from slight grammatical alterations, the following interview is presented in the raw form of Jonny's vocabulary, to allow the characteristics of the freeskiing community to shine through.

John: How did you get into BM freeskiing?

Jonny: I was actually a racer, and the racing in Halifax brought me further west. I skied in New Brunswick and then in Quebec, Ontario, and I actually went to school in Banff for a year. And that would have probably been my introduction to it. I remember between runs on powder days just having some fun. But I never really knew it was something that people are passionate about, I just thought it was something that people did. I came to Whistler from Halifax and met with other skiers, they just kind of introduced me to it. They weren't "hey we are going big mountain freeskiing", they were just like we are going skiing, it was something to do.

John: What do you love about BM freeskiing?

Jonny: That's where I might differ from other people; some people are into going to different places, or just being out in the mountains. But for me it has been about the physical and mental challenges. I want to find something that is more difficult for me to do. It may be a steep cliff or a steep face or something like that. I would rather go hit a cliff than ski a powder line. It has always been about experiencing that thrill, that adrenaline rush. When I am going skiing, when I am in the gondola and there has been some snow, or even when there hasn't, almost everyday I almost feel sick going up the mountain. It is really almost vexing because you are doing something and you are excited to do it but you are scared and sick about it right?

John: So when you step onto the gondola and you have that sick feeling, what do you do?

Jonny: It leaves once I get on snow, almost immediately. I'll be on the gondola with

some guys and I'll be quiet just focusing on my breathing, trying to calm down, I take it very seriously. It is by no means a leisure sport, even if it is a day that I am skiing with friends.

That feeling of sickness is definitely gone once I am in the skis, I have my goggles down. I am getting ready to rip. It must be anticipation, more than anything, just to get the day started, to get on the skis. I think about the things I want to do and I can't believe that I want to do it, and it is hard to believe that I am capable of doing it. And then once I get on the skis I remember that this is what I do and I can do it.

John: When you are about to do something big how do you prepare?

Jonny: Usually when I am looking for something big, I break it down to if I fall it is not going to hurt that much. I honestly believe that I can, sometimes I have to think to myself you can do it, you won't fall and that's when I might have trees in my fall zone or something like that. And if that is the case, it is a little more difficult, it is crucial that you make it happen. And I do think in my head "you can do it" and "just do it because you can".

John: What is it about BM freeskiing that makes you want to do it again?

Jonny: I think it is the challenge. I find it to be enlightening. When you are on top of something ... Even cliffs I have hit before like a fifty footer or something, it can be done, but it's still, I am going to jump off of a fifty footer here. And you know you have had buddies hurt themselves and you have been hurt doing stuff like this, and yet you are like, no problem. I find that before you do it you are very anxious, you are kind of fighting common sense. Because your com-

mon sense tells you no, just ski around and have some fun. But you have to fight that and I think it is that, that is exciting when you can finally decide that I am doing it and then you actually do it. That is what I think it is all about, that split second where you're mentally strong enough. Maybe you are ignoring common sense and doing what you want to do, what you think you can do. There is a quote by T.S. Elliot that I like, it goes "only he that will risk going too far, can possibly find out how far one can go" and I think about that a lot. *It is never going to be comfortable to try to excel at something.*

John: How do you go from that mind game between common sense and the challenge, and then actually doing it?

Jonny: It comes down to a lot of things, but by being in the best physical shape I can be is really important. Being well prepared, being on top of something saying I have done everything I can to be able to do this. You have to come up with pros and cons for everything, and if you can create a stronger argument for doing it, then you are going to be able to do it, as well as acknowledge what is wrong with it. With thorough preparation I would be able to say stuff like "you are strong, you have done stuff like this before." And a lot of the time I will repeat to myself "you got it, you got it". At times I say it out loud, other times I just think it. It depends on how stressed I am. On a normal day it is usually not that intense even if you are doing big cliffs. I think you get good at big mountain freeskiing through trial and error, and as you experience more things like big crashes and big cliffs you are able to apply that to what you are doing. A lot of things that you end up doing you have probably done something like it before. You just kind of process all of that. A lot of it is

really thinking it over, so a lot of it becomes subconscious, it is almost instinctual.

John: Do you think that those instincts come from experiences?

Jonny: Yeah, no doubt. Yeah it is like, you can ski onto the face and in my particular example I am not formally educated in snow pack, but I can be skiing something and just by the feel of it and by the terrain, I can know that it is going to crack [avalanche] and when it is going to break. I can pretty much pin point when with my weight I am going to make it happen. For example, I was skiing in Revelstoke this year, at a heli ski operation, and I was skiing onto this face and it was flat and as I was skiing towards it, it began to become convexed and I knew there was new snow and I also knew that there was cliffs. I knew it was going to crack and it did. It is pretty neat because it is all in a split second, I turned quickly to look at the crack to see if it was going to have enough weight to take me down. And I realized in an instant that it would take me down. I made the decision that if I am going to fall onto rocks then I am going to hit it with my skis and my boots. So I immediately went straight and it all worked out really well. But all that happens in a moment, like in a split second.

John: When you say hit it with your skis and your boots, do you mean just ski straight at it?

Jonny: Yeah you just go off, you can't see anything, you are within an avalanche, and you just have to make a less than ideal situation good.

John: So at that moment that you decide that you are going to pin it, were you thinking anything in particular?

