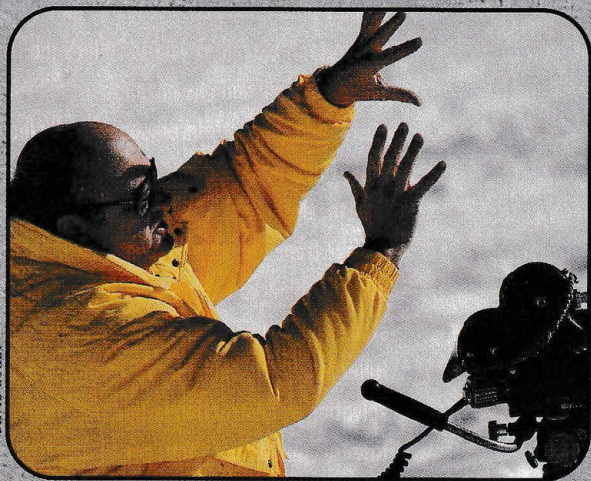


What's up with **Warren Miller?**

In 1989, the man who brought ski movies to the masses sold his production company to his son and a partner. Eight years later, they're trying to hold onto longtime Miller fans while wooing the young MTV generation.



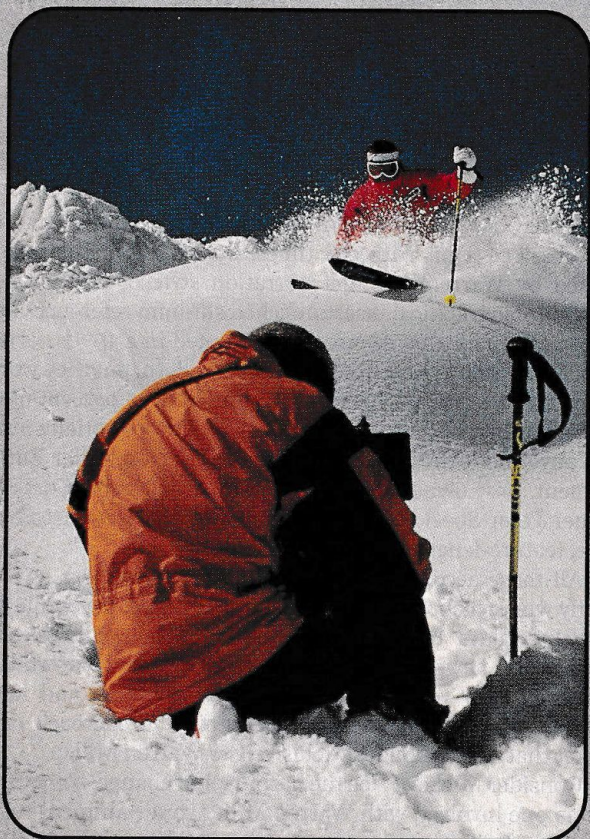
DAVID LOKEY

THE ORIGINAL: *A hands-on director, Warren has been making movies since 1950.*



ANNE KRAUSE

GENERATION NEXT: Warren's son Kurt Miller (left) and partner Peter Speek bought the production company in 1989.



GARY NATE

THE MAN BEHIND THE LENS: Bill Heath captures the ski scene at Steamboat, Colorado.

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK: Slicing up some New Zealand powder for the eye in the sky.

LARGE PHOTO BY MAX BERVY/WARREN MILLER FILMS



MAX BERVY/WARREN MILLER FILMS

CATCH A RISING STAR: Mickey Price takes center stage in the latest Miller flick.

IT'S 15 DEGREES, AND A WINTER GALE IS MOVING FAST TOWARD THE 11,000-FOOT CORNICE THAT HANGS OVER THE WORLD AND SNOWBIRD, UTAH. THE PRECARIOUS PLATFORM OF SNOW HOLDS SEVEN SHIVERING SKIERS AND \$50,000 WORTH OF FILM EQUIPMENT. Hip cocked, Mickey Price faces a black 16mm Arriflex camera. He's rocking in his ski boots, trying to say something funny. The lens stares back at him, reflecting tufts of blond hair half-tamed by a dirty stocking hat. He wears a backpack that contains an avalanche shovel, an extra hat and four cans of tunafish.

