



Mallory Duncan hangs out on the stoop of the "Ice Box," his trusty van. [Mary Ashley Krough](#)

## GALACTIC BROWN... BUT CALL HIM GB

The sacrifices Mallory Duncan made for skiing deprived him of more than he realized until he set out on a journey to reclaim what he'd lost

by *Scott Yorko*

Like plenty of kids who start skiing before the age of two, Mallory Duncan had time to dream big about the future of his ski career. But where skiing has taken him is far different from where he dreamed it would when, as a child, his family traveled each weekend from California's Bay Area to Alpine Meadows.

DUNCAN STARTED RACING AT AGE eight, and opportunities soon followed to join development teams. "I wanted to be the first Black person to win an Olympic winter medal [in ski racing]," says Mallory, 29. The National Brotherhood of Skiing (NBS), a nonprofit that organizes and supports Black skiers, furthered his dream, putting him into its Olympic Scholarship program and helping cover

the plethora of ski-racing expenses and his tuition at Sugar Bowl Academy in Lake Tahoe, where he trained six days a week throughout high school.

"Mallory was always ready to go," says Henri Rivers, president of NBS and one of Duncan's year-round coaches in the late '90s. "He had good fundamentals and made good turns on edge, and he'd get on the hill and just

stay there. You'd always have to say 'Mallory, this is your last run. Time to pack it up.'"

Ski racing was everything to Duncan, but he never reached the level of Olympic prospect, nor did he make the cut for the powerhouse Division I team at the University of Vermont (UVM). But college has a way of expanding one's horizons, and Duncan instead walked onto the track team when he headed to UVM in 2011 to major in business administration with a concentration on entrepreneurship and a music minor. He won the conference championship in his discipline for three consecutive years.

"I ended up being way better at track than I was at ski racing, setting a couple of records in the 4x4, 400-meter hurdles and >>





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the 110-meter hurdles," he says. "I looked around and realized I was no longer the only Black athlete in the competitions. I had been so isolated from other people of color by ski racing my whole life, and suddenly I felt so much more relaxed." His saw how his braids and dark skin belonged; he started making beats and writing raps; and he began embracing and exploring his own Blackness, which he'd missed out on in the homogenously white world of ski racing.

"By choosing to be a skier and racer on this level, I had subconsciously made the decision to not be as involved in Black culture by not being surrounded by it," he says. "It'd be dope if that wasn't a forced decision—if I could be a ski racer without having to turn my back on Black culture and not feel like the only person doing this thing."

Through college, he fell out of love with skiing and needed a break. But afterward, like so many former racers, Duncan returned to skiing by way of the backcountry. A friend convinced him to guide rafting in Maupin, Oregon, then he followed his new guide friends to Bend for the winter, where he's currently based. Duncan found a used pair of AT boots for \$200 and began tagging along with a cobbled-together setup. He remembers following friend Pete Elmore up a ridge on Mt. Thielsen and skiing the southwest face in four to six inches of >>

[Left] A committing first turn delivers Duncan perfect powder in Oregon's Cascade Mountains. [2] Stratton Matteson

[Above] Duncan defends his 400-meter hurdles title while flying the University of Vermont colors. [3] Courtesy Mallory Duncan





fresh, stable powder, then going up for another lap and a half.

"That was a turning point for me," Duncan says. "It was the biggest day I'd done in good conditions, and I was stoked to know that I could explore all of this stuff. I started buying into Pete's philosophy that it's worth it to do multiple laps for a good work-to-reward ratio, and we just kept going out for big, long days all the time."

When Elmore left town, Duncan connected with Colin Landeck, a local mountaineer who wanted to climb steep lines. Together they skied the North Couloir on Broken Top and obscure lines on California's Mt. Shasta. Duncan later linked up with big-mountain splitboarders Stratton Matteson and the late Alex Kollar for a mission on Mt. Jefferson.

Skinning and bootpacking up a steep slope and breathing heavily brought on a rush more akin to racing on the track than between the gates. Being deep in nature with the freedom to express creativity through his ski style felt even more natural. Duncan explored new skintracks in his backyard in Bend and took a job as a salesman at the ski shop Crow's Feet, then as a sales rep for brands including Dynafit, Rab, Julbo,

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Pomoca and others.