Jonny: I was thinking that I can't fall because then I would hit rocks and then I would be fucked. But if I am able to land and hit the snow, then I can't fall because all the snow is coming on me, and that was pretty much what I was thinking. You can't fall so you are concentrating on positioning yourself for landing.

John: And in that instance you landed and then?

Jonny: And then just keep going. Another example, actually on the same day it was the same sort of situation where I am skiing down and I knew it was going to crack. One guy went crack, another guy went crack, and now it is my turn. You take things into account. You think, ok it is new snow, it is light. This is the type of things you think about. Sure we are in some unstable conditions but as a professional you can deal with it. It is light enough that it is not really going to get you down or break your bones while you are in it. I had to ski down the fall line, and it all broke around me and I knew the cliffs fall line had rocks below. So I stuck with my initial plan, which was to point it [ski straight down], so immediately I knew I had to get out of there quickly. I took it a little bit skier's right and again I was like, I can't fall I can't fall. Because I was landing side hill and the snow was coming fall line... I fell, and you are in the snow and you are scared to death and then it clears and no problems.

John: When you fall in those types of situations what are you thinking?

Jonny: You are thinking, am I going to be buried. You are also thinking you have eight or ten sets of eyes on you so you think that the chances are that they are going to get to me before it is too late. You are just waiting for it to end because it is all moving and

kind of imbalanced. You are scared but it is something that you have accepted. And mostly I am pissed because I have fallen. I was thinking I should have stuck it, it would have been a sick shot if I stuck it. That and now I am in a compromised situation.

John: In terms of preparation you accept the challenge of doing it and then you use your positive self-talk?

Jonny: Yeah basically it is nothing new. You keep in mind that there is a crew around watching, it is not like you are alone in the backcountry. You know you are going to be saved if you get buried, and you know you are not working in an area that all funnels into a crevasse. You keep all this positive stuff in mind, sure it is going to avalanche and you might fall on rocks, you might get buried. But there are a lot of positive things you can think of. Don't get me wrong I turn away from stuff a lot. I say out loud to myself, it is not worth it. I will say it out loud and turn around and get out of there.

John: Do you have an example of that?

Jonny: A specific one no, it actually happens quite often, it happens more often than not. Where I will maybe get to a cliff that I want to hit but other people have hit it already and there are bomb holes. I could do it but it is not worth it right now.

John: Without a specific example what do you think generally deters you from doing something? What is the thought process?

Jonny: Just look at the consequences, people call it calculated risk management. You know there is risk and you are calculating it. There is probably a mathematic equation, like you are figuring out this plus that and the weight of one thing compared to another.

And you know, you just calculate that risk and there is always going to be some level of it and if it is too high then it is not worth it. Things are a little bit different for me now. When I wasn't pro I maybe would do them [riskier things]. But now it is like I can do this I have done this but I have a career to think about now. So it changes as you grow, like maybe you love a girl. Things change and that is going to influence how you add up the risk. That is when I am by myself or with buddies. Even when there are cameras, they will be like Jonny, I want you to do this. I have skied into lines and it is fractured and Todd Jones from TGR is filming me, and there are two cameras and stuff. And I just put up the two poles, no! The shots over man. Yeah there is not a lot of pressure other than on yourself. They are pretty good for that. They come up with suggestions and stuff and sometimes they try to be persuasive but by the end of it they are not upset if you say no.

John: Do you feel that pressure of the cameras has changed your preparation for skiing?

Jonny: Um, yes, as far as the filming goes that is very new to me. And that is a whole different game than competing. Like really not as much pressure, you can fall all day. Like if you fall all the time you are not going to have a good segment but you can film all day. Or you can try to do that line the next snow day and get it. It is not like you have three comps and that is it. I'm trying to cope with that actually, because I find that I am still bringing a lot of my competition stuff into the filming realm and I find that it is kind of compromising my filming. Style wise, because big mountain comps seems to be a lot about survival. It doesn't matter if your arms are rolling down the windows as long as you are stomping stuff, and it is good and clean, it doesn't matter. But in

filming it seems like it is all about style, like you can butt drop as long as you are tight, that is what they want to see. So I am trying to create two different styles.

John: What is your process for that?

Jonny: The filming stuff I am concentrating on technique and style. Like that is what your focus is, like ok leave your hands here, your tips are going to be there. In big mountain freeskiing competitions you are more thinking about where is your next cliff. You're looking for things that you need to remember for the line. And then in the air you are just concentrating on having good position for landing. So I think the difference is focusing on different things.

John: In terms of success elements what allows you to be a successful BM freeskiier at the elite level?

Jonny: It comes down to focus and preparation. The season that I was successful in competitions I remember training and running. I pretty much sacrificed everything. I remember working on mental focus while running all the time.

John: How would you do that?