BY LOLLY MERRELL

"Mickey Price, here at the Bird with good friends and good scenery," he says. The weak attempt at sarcasm doesn't work. The man hidden behind the camera, Bill Heath, stops the film, rocks back on his heels and stares at him, shaking his head. He coaxes Price with some questions while the temperature drops another five degrees and snow covers our tracks along the Baldy Traverse, a high ridgeline that leads skiers into the double-black gladed chutes of High Baldy. Two other skiers, Suzanne Sawyer and Andy Hunter, start construction on a snow sofa with their avalanche shovels. Another skier, Caleb Martin, lays down to nap in the snow. I pace to keep my wet telemark boots from turning to marble. "What are you, Mickey?" Heath asks, his voice muffled by the camera. "I'm a circumstance," he answers proudly, splitting into a grin.

This is the third day I've spent in Snowbird with "the talent" of Warren Miller Entertainment's latest feature film, "Snowriders II: The Journey Continues." "Talent" being a phrase that Heath, who's spent 14 years shooting for Warren Miller, doesn't like to use. "The skiing is the focus of the film," he says. "Personalities just happen." In this case, Mickey Price has been discovered—first by production manager Max Bervy, when Price sent in a homemade video from his home in Big Sky, Montana, and second by Heath, who has worked Price's deadpan humor throughout the filming. Of course, it helps that Price can launch off 35-foot drops, pop into a double helicopter and stick his landings every time. We film from 7 A.M. to 5 P.M. daily, a grueling schedule that doesn't quite equate with my image of what a Miller film seemed to be: a soirée in the snow with world-class skiers, dream terrain and very little work. Clearly, I've been wrong for years, which only shows that the movies have succeeded in their mission to lift an audience into the appetite-whetting, ethereal universe of fantasy skiing.

If there's a formula to hypnotizing an auditorium of Miller fans, it's partly in the relentless work that keeps the films so seamless. The formula works, and why shouldn't it? After all, the company has been perfecting the same movie for almost 50

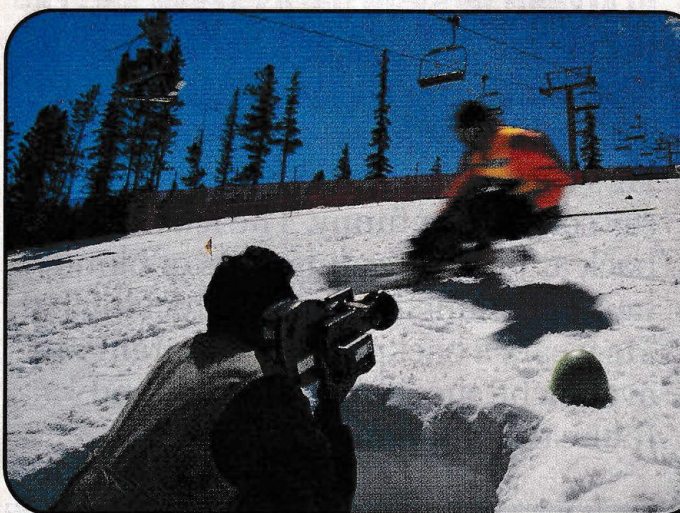


years. The locations, fashions, ski equipment and technique have changed a bit with the times, but a Miller film is still marked by Warren's distinct narration style of corny jokes, puns, autobiographical inserts, clichéd ski-bum references and a sense of humor that seems forever rooted in a 1970s variety show. Miller's films may not be entirely modern, but they work: Last year's "Snowriders" grossed \$2.1 million, 15 percent more than any other Warren Miller release and exponentially more than any other extreme-genre flick. And Warren Miller Entertainment, now owned and operated by Miller's son Kurt and partner Peter Speck, is the only company that produces box-office, feature-length ski films.