Although his career aligned with his passions, Duncan was still one of few Black individuals in a predominantly white outdoor community and industry, and he says he shouldered a constant burden of proving that he belonged. When working at Crow's Feet, he'd often encounter customers who'd ask him if anyone else could help them buy touring bindings, assuming he was not knowledgeable about the gear. Even as a rep, Duncan says he's always

thinking of what he'll need to say at the beginning of a presentation to legitimize his expertise—dropping a reference to Fred Beckey's first ascent of Mt. Hood's Yocum Ridge or bringing his own beat-up touring boots into a store for a crampon fit demonstration.

Then, in the summer of 2020, when George Floyd's murder and the aftermath brought more awareness to the pervasive racial inequality in the U.S., particularly to white people, Duncan's racial isolation intensified. People from his ski academy with whom he hadn't spoken in years reached out to have conversations about race, offering themselves as allies.

"On some level, this was positive—but it was also really stressful and traumatic for me," Duncan says. "I was clearly one of the only Black people they knew, and it felt like they wanted me to relieve their white guilt more than empower Blackness. Yes, I want to see inclusivity and inequality addressed, but this felt awkward, and I didn't know what to say, didn't want to feel like I owed that conversation to everyone."

Duncan mostly stopped responding and retreated inward, living in a van, out of work and isolated even more from his family and diverse Bay Area friend groups by the pandemic.



He stayed out in nature and wrote raps to deal with the confusion. In one verse, under the name Galactic Brown, he writes:

*Yo I can't even THINK with all  
this white noise around me  
Surrounding me, trying to figure  
out what my grounding be  
With all this Black and white  
and wrong and right, I'm trying  
to find the ground between  
I'm Brown between...see at these  
depths you might find seaweed  
Trying to find the difference between  
me, my identity, and how they see me  
But when I feel that pressure pressed  
up on my neck, I can't breathe see  
Feel like I'm resting my back  
up on that green screen  
Because do Black lives really matter  
or is this scene just on repeat?  
Call me GB, cuz being  
Mallory ain't as easy  
In this white city I find that I'm  
choking on this free speech  
Cuz they either want me to vali-  
date them like a CPA*

*Or they stay sleepin'—cuz that's  
where the sweet dreams lay.*

Duncan still doesn't have the answers on how to talk to white people in his skiing and outdoor communities about this issue, but he knows shaming anyone for trying to engage on such a challenging topic isn't productive. Now that he's back in the sales rep field with new clients, he can pick who he works with based on how they walk the talk on inclusivity.

"Is it just a Black person in an ad put there by a bunch of white people because it's relevant, or are there BIPOCs incorporated into the team in the internal organization...so they're not just 'Blackwashing'?" he asks. "Are they also trying to elevate women?"

Ross Herr, director of sales and marketing for Dynafit, has known Duncan for years, working with him as a sales rep and bringing him on as an ambassador for the 2020/21 season. "He's a rock star rep and hard worker, as well as a strong, passionate skier who expressed interest to do more with us than just sell gear," says Herr. "He wanted to do more through NBS outside of the ski racing arm, and since gear is such a barrier to the sport, we

[Facing Page] While on a 10-day trip through the Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness, Duncan eddies out on Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon River. □ Courtesy Mallory Duncan

[This Page] Duncan finds his way home as the golden hour descends in Oregon's Cascade Mountains. □ Stratton Matteson

gave him our demo fleet to take people touring. As an ambassador, he has tons of ideas we want to support...but he's really adamant about not leveraging his color to be able to work with us, to not let it influence how we work together. It's something we wrote into his contract."

Henri Rivers is excited to have Duncan working on the alpine scholarship fund committee for NBS, reviewing applications and mentoring young Black skiers coming up in the same program that he went through. "He's going to be traveling around, identifying kids of color we can support," Rivers says. "Now he has an opportunity to help kids and be part of resolving the inclusivity problem. Kids want to ski with guys like Mallory."

He may always feel a need to prove himself, but Mallory Duncan is picking his line and finding his way toward a new skiing paradigm. ✽