Jonny: A lot of positive affirmations, I know a little bit about sports psychology because when I went to that school in Banff we had some sports psychology courses and I now feel it's all about having the right attitude. Like I was running and I was thinking I want to be the best skier that I can be. I think that is what it comes down to. What messed me up last year, was having success and wanting to build on that, I think I messed with that focus a bit. Being more concentrated on results rather than my own personal challenge. In comps I usually stay by myself. I am not there to make friends, it

is nothing like that. I think that *when you are really focused you don't really think about much*. You are just concentrating on staying relaxed. Like I wasn't thinking about stomping an air or what I am going to do when I am on the podium (Laughs). I am just trying to keep a level of composure really. I would get up a little bit earlier and stretch. And during the day I would be by myself and inspect by myself. It really comes down to visualization. I remember going through it in my head before hand. Visualizing the run and then I did it, I did the run I am talking about the finals where I moved up from seventh into first and ended up winning the day and won the sick bird at the same time. I remember getting to the bottom after skiing it and it felt like I had skied it a bunch of times. It almost felt too easy, and that is really how it is. With BM freeskiing, you need to know that you can do it one hundred percent. You almost have to bring it down a notch, ski it at like 95% rather than one hundred and that's another skill in itself. You have to know I want to be competitive I don't want to fall all the time so I need to step it down and I think that is another thing that you have to get good at. If you allow the buildup process to begin too early you might end up getting too anxious before your run, maybe thinking about things that could go wrong. You have to be able to stay really calm even though what you are doing is very important. So you need to break it down and try not to worry about anybody else.

John: How do you stay calm and not worry about any body else?

Jonny: I just try to separate myself from the situation. I am not there to try to beat Hugo [one of the world's best BM freeskiers] I am there to ski my best. And if I ski my best then who knows what will happen. That is really what it is all about in any sport. I

think if you are thinking about what will happen, then you are going to lose your focus. You have to keep your focus centered really. Actually the year that I did really well (performed the best in the world) I don't think I watched anybody else, it was a total separation. I would hear this and that but I wouldn't think about it. Ah, someone did this someone did that, I wouldn't allow it to get in. I would hear it and then just keep concentrating on what I wanted to do. I would walk away for a little while and visualize my runs. I would just get away from all the excitement for a bit. And a lot of times if someone else isn't as calm as you and they are getting all pumped, that can influence you. It can happen while you are waiting. You have to be strong enough to stay with your plan of action. Whatever you do, I think it is good to pull away, do your own thing, just don't get influenced by the energy that is out there. So I never buddy up with anyone up there. The year after I had done well, people wanted to inspect with me and they were asking me about this and that. And there is more pressure. You hear people talk...Jonny Law this and you know "man I wasn't going to do this comp and then I heard you were going to be here", stuff like that. It is just a bit different now that I have been in magazines and stuff, people expect stuff from you.

Before I had nothing to lose and therefore very little pressure. Last year (the year after his best and most consistent performances) though I wasn't as well prepared, I wasn't prepared for that I guess. And that is tough to do. I am trying to get back, and I figure I can get back to it this year because I don't have anything to lose really. All I can do is go into it and try to do my best. The sponsors would of course like to see good results. *But I would rather see a no result rather than a twentieth or something like that.* I mean if you go out and you blow up [crash]

and people are like, dude you would have won if that didn't happen. That doesn't mean much at the end of the day, but twentieth place or something like that means nothing to me. This year if I compete I think it will be nothing to lose. I will just have to keep it cool.

John: When you visualize your run do you see it through your own eyes or as if someone is filming you?

Jonny: Through my own eyes, I can see my ski tips and I can almost time my airs in my mind, I can know how long I will be in the air. A lot of the times it will come down to inspection, you need to be able to trust your inspection. That's what it comes down to with this focus and this visualization, you need to trust your inspection and trust yourself. You need to know that you inspected well, otherwise how you are going to be confident up top and ski well and feel good about it. You are going to be worried and because you are worried you are not going to be skiing strong. *So it all comes down to inspection, inspection is most important.* And sometimes there will be for example a cliff band, and you are skiing into the cliff band. Where is your take off? And sometimes it needs to be very specific, where you take off. I have done things where I have lined up something that could be across the valley, where I have to point my skis at, and I have to trust that not only did I inspect that well, but in the split second that I have while I am skiing up to it that I have it lined up well, and that is the actual take off. That's what it comes down to, being confident with your own abilities.

John: How have you learned to inspect well?

Jonny: I think ski racing helped, like ski through every gate and do the hand movement through the gate. You will see me up there doing like prere, siddi, poo [skiing sounds] like you will even hear sound effects. You just take your time, you line stuff up. If I was to just focus on the cliff drops that wouldn't be enough, you have to almost imagine how many turns are going to be in-between each cliff drop and you concentrate on certain landmarks and you've just got to be confident about it.

You will probably like this story. This was after Snowbird, the same season and I go to France for the final competition of the year ranked fourth on the world tour. And we get to the venue and it was awesome. We had a ton of snow, there were cliff bands, there were some steep zones, it was just awesome. And then we were told that we couldn't inspect. We had to inspect from afar with binoculars. The tram kind of went up on top so you could kind of see stuff. But it was still a long distance away, the French skiers had all skied it of course. It is hard to say why they didn't let us inspect, but I am really glad they did it. I think it really separates the weak from the strong and the good from the great. And it was intense.

John: So what did you do?