All these accolades should be proof that Miller's style is exactly where it should be: The same as last year. But while the company enjoys an exclusive niche, it's facing an increasing threat from newer, cinematically risky ski and snowboard movies by edgy young directors like Greg Stump and Mike Hatchett. These newcomers are beginning to encroach on a market that once belonged exclusively to Warren Miller.

Consider Mickey Price the harbinger of change, something that no one involved with Warren Miller Entertainment really wants to admit. The company is staring at a new era, and it's not entirely because the industry is forcing it to change, or because younger filmmakers are trying to knock the reigning studio off its 50-year throne, or even because the formula is tired. It's also because Warren Miller, the man, is more of a legend than a necessity in the studio these days, and the unique narration that has preserved the film's cult audience is quietly

ABOVE PHOTO BY MAX BERVY/WARREN MILLER FILMS
INSET PHOTO BY BOB RANKIN

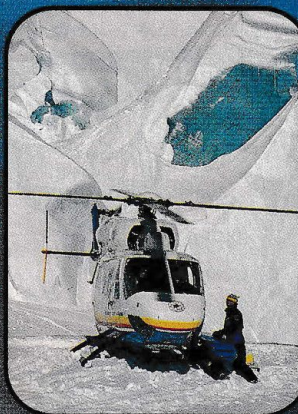


MARK WEAVER

IT'S ALL A BLUR: Cameraman Brian Sisselman documents life in the fast lane at Breckenridge, Colorado.

UP ABOVE DOWN UNDER:
Chris Davenport
flies the New Zealand
skies.

GOING UP? Production
manager Max Bervy
loads the chopper.

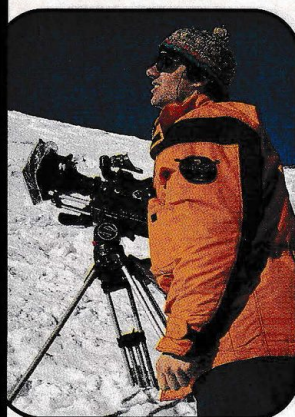


as Price. I ask him why he wants to be in the film. "Actually, I'm worried people will think I'm a chump for doing these movies," he admits. "It's like people won't take your skiing seriously if you're in a Warren Miller film." It's hard to believe anyone could discount the film's skiing: Miller's stunts are recognized worldwide, and the skiers are topnotch: Martin, for example, has a spot on the "C Team" of the U.S. Freestyle Team and Price has dabbled in freestyle mogul competition. But Price, Martin and Hunter represent a younger audience that doesn't quite fit on the Warren Miller hit list. They don't appreciate the long-standing cult aspect of the films, they're not entertained by Warren's narrations, and they would just as soon rent a Greg Stump video as drive to one of Miller's feature venues.

Heath, a 34-year old Canadian with a biting wit, recognizes the generation gap, as does everyone else in the studio. But there isn't a lot he can change. Creative liberties are hard to come by in a Miller film; altering the formula is like trying to change the recipe for Coke. Heath did manage to squeak a variation into "Snowriders," a short retro segment featuring 1970s

disco-style ski clothes and lip-glossed girls with mirrored glasses making come-ons to the camera. It was a nice change, but one that Kurt and Speck said met with opposition from Warren.

Today the filming is straightforward. The skiers will be shot as they zoom down the mountain, spraying powder toward the lens. We head down from Baldy Traverse and perch on the lip of a catwalk. The skiers fly off in succession, then climb back above a steeper lip. Price is popping into daffys, helicopters, Moroccans, anything to deplete his twitchy energy. Then he suddenly stops



SHOOTING STARS: *Heath sets up a shot at Copper.*

and eats some tunafish. Later in the day, the crew climbs into the expansive, unbroken Mineral Basin and huddles under a cornice. As the skiers begin to bob through the pristine powder, a pack of snowmobiles unexpectedly scribbles up the canvas of white. I watch the skiers slice through the messed-up snow and know we won't see it in the final cut.

