



# Enduro's Winter Soulmate

Will the Red Bull Raid uphill/downhill shred event reinvigorate big mountain competitions?

by **Dave Zook**

**Nothing creates frozen snot snow conditions** quite like an April freeze-thaw cycle—minus the thaw. And a day before the inaugural Raid, a skin-uphill-then-charge-downhill event held last April at Squaw Valley, the venue sat firm under graybird skies. Competitors stressed that the event would be survival skiing at best. Adding to the butterflies, skiing legends JT Holmes and Daron Rahlves were on the start list.

And then, on the morning of the event, the skies went blue and skiers and boarders were served up thinly creamed corn, on top of a fat base, beneath unfiltered California sun. In other words, organizers got lucky as hell, and in the end, Red Bull, who put on the event, announced Raid will be back at Squaw for a second year in 2020.

The Raid format combines two components: timed skinning on the way up, followed by a judged big mountain contest on the way down. It's a mass start for the up, but one at a time for the down. Competitors mix in with the other disciplines (snowboarders, skiers, women, and men) at the start gates, but are scored by category. The descent is ranked by three

judges, with control, line choice, fluidity, and air taking the most weight. To do well, competitors basically need to haul ass uphill, and then make proper turns, jump off stuff, be creative, and not crash on the down.

If that sounds to you a lot like the enduro mountain biking criteria—minus the subjective scoring—you're not far off. The Raid combines uphill endurance with freeride descending skills. Enduro, if you don't know, has helped to revitalize mountain biking, merging as it does two formerly independent activities in trail riding/XC and downhill. Enduro racing, which debuted in the US in the early 2010s, filled a niche in the mountain bike world, by bringing together disparate disciplines. It's an event that reflects the way many mountain bikers actually ride bikes outside of competitions. Similar to enduro, the Raid format combines touring and big mountain freeriding. When the Raid returns next spring, the snowsports industry may want to ask itself if the event could also trigger some far-reaching enduro-like enthusiasm.

Daron Rahlves, one of America's winningest world cup ski racers, creator

of the Rahlves' Banzai Tour, and featured athlete in a handful of ski films, was tapped by Red Bull (a sponsor) for input prior to the 2019 event. They discussed if the Raid would be of interest to the ski and snowboard backcountry crowd. Rahlves strongly agreed: "It takes what a lot of us love to do and puts it in a competition format," he says.

The venue was Squaw's Silverado Canyon. The uphill course navigated a cat track several hundred yards, then cut to the right, ending at the top of the downhill venue at Squaw's High Camp. Steep enough to get the lungs wheezing and necessitate a few kick turns, it was still a sprint by backcountry skinning standards. The fastest folks finished in about 15 minutes.

The downhill was held on a rarely open matrix of steep and rocky north-facing terrain. The nasty, massive closeout airs were easy enough to avoid (but some were still in play), leaving the vast majority of athletes to launch features in the five to 20 foot range. An extra steep and spicy chute far to skier's right also saw some action.



Considering a good portion of the entrants were new to big mountain events, they could also descend lines without leaving the ground. About half the field qualified for the final round.

Squaw local JT Holmes first competed on Silverado in 1995. He's had a long, sometimes tumultuous relationship with "Silvy," suffering two big crashes there while competing on the Freeride World Tour. "Familiarity affords me the luxury of feeling confident that I won't die, which differentiates the experience from many high-pressure moments of my career," says Holmes. "That said, I didn't underestimate the terrain."

I competed in the men's snowboard division. A pole malfunction on my first hike, left me in dead last for awhile, but I squeaked in to qualify for heat two. Gassing myself for a first place among snowboarders in the uphill in my second attempt, I ended up in third with a playful line packed with small cliffs. For both laps the downhill was more exhilarating than terrifying, and the overall camaraderie more laid-back huckfest than agro.

The top skiers, as tends to happen in big mountain events, delivered a clinic of backflips, 360's, and teeth-chattering edge control, one-upping each other for gnar dominance. Rahlves, to no one's great surprise, took first for his blazing speed. "I feel the formula was pretty spot-on for the first year," says Bryan Barlow, competition director for Dragonfli Media Technologies, which worked with Red Bull to produce the event.

So, will Raid (and possible spin-off events) do for skiing and snowboarding what enduro did for mountain biking? The big mountain contest scene—what the downhill portion of Raid is similar to—is in a volatile place; starved for prize money even as participation and event offerings are up. And while longer uphill Skimo (ski mountaineering) racing has a steadily growing following in the U.S., it remains a lung-crusher of a sport mostly confined to European lunacy. Still, the first Raid sold out quickly.

JT Holmes, who finished in third place after stomping a huge committed cliff drop that no one else attempted, is confident the format has the chops to bring the snow community together for the greater good. "It certainly fills a void. Raid winners aren't endurance athletes, and they're not just flashy freeriders. They're highly efficient mountain travelers that absolutely rip," said Holmes.



Skier **Daron Rahlves**