Jonny: Inspection, I did it with binoculars, and actually I took a picture of a picture with a digital camera, I was able to zoom in on stuff. But still what if there was shrapnel on the take off? I couldn't see that with the means of inspection that was available. I came up with a game plan. My last cliff was probably a good forty or forty-five footer, but it was like a big band with outcropping rocks on either side, and a tranny that built up into it with wind. If I didn't have that angle right I would have landed on rocks which would have gone really wrong. So because

the face was fall line with a cat track, I was able to sit on the cat track with the cliff I wanted to hit and my landing lined up. I turned around, looked past myself to find a landmark that would work with that take off. So I used the same technique as I would have if I was on top of it, but from below. It was very stressful because I was in France for the first time. First time competing there, first time skiing there, and the upper management of Dynastar was there. Who at the time were my sponsors. I was going fourth, the three guys in front of me were not considered high profile. So they went and then it was my turn and I was doing my focus thing where I keep it calm and keep it chill. But it was really difficult this time because it was more difficult to become confident with what I wanted to do, not being able to inspect basically. I just relaxed and the three people had gone, and they were like “ok Jonny, are you ready?” *And at that point I allow myself to start to get psyched up, not like aggressive or anything. I just allow myself to really allow myself to become ready, to do what I want to do. And so I was like “yeah, I’m ready.”* And they were like “ok you have twenty minutes.” “Dude what are you talking about?” And they were like “we need to wait for the helicopter.” Again I am like “what are you talking about?” And they wanted to film some of the dudes, so they put a helicopter above my head. So vvvvvv,vvvv,vvvv [helicopter noises] yeah the wind was intense, and my heart is now going fast, I am trying to focus and keep chill. Like I am about to kill myself with this line. But I felt good about it, I felt that I had really spent a lot of time looking at the pictures and riding the tram trying to get a good look at it, but still it was really challenging.

The first day I remember skiing down and there was no tracks. I was coming into one of my features that I wanted to jump off of, I wasn’t completely sure if I had it right and

luckily I didn’t have to stop because I had an exit strategy if it didn’t look right. Basically I had everything going, I had exit strategies that if I was skiing up to something that I wanted to do and found out that I couldn’t or I wasn’t sure of it, I would have a way to keep it fluid and to get out. So I am skiing up to it and I was trying to gauge my level of just confidence really confidence. How you are feeling physically, as well as mentally. This is during the run, and I was skiing and it was wicked powder and I ski up to it and it was all split second that we are talking about. *And so for a split second I wasn’t feeling right about sending it off this cliff so I was able to turn around and kept if fluid, but you know you got to be really in tune with how you feel about what you are doing. Like you don’t just want to send it because you are in a comp.* I have made mistakes like that in previous comps. Again you have to relax and it is not worth it to kill yourself with this stuff. And yeah I remember coming up to that last hit. And I just saw my landmark in the distance, and who knows if somebody moved it or not.

John: It was something that could be moved?

Jonny: Yeah it was a flag. We’re talking like hundreds of feet away. And it was just like a sponsor flag in the background. It was awesome, I ended up second in that comp.

John: How was that feeling if you didn’t know whether the flag had been moved?

Jonny: Its freaky man, you can’t even believe it. Like the second before you hit it... And then it drops away from you and hopefully it is good. I have had times when I’ve taken pictures or something, and hitting cliffs and all of a sudden there are rocks coming at you. And you have to, like don’t just freak out, you have to deal with that too.

John: So you have had times that you just landed on rocks?

Jonny: Yeah I had this one cliff last year, it was like it was probably the biggest cliff I had ever hit. It was probably eighty, eighty-five feet. This was a really good learning experience. My take off was kind of angled and I think an angled take off actually makes you drop away, it is like hitting a golf ball on a slope. I pointed it off and ended up drifting left. I was eighty feet up and there was a big rock that I am going to hit. I am going to land on a big frickin rock. You are falling off a cliff so you have some time, and I thought this is going to break me badly. But you do what you can to make a bad situation dealable, and I just kept it really tight. At the very last second I leaned over and I kicked off the rock. I was somehow able to measure the angle of the rock and I kicked off of it with both skis at the same time with the same amount of pressure on each foot and my pole. I blew both my skis apart in exactly the same way. I think that if I'd taken more of that hit with one leg instead of the other I probably would have broken that leg. I broke my pole within the handle and my wrist was sore from that. I was fine, because I was able to deal with the situation. I have always said about big mountain skiing, that as good of a skier you have to be, you have to be just as good if not better at falling. Because it is just as big a part of the sport as skiing is. I just mean tumbling, being able to fall. There have been times where I was rag dolling, like I will be skiing along and I will notice that there are rocks in the fall line and then I fall. And I am rag dolling and I know that if I don't stop then I am going to hit the rocks and instead of letting the rag doll take control I try to time it so that everytime I hit the snow I dig something into the snow to slow me down. Because you are aware of what is going on, you are able to control the situa-

tion even though you are very much not in control.

John: You said that when you are skiing down and you notice rocks and then you fall. Do you think that is because your focus shifts to the rocks?

Jonny: I don't think so, not at the level that I am now. At the time that I was skiing, I wasn't thinking rocks and then fall but I know that I am creating "sluff" (snow released from the mountain by the skis of the skier as he turns) and I know that there is a mogul field below me. I know I have to control my speed. It is just a bunch of things and I think as the situation is created you come up with different things to think about. So as I am skiing I am creating sluff so I am thinking about managing my sluff. If I am trying to get some speed from the line but I know there are moguls, then I am going to try to judge my speed coming out of the line, or if I am falling I then notice that there is something that I have to deal with like rocks and stuff.