Such is the hit-or-miss business of making ski movies. The week was filled with setting up shots: waiting for the sky to clear, the snow to stop, the snow to come, the landing to be right or for Price to say the right, hilarious thing. Typically, out of 3,000 feet of film shot for a feature, only 300 will get used. None of us, including Heath, has any idea what 300 feet of footage will make it into the movie.

THE SCREENING ROOM AT WARREN MILLER ENTERTAINMENT'S HEADQUARTERS IN BOULDER, COLORADO, IS DECIDEDLY UNGLAMOROUS. Tucked in a blond-brick building on the edge of the industrial part of town, the space is like an insurance office, with permanently sealed windows,

being trimmed every year. "We're deliberately working in more voiceovers from skiers," says Speck, and then adds a bit solemnly, "I guess we're trying not to rely on Warren as much."

IT'S BREAKFAST, AGAIN, AT SNOWBIRD'S CLIFF LODGE AND HEATH IS MONITORING THE BOUNTY LIKE AN NFL NUTRITIONIST.

He's concocting herbal laryngitis recipes for Hunter, a phenomenal telemark skier and first-time Miller star yanked from the resort's janitorial staff. Sawyer watches over the table with detached wisdom. A 30-year-old Utah local who works at a consulting firm, Sawyer was snapped up in 1992 for a role in "Black Diamond Rush," and after appearing in six films has earned a reputation for skiing the crappiest snow at any pitch. She's super-model attractive and seems amused by the newcomers, Price and Hunter. She shrugs off her minor celeb status: "There's not a lot of that, and it's not the reason I've been in the films."

Certainly, skiing in a Miller film doesn't guarantee the stardom of a Glen Plake or a Scot Schmidt, but I'm not convinced that Miller skiers don't secretly hope for some minor recognition, especially if you're as center-stage



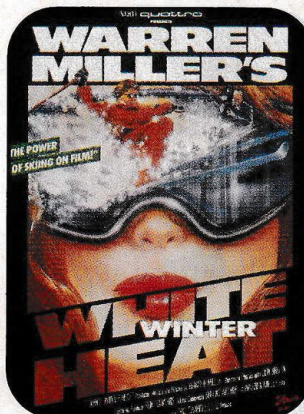
HOMETOWN HERO: *Suzanne Sawyer at Snowbird.*

cubicles and corkboard ceilings. Film awards, framed magazine articles and marquis-sized posters of Warren Miller's films, including "The Skiers," his first-ever production from 1949, line the walls like a hall of fame.

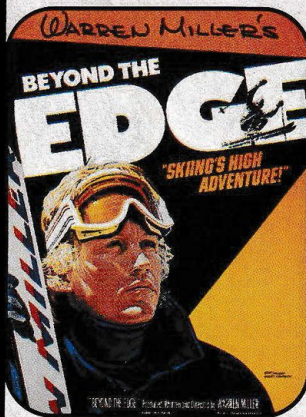
The company was based in San Diego until Kurt Miller and Peter Speek, who bought it from Warren in 1989, moved the enterprise to Boulder in 1993. Kurt says the move contributed to their current stability, thanks to a closer proximity to the mountains and Boulder's relatively affordable cost of living. "You know what Warren asked Kurt when we moved to Boulder?" says Speek. "He leaned in the doorway, and with a straight face, said 'You're not going to fire me, are you?'" Warren wasn't alone in his thinking. Many industry observers believed that Speek and Kurt would overhaul the studio and make the features more cutting-edge. In other words, they'd instantly can Warren and his narrations. "Why would we do that?" Speek says. "He's been doing it right for the last 50 years."