John: So if there was nothing to deal with would you just let yourself rag doll?

Jonny: I would try to stop myself but a lot of the time I know rag dolling can be better for you rather than being tense and fighting it, a lot of time the rag doll can prevent injuries. I used to fall a lot on stuff that I don't even think about now. Being able to fall and get up and hurt yourself and get better, it is just one big learning process. But I guess you get to the point where falling is now unacceptable, for example skiing lines in Alaska. But when you are learning and trying to progress, falling is very important. If you are on top of a forty footer and you have crashed off of a forty footer and it didn't hurt, you can be on top of another forty footer and say, I can do this. I could fall and

it probably won't hurt. You know that it is possible to not get hurt on something like that. I am actually curious to see how I am affected by the crash I had three months ago, that is a whole different level man.

John: Do you want to talk about that?

Jonny: Sure (laughing). I was skiing a line in Alaska, and Alaska is very different from anywhere else. It is just so big and the features are so large and you are taking what you know about skiing and you are applying it to a much different sport. I was taking my scale that I have created with “regular” mountains in North America and applying that scale to the mountains in Alaska. The line that I skied it was really big and it was probably a couple thousand feet long. I wasn't going to hit any cliffs or anything, but I skied fall line and I was hoping to get onto this turtle back spine which just kind of came out of the snow out of the pitch. I was hoping to be able to ski up onto the spine in the middle of this line and the sluff would be going around me and I realized that this spine just came out super steep and it was probably thirty feet high. It was like nothing I had ever seen before, I mean you see a turtle back spine you just don't think like that they could get that big. I am skiing towards it and I realized that I can't get on it. Then I realized that I have a couple tons of snow coming at me from the sluff. I had a second to think about it, another split second moment, and within that split second moment I thought I either try to get onto that spine and I get nailed by my sluff, or I point it and destroy myself because it wasn't really ideal for straight lining. I decided within that split second to try to crank a turn hoping the sluff was far enough away from me that I could get away under and around it. However I had no idea what was going to happen. And I think I decided to turn right instead of left because the slope was sort of funneling left,

heading towards the spine. I thought that the snow might be going in that direction and the second I initiated my turn I saw a trickle of snow, and *another one of those split second moments* and I was like oh no! Oh no! My sluff hit me like a freaking bus, like nothing I had ever experienced. I had been in some sluffs around Whistler, and it is like a little bit around your boot, maybe and you kind of lose your balance a little bit. But this was a bus! This was just boom, it hit me like nothing I had never felt, and immediately I was going twice as fast as I was before, and the violence of it was like nothing else. Stuff yanking on you and you don't know if you are up or down. Immediately my full faced helmet got packed with snow, so I wasn't breathing and I just kept falling and falling and falling and I couldn't believe that it was this rough. I started to get worried about the breathing and then it kind of started to slow down and I started to get my hands to my face, and then boom I got hit again, I just got fucking smacked down the mountain. I managed to work myself to the end of one of the sluffs but it was building up, it was pretty rough, and I continued to get beat down and beat down.

John: Could you breathe at that point?

Jonny: No and I really got to a point beyond. We talked about earlier about that eighty footer onto rocks, that time I was in the air, and I was like this is going to wreck me, but I didn't think that I was dying. *But this one in Alaska I accepted the idea that I was going to die.* Because it just seemed too rough. I didn't know when it was going to stop. And I realized if it didn't stop soon then I was going to pass out and people were too far away, and I knew all this and yeah, it is done. What I found interesting about it is that as terrifying as it was it also seemed kind of peaceful. Once I came to that realization I just kind of let it go. And it was so

violent and then I came to a stop. I rip my helmet off and I am spitting up bloody snow and getting the snow out of my mouth and out of my throat, and I think thank goodness, and I look down at my legs and it is like this [motions that his leg was at a 90 degree angle mid way down his femur] nasty angle in the middle of my quad. People talk about shock and say, oh my God that must have been rough. But compared to what I was going through, I was like sweet. I thought I was going to come to and I was going to be destroyed. I didn't know what to expect.

John: Well you accepted death.

Jonny: Yeah dude, it was pretty wild. And then I was stuck on the snow for like forty-five minutes while people tried to get to me. That was what it took for them just to get to me. Then we had to get down the mountain.

John: So what were you thinking?

Jonny: I was thinking about a bunch of stuff. I was mostly disappointed with myself and embarrassed that I had made that mistake.

John: Was this in a competition?

Jonny: No this was filming, just a few months ago with a European production, which I think was part of the problem. Had I been there with TGR [an elite and experienced extreme sport filming company] I think they would have helped me a lot more. I mean being a rookie in Alaska I don't blame anybody other than myself. But there was a big language barrier so it was all me, I was making all the judgements for myself.

John: Like you didn't have Will Burkes (a highly experienced BM free skiing resource person) there to give you some info?

Jonny: Exactly or to say like make sure you ski it like this. Or like see that spine it looks this big but it is really three times the size. So stuff like that because everyone I was with there were all rookies in Alaska, even the production company. When I was lying there I was actually thinking about my career, I thought ok this is my femur, it's broken now, how badly I did not know. I had actually thought that my lower leg was broken as well, my tib and fib, I thought I had broken those also. And there was a really good chance that my knee was messed as well. I thought I had destroyed my lower leg, well my entire leg. And yeah I actually came to terms with it though. I was like, I am alive, it is ok. I don't know, maybe stuff that helps you perform well, helps just being able to cope with injury and trauma. A lot of people let it bring them down. If you are not the type of person that can deal with those situations, well you need to make yourself that person. The fact is my reality changed, this is now my reality. I can't be upset over what I am going to miss in the next three months, or what is going to come because of this accident. This is now what I have to deal with. Cope.

John: In situations like dropping off eighty foot cliffs, or getting hit by your sluff, you talk about these moments that are filled with a huge amount of information analysis such as decision making, self analysis, and analysis of the conditions. Does time slow down for you during those moments enabling you to perform so much cognitive activity in a single moment?

Jonny: Yeah actually it does, and I actually feel that it is those times that you end up being addicted to. It is where everything is forgotten. I find it actually very enlightening. As much as I am thinking about stuff, it is just coming to me. I am not thinking of anything else except for this one very

special time. It might be an eighty footer to stomp. It is the in between where you are in this zone and you are preparing to for what you don't know. But I think it is those moments that you end up being hooked on. You know it is this connection to something. I don't know what.

John: What do you think helps you be that connected to the moment when you are skiing?

Jonny: Well I think, it has to be the self awareness that allows me to do it. Man, I think it is a number of things that have gotten me to that point. I think injuries have been a big part of it. My first injury I broke my jaw and had my mouth wired shut for a month and I think I got to learn from my mistakes. I can't prevent them. I found that time really tough because I was really on my own. I get these rushes of self-fulfillment over doing something that some people that might find crazy. And it is not self-fulfillment like 'I am the man, I totally stomped that'. It is more like I brought myself to do something and I was able to control the situation. It is a feeling that I can't really describe. I know that the most emotional moment I have had skiing was in France for that final, where I nailed my line and felt really good about it. The finish line was kind of away from where the spectators were watching and there were a lot of them. I came to the finish line and it usually takes a while to allow myself to come down from what I had just done. Your heart is pounding and you are shaking. I put my head down, and this is what I usually do at the end of competitions before I talk to anybody. I stop and I go through what I had just done, I visualize what I did and try to compare it to what I visualized before I had done it. It is a bit of some sort of closure, because you really give a lot of yourself. It is life or death basically. You are not going out there and

swinging a bat. You are controlling a day in your life that could turn out so wrong. I remember getting to the bottom, head down, poles in my armpits, you know just relax, get my heart rate down and visualizing the run that I had just done. And all of a sudden all of these kids surrounded me and they are all yelling in French you know numero une and I didn't know what the hell they were saying but it sounded good. They got me to sign their helmets and stuff and I found that I must have been in a serious emotional state you know because like I said about giving so much of myself out there and I basically broke down, with these kids all around. Because personally just being able to have done what I did, I found very fulfilling and it was also the realization of my ultimate goal of whatever, I guess to have people stoked on me to watch me ski. Never had I thought that I could be one of those guys. I was just going to try to be my best to be one of those guys. And at that moment I totally broke down.

I focus on getting ready for it. It ends up being quite a rush, a massive rush because all of a sudden people are talking to you and want to do interviews. I kind of ended up losing perspective and I think that's what happened to me this year. I just lost that perspective. I have to re vamp my whole deal, and I think this injury is really going to allow me to do that. That is what I find so crazy about the last year and a half because when I was preparing for all the stuff, I was never thinking that I am going to be this guy. I was always thinking about doing whatever I can to be this guy, I mean what does Gandhi say, "total effort is total victory." And that is how I went into it. So then when it actually happened I wasn't ready for it because I wasn't prepared for it. I never expected it to happen. So yeah so that's what I think I have been trying to deal with the last little bit. In Snowbird I was doing

well, I was actually in third after the first day and that was just this year. I had only skied three days prior to it because I had torn my MCL the month before so I go in and I didn't think I was going to be competitive and I ended up being third. For the final day a TV crew wanted to do a feature piece on route finding, how to choose your route and how to get psyched up. And when you are inspecting to some extent I do think about scoring. You know as much as it is a personal thing I have to think about what other people are going to be going for. And in any case we did a route finding mission and they put a microphone on me and I talked about how to do it, and something like that is really where I want to be right, on TV, one of the celebrities at the comps. But it really affected my focus and my preparation for the final and my inspection for that matter. Usually I am very quiet and alone and here I am with a new responsibility. So stuff like that that you need to deal with once you break into the (celebrity) scene.

John: So how did the final go?

Jonny: Oh I crashed really hard. It was going pretty well, I had picked a pretty aggressive final part of my line, it was more like a one hundred percent feature. And usually I think in skiing something where you are one hundred percent, you have less confidence, in that as the challenge goes up your confidence kind of goes down.

John: Is that because you are so close to a point where you have no previous experience to draw from?

JL Exactly, it is kind of, it can go either way. If it goes over one hundred percent you are pretty much pooched. And maybe, once you are committed to your line after inspection you can't change it. I have to remember

that I am doing them a favor. And I should concentrate on what it is I need to do in order to do well. I should have been a little quicker and said, why don't I compete and then right when it is done we can go back up and pretend it was as before the comp.

John: How do you refocus during a run when something unexpected happens?