Speek and Kurt confront the possibility of losing the younger audience daily. But they attribute the threat less to competition than to the fidgety video-game nature of the MTV generation. "Our biggest challenge is staying fresh, entertaining the 16-year-olds without sending the 50-year-olds out of the theater," says Speek, a tanned fortyish Californian. He sits next to Kurt in their large office, complete with a viewing center and posters of the last three films. "But we can't make drastic changes. That'd be a feat greater than Evil Knievel trying to clear the Grand Canyon." Both Kurt and Speek admit they're not quite sure how to make the transition successfully, so instead of overhauling the features, they're using the Warren Miller name to reach out to younger audiences with a cable-television show and videos made from unused feature footage. These satellite ventures have been successful, but feature films are still the company's backbone, and every editing session is a new exercise in trying to bridge the generation gap.

The older audience that Speek and Kurt are trying to please includes Warren Miller, the man who at 73 still refers to himself as "the world's most successful ski bum" and the living ethos of the company. "Warren's philosophy is about passion," says Kurt, who has his father's meaty build. "Passion for life and skiing, for enjoying what you've got. We keep that philosophy in the films, but we don't do things the way Warren did. He was an individual running the company, handling everything from filming to marketing himself. These days, we're a team running the company." Warren is still involved with the feature films, although his editing input and narration time seem to dwindle a bit each year, and his solo approach has met some resistance from the "team" and created some challenging moments for Kurt. "We listen to everything Warren says," Kurt adds. "He's a



WHITE WINTER HEAT (1987)



BEYOND THE EDGE (1986)

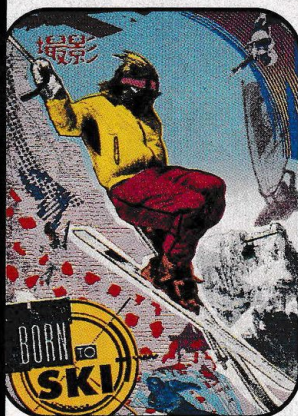
passion for marketing," he says abruptly. "Nowadays you can produce a ski video for \$500, but getting a theater to show it is the challenge. When I was involved in the business, I saw at least 40 guys come and go. They didn't have anything unique about their films ... just like the films Kurt and Peter are making now. Still, they're making more money than the studio has ever made, so I guess they're doing something right."

DON BROLIN, THE DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND WARREN MILLER'S SIDEKICK SINCE 1952, IS A 60-ISH MAN WITH AN ED MCMAHON SMILE.

The master of ceremonies for this special summer screening of "Snowriders II," he stands in front of an audience of about 25 people, explaining the editing process and handing out clipboards for feedback on the segments. I scan through the list looking for Snowbird. It's been three months since the Utah filming session. Price is working in Montana at a ski camp, Sawyer is nestled in her consulting job, Hunter is climbing the Wasatch Range while working slim hours at the resort and Martin is training with the Freestyle Team at Mount Hood. As the lights turn off, I expect no narration, just some rough-edited music to accompany the film. I'm shocked to hear Warren Miller, hidden behind the LCD projector, narrating live. Everyone in the audience seems surprised; they crane their necks to look at him. Sure enough,

there's that familiar voice, the dry monotone no older than it was 20 years ago. "Hi. I'm Warren Miller."

Until 1985, Warren narrated every feature live, chalking up as many as 100 one-night stands each year. In 1949 it was a production necessity, when he lived in a trailer in a Sun Valley parking lot and made his first film for \$400. From 1950 until 1956 he dragged an amplifier and projector to his venues, slowly gaining recognition while making ends meet through ski instruction and carpentry jobs. As the films gathered momentum,



BORN TO SKI (1991)



AERIAL MANEUVERS: *Bret Pajerski looks down on Breckenridge.*

he moved to San Diego to be closer to the movie industry. In 1984, he hooked up with Eric Chandler Ltd., a promotions firm that wanted to change the films (read: get rid of Warren's narration). Miller dropped the partnership in 1989. "In the 1950s, people started coming to see my films for two reasons: because I said funny things and to see extraordinary skiing," Warren says. "I still don't see why either of those things should change." These days, Warren flies occasionally to Boulder to write and edit his script, to preside at the screenings and offer opinions on the film in progress. He never stays more than a few days.