Jonny: Stuff like that happens, even the year I won in Snowbird, I hit a cliff and when I landed there were rocks under the snow, and thinking about that experience, a lot of it comes down to luck. I had no idea it was going to happen, it just worked out. Something like that you just deal with. Sometimes you don't have control over those variables that will get you. Something like that happens so quickly, if you are skiing along and all of a sudden you see something that you didn't see before and maybe for only a split second but at least you have that split second to react. Those unknown variables that you have no control over, you just have to deal with them. I did a downwards sloping cliff where the cliff itself was twenty five feet high and probably sixty feet of distance and I spun off of it. But when I spun off of it, I clipped a rock with my ski. I knew it would be better for me to try to get somewhat around, so I kept with it and I ended up doing this corked three [off axis three-sixty] off this cliff and I stomped it. Sticking with it enabled me to make a less than ideal situation turn out pretty good.

John: Is there anywhere else in your life where you get the same enjoyment/love as you do with skiing?

Jonny: Um (long pause) uh, (long pause) not so much, not to the same love. I know that in the summers I used to go to this rope swing up at one dock and I remember being there and convincing myself to try a double

back flip because of the whole challenge thing. I am not there to enjoy the beauty of the lake, I am there because there is a freaking rope swing. And you know I had never done a double back flip off of a rope swing but I was thinking that it has got to be doable. And it is the same thing, the consequences are less, I am not working out in order to do better rope swings. You know but it is the same sort of deal where I am on top and I really need to focus on what I need to really focus on, what I need to do. Every once and a while if my take off isn't right and I go for it anyway, it is going to go very wrong. I need to concentrate and focus on that. So I guess that is the same challenge.

John: How does skiing a hundred percent feature which has severe consequences if it goes poorly, affect your preparation?

Jonny: It shakes you, it makes you less confident. It rocks you and it is the mental strength that carries you through it. It is a no fall zone so your confidence goes down because of that but you have to convince yourself to bring it up because you are fighting it in your head. And until your confidence is at a certain level I don't think you are going to ski at a level to perform there. So if I am not able to get my level of confidence there, that's when I say it is not worth it.

John: When your confidence gets knocked down, how do you bring it back up closer to a hundred percent?

Jonny: You rely on things like your physical strength. You try to find transitions that are good and you can rely on that to some extent. But I think when the conditions are really bad you can go either way. It is just confidence, it is like a day where there is a ton of snow and I want to hit cliffs, and I get to the cliff I am like, oh no because the cliff is really bad, or I am not feeling it for some

reason. At the same time I am excited because there is a lot of snow, then I can say I can do this because of the snow. But your confidence when there is no snow goes down because you are having trouble getting stoked. There isn't much to get you excited to do this. And a lot of times it can bring you down. Because you realized that you're chances of being injured are that much greater and you just rely on your strength and you spend time skiing in conditions like that. You practice cranking that turn through hard pack moguls. But a lot of times in the comps, generally the stuff that you wouldn't usually do is when the conditions are bad. When the conditions are good, it is all stuff that you would do anyway. But when the conditions are not good it's like even though you are going smaller, you are stepping up even more because the conditions are so poor you are skiing that much better. And mentally you have to be stronger.

John: Is there anything you have learned from the mountain that you have taken into the rest of your life?

Jonny: Um, (long pause) I think that it touches on how quickly your reality can change, and how you are trying to be in control as much as possible but there are always going to be things out of your control. And you can't let that choke you up. Some people really allow things to get them down especially things that are out of their control. Life is too short, how can you let that stuff bug you man. As much as I prepare for the future, you have to love what is going on at the moment. You can't always say, I can't wait until I am doing this or I can't wait until I have accomplished that. You just have to chill out.

John: And being in the mountains has helped develop that?

Jonny: That, and all the preparation. I moved to Whistler when I was eighteen. And I remember every spring I would have trouble living because I felt that I needed to do something with my life. I thought, Should I leave Whistler? Should I go to school? And every spring it was becoming more difficult to stay happy. I had this drive that I think is in most people, to want to do something with their lives. I remember one morning I woke up, it was five in the morning and I went and sat in the living room and the sun was coming up and I broke it down. I was like ok, life is about being happy, and I almost said this out loud to myself. Ok so what are you going to do to be happy? What makes you happy? Skiing! Ok so I guess you have to keep skiing. How are you going to do that? And I just tried to figure out what I could do with the limited amount of education that I did have, which was none. And I was like ok, let's try to be a pro. And it took me a year. That first season I got all the equipment that I needed and I played with the world tour and the North American tour, mostly to see if I had some potential. And the next summer I quit smoking, cigarette smoking that is, because I was a cigarette smoker. I was by no means an athlete. I remember my roommate the fall before I did well coming upstairs and I had shaved my head that morning, and I just said, Dan "It is go time!" I gained sixteen pounds of straight up muscle. But it took a lot, a lot of me to make that sort of change in my lifestyle and not only that but the people that I was surrounded by, they were not doing that.

John: So did you change that environment?