It wasn't until the Snowbird segment flashed onto the screen that I realized how much Warren still cares. The movie had already traveled through Winter Park, Killington, Alaska, New Zealand and British Columbia when we got to Utah. There was Price, grinning and tossing off his "I'm a circumstance" line. A song called "Bumblebee Tuna" kicked in, and shots of Price eating his tunafish were interspersed with the four skiers popping off the catwalk. The Snowbird segment had been altered at the last minute to include more of Price's commentary, and Warren hadn't had a chance to change his script. For almost 15 minutes he sat silent, clearly miffed by the air time allotted to Price. He waited in the back, tanned and bald, the reading light illuminating a scowl. During later segments, his voice wasn't as upbeat, he stumbled over notes that a production guy had scribbled in the margin, and he growled about an obscenity in one of the songs.

The next day, Max Bervy and I discussed Warren's role in the editing process. "We incorporate everyone's input," he says. "And if Warren feels strongly about something, we usually follow suit." A former freestyle competitor, Bervy has worked in the office for seven years and oversees everything

COMING SOON

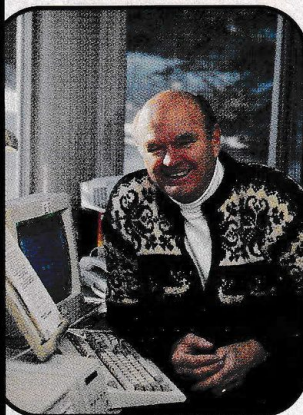
"Snowriders II: The Journey Continues" will debut on October 21 in Portland, Oregon, and play in more than 200 cities nationwide this winter. For information, call (800) 729-3456 or check Warren Miller Entertainment's Web site (www.warrenmiller.com).

from trip bookings and marketing to the on-location shoots. His office is filled with photos and memorabilia from exotic mountain resorts around the world.

We wander down the hall to the office of film editor Kim Schneider, who edits the films and cues the musical sound track on a Macintosh. His "studio" is a windowless, low-ceilinged space behind the storage racks. Like Warren, Kim comes to the Boulder office only when there's feature work to be done, usually for six weeks or so in spring and early summer. A ponytailed, kind-eyed man with a quick smile, Schneider was sleeping in Sun Valley parking lot 12 years ago when Warren met his kindred spirit and hired him to work on the films.

Part of Schneider's job is to wade through the towering pillars of CDs that Speak and Kurt have rodeoed into the office. He listens to a new track—today he's checking out a group called "The Souls"—and eventually plays it against some film footage to see if it meshes with the tone of the clip. The music is a more obvious method of keeping younger audiences hooked, and to no one's surprise, it's a change that doesn't always meet

with Warren's approval. "If kids want to watch a music video, put 'em in front of a television," Warren gripes. "The mountain and the skiers should be the stars, not the music." Objections aside, Kurt and Speak have been playing more lyric-heavy music to replace the dwindling Warren narrations. "I'd say we increase the music time, versus Warren's narration time, about 10 to 15 percent per film," says Speak. "We're careful to pair a group like, say, Rage Against the Machine, with something like a fast-paced moguls scene. That way, the older audience doesn't get caught by the



LIVING LEGEND: *Warren at home in Washington.*

music. They ride through on the fast pace of the clip."

Bervy and I watch some tapes from the Miller cable TV show, "Locals Only," and talk about the future. "We move slow and haven't taken a lot of risks," he says. "Snowriders II" will debut in late October and appear in some 500 theaters worldwide. It won't be much different, really, from the previous year's film, which wasn't much different from the film before that.

With Hollywood keeping a profit-hungry eye on the independent film world, it isn't out of the question to wonder if Warren Miller Entertainment might be snapped up by a big production company. While most folks in the studio laugh at such a proposition, Speak says someday, given the right circumstances, he and Kurt would consider such a deal. But for now, the small studio and its living legend will move only slowly toward the future. "We won't try anything too edgy," says Bervy. "No complex parts, no huge personalities. After all, we're not making anything more complicated than a ski film." ▲

LOLLY MERRELL is a SNOW COUNTRY contributing editor.