Jonny: No! I was able to focus a lot. I did stay in my room a lot. And there was stress from friends to hang with them. Like, why aren't you partying with me? And you know the preparation was pretty massive. Another quote said "success is ninety nine percent

preparation." I have read some self help books which really stuck with me. *And if I didn't do well in the comps or get the sponsors and make the money I still would have learned a lot and it would have applied to anything else I did. If I found out I wasn't able to do what I am doing now I would have been able to take the lessons I have learned and applied them to like school or business or whatever.* And I think even quitting smoking, that was a big step, it took some serious mental strength. One day I was like no, no more. And I broke it down again. I have to quit at some point. I am either going to have to quit when I am sick and a doctor tells me I have to quit because it is killing me, but I am going to have to quit someday. And I am able to apply that to other things also.

John: And then it came together that year?

Jonny: Yeah I did one year of comps. And not to toot my own horn but I think it is a pretty crazy story. That spring I decided I was going to do it. That summer I collected all the equipment I needed, to be organized and you know have responsibilities I just decided to bring it upon myself. And then in the fall working at sure foot, I realized that I needed some money to get to comps and I sold this guy some ski boots, and he started an air-conditioning place in Florida when he was twenty. Now he is forty five, and now he is the biggest air-conditioning whatever. And I was like dude, do you ever help guys pursue their dreams? And he was like what do you need? And I told him what I needed and he flew me around and got me some stuff. That year, every comp I went into I fell. But I was nominated for sick birds a lot. And I had lines that people said I would have been top three if that worked out better for me. And that summer I just like, now, now it is for real. I know that I can do it. I just have to put it together.

John: And then after that first year of falling and getting the taste of it, what did you work on?

Jonny: I worked on my focus, and I think working out was a big part of that. Because when I am running I find it to be seriously meditating with the breathing and you do a lot of thinking and I would think about skiing lines and faces and stuff. I really became involved with what it is that I wanted to do. I now had some pictures that I could show to sponsors and stuff like that. I was put on a list of dudes who could make up a good team for Dynastar in Canada. I showed commitment to it, by immediately sending e-mails and some photos. I would spend days writing a one page letter to make sure it was worded properly and that it was saying what I wanted it to say. They put me on the team because I was very passionate, and I had a vision. And that's what is interesting about what I am doing now, because it is not about the skiing. It is a lot of business. There are dudes who were awesome skiers back a few years, but they were the classic ski bum. You know they didn't want to make the phone calls. Like in Snowbird I was staying with the North Face team and I had to go to dinners instead of going to bed. Actually do you know what messed up my focus this year?

John: No what?

Jonny: A girl! I forgot about that. I don't want to blame her there is no doubt about that. But it definitely changes things. She was also competing. And we were sharing a bed which is not ideal, but oh she is just so sweet. Mmmm. But I should be able to rise above it. But at the end of the day, I am but a man.

John: So what do you think about next year with the lady?

Jonny: I think it is going to be very much me against myself. Challenging me vs. me because of my injury. I am not going to be out there trying to prove to everyone that I am the best. I am going to be out there proving to myself that I can still ski. You know and at the end of the day if I make it down and my leg didn't hurt that much, then I am going to be stoked.

John: What recommendations do you have for people who would like to pursue a career in BM freeskiing?

Jonny: Well *basically you have to become what you do*. That is pretty much it. At the end of the day, you can't have regrets. Like after my first season, I was like man I would have done well if I was in better shape. You can't expect to be successful if you are not trying your best. Yeah become what you do and take it seriously. And that is the only way you can, and that applies to everything. It is an equation for success. But I think if you are not passionate enough about something, I don't think you are going to be able to do that. I think it has to come from within really. For some odd reason there is the pressure from society, they would say something like, oh you'll grow out of it [BM Freeskiing]. Fuck you! You know, watch this. And that's why I am really hoping to make this into something really great. This whole career thing, you don't need to do what the man tells you to. That's where I think there is a lot of pressure coming from, to do that, and I want to get that message across that you don't have to do that. But I think that I am pretty fortunate in the way that I am able to handle things and look at things. And I thank skiing for it. And not just skiing but I think putting myself in those compromised situations. Experiencing less than ideal situations, and it gives you good perspective. A lot of people are used to days when nothing bad happens, nothing is wrong

and everything goes as they want it to. And then when the movie they wanted to rent is not there, it is the worst day ever.

John: Being surrounded by people in the party scene environment, how did that affect your preparation?

Jonny: I think being in that environment actually helped a little bit, seeing these guys not do shit, it made me want to try that much harder. They would be like, Jonny lets go bla, bla, bla, and I would be like, ok see you later. I am going to run or go to the gym or work on the computer. And I wasn't trying to be like I am going to do this (in a snooty voice) or that I am holier than thou, nothing like that. I just found that it was motivating that I didn't want to do what they were doing.

John: Anything else you would like to add?

Jonny: I did some writing recently and I wrote that I found it vexing that temporary

insanity allows a person to experience momentary enlightenment. I think that is what it really comes down to. It is kind of the way it is. You can be out of the realm in order to dive in. I really don't know why I want to do this so much and why I feel it is important. And to try to explain it, it is just hard. Why did people want to have children? I think they just need to.

Reader's Note

When Jonny first read the interview you just read, he emailed us the following response : "I just read it and it's a pretty heavy dive into my frame of mind. I hope people enjoy reading it. I'd say it's cool for my email to be included with the interview. I would be keen to hear what people think. If there is anything more you or Terry would like to explore with me, I'm totally game. I'm in the process of mounting a comeback and I'm finding it to be a very interesting mental challenge".

Email: jl@jonnylaw.com