

A third-generation Chamoniard, Tof Henry straightlines the Alps' steepest slopes. Yet a turbulent life off the hill might be exacerbating his extreme style.



Illustration by Tyler Heritage
Photos supplied by Daniel Rönnbäck

ON THE EDGE

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SWEDISH PHOTOGRAPHER Daniel Rönnbäck was standing in the tramline of Chamonix's Aiguille du Midi when he first saw Christophe "Tof" Henry. It was 2012 and Fransson nodded toward the third-generation Chamoniard, whose black mop of hair wiped across his tanned cheeks, and said to Rönnbäck, "That kid is the next generation of steep skiing. He's the fastest skier in Chamonix."

But you wouldn't need a steep skiing legend like Fransson whispering in your ear to notice Henry's swagger. The way he cuts to the front of the tramline with baggy bibs hanging off his broad 6-foot-3-inch frame resembles a high school basketball star waltzing in late to class. Or perhaps you've seen POV videos of him straightlining sheets of blue ice on 50-degree test-piece lines before launching onto variable snow and cranking GS turns on an exposed hanging glacier.

Around the Chamona Valley, where he has lived for all of his 33 years, Henry is known to skip entrance rappels above classic lines like the narrow Col du Plan coclair or the highly coveted Mallory-Porter, a route that plunges 5,000 vertical feet below the Aiguille du Midi cable car. He skis no-fall zones like he's freeriding inbound and does so on high avalanche days in bad weather with low visibility. And just in case you're unsure if Henry is a big deal, he's ready to let you know. "I ski top of Mallory in May last year with nine turns," he says loud enough for anyone on the street to hear it. "No fucking hop turns!" Sitting outside the Elevation 1904 bar just off Chamonix's main square on an April afternoon in baggy jeans and two hoodies, Henry was drinking like he skis—fast and without hesitation. I asked if he ever brings a guide along to handle his photographers or film crews. "I don't need a guide," he says. "I'm better than guide. They ask where is the good snow."

When pressed on what he's trying to accomplish in his ski career, it might be the easiest question he's ever answered. "My goal is to ski all the biggest lines you can in Cham in different way and style fast and big," he says, his thumping pulse visible in his jugular vein.

Despite all of the impassioned chest beating, his connection to the peaks is a source of vitality that calls him on a near-daily pilgrimage. Skirting the

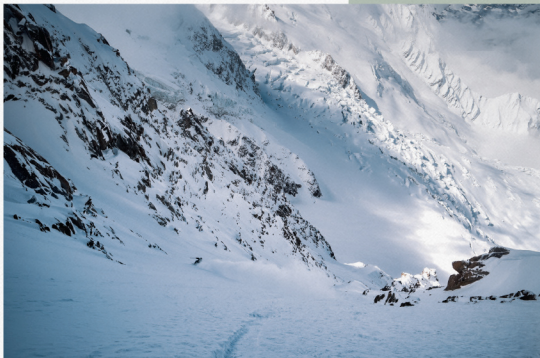
thin line between dialed and loose is precisely where Henry feels centered and free. Yet down on the valley floor, his world is weighted with personal woes and an unsettled family dynamic threatening to knock him off-balance.

AFTER AN HOUR OR TWO of throwing back beers, recounting his favorite ski lines and dreaming of summer was-life-to-ski first descents in the Chamon Andes, Henry spotted a blonde rascal with a red bandana around his neck running by on the sidewalk. "Jules!" Henry called out to his 6-year-old son, who kept on running, baby-sitter in tow. When the boy passed again, Henry swooped the kicking child up into his lap. The boy squirmed out of his grasp and ran off. For the first time all day, Henry's enduring smile gave way to a troubled face. "Sometimes he doesn't want to spend time," he says softly with a long, sad drag on his cigarette.

Henry grew up skiing from the age of 2 in Chamonix. His parents were working-class weekend warriors at best, not deeply embedded in the mountain culture so often romanticized in the birthplace of alpinism. He had an unremarkable childhood and a subdued personality until he was 15. That's when he started skiing with fellow Chamoniard Aurélien Ducrocq, an eventual two-time Freeride World Champion skier. "We would freeride together, learning how to use the big wide ski," Henry says. "This was the new revolution." Having such unmatched access to big vertical and long seasons breeds rapid progression in Chamonix, if the motivation is there. And it was, so much so that Henry was too busy skiing to finish high school. By age 20, he was skiing faster than most locals on open freeride terrain, working as a ski instructor and finding summer labor jobs clearing trees and building a zip line and ropes courses—anything to keep him outdoors.

In 2014, tragedy struck the Henry family, when his mother, Françoise, died of leukemia. Soon thereafter, a Christmas dinner ended early after an argument erupted between Henry and his father. The two have not spoken or seen each other since. That left just a few close friends at his wedding in April 2016. A little more than a year later, Henry's wife took Jules, who they had when she was 22 and Henry was 27, and left, for the second time, with

HENRY



another man. Henry, meanwhile, was skiing in Chile for two months. That July, he posted a video on Instagram of him skiing a couloir barely wide enough for his skis with the caption: [sic] "No more mum no more dad no more love from my wife, missing my son, fortunately the passion is here and save me..." When he returned home to face the music last September, he was a wreck, living out of his 2005 Volkswagen Transporter van piled with 25 pairs of skis, and only seeing Jules once a week. His younger sister, Caroline, who had the hard task of breaking the news to Henry about his wife's "extra conjugal man," was worried about him. "Tof wanted to stay at the bar and drink, and I was worried if he'd go to the mountain and maybe not worry about the risk as much," she says as smoke ribbons swirl from her cigarette on the patio of the Chamonic café where she works one of two jobs. "He thinks he knows everything, but Mother Nature is stronger than him and I am scared that sometimes he forget it. But I know when he feels bad, the skiing and the mountains are his medicine, his therapy."

Indeed, the day after they buried their mother in the same Chamonic cemetery where centuries of legendary alpinists lay, Henry was skiing off the Midi. But when Henry talks about skiing, it sounds more like a drug than therapy. "I'm so stoked in the mountains, I always want more," he says. "It make you crazy, I get down and I just want more, more, more."

At 18 years old, Henry started skiing with Pierrefrancesco "Pir" Diliberto, the monoskiing founder of TKB Films. Nathan Wallace, an American ski mountaineer who has called Chamonic home for more than two decades and another of Henry's mentors, remembers Henry didn't have a backpack or avalanche equipment while filming with Diliberto. "Just a helmet, and he was straightlining crazy avalanche zones," says Wallace. "We wouldn't even ski with him."

Henry certainly earned his early reputation for quasi-reckless skiing, and although he still hasn't done much to dispel it, Chamonic is a difficult place to find someone on a high enough horse to call another skier out for being



Henry is often first in line at the Aiguille du Midi tram. He likes to be there alone, sipping coffee with a crossword, before he goes into the high alpine where he finds most at ease.



Tof Henry, along with Jonathan Charlet, was the first to climb and ski the North Face of Aiguille de Triollet. Popping into some of the most dangerous lines in the world is how Henry copes with life's challenges.

dangerous. An estimated 100 people die each year in the Mont Blanc range alone. Diliberto relents the fact that almost half of his friends have died in the mountains. "We are a full hard drive of bad stories," he says. Henry tends to shirk off any conversations veering toward the topic of death in the mountains.

But perhaps skiing almost every day, including 60 laps on the classic Cosmiques Couloir and the Glacier Rond in one session alone, really does provide Henry with an intimate knowledge of how the daily weather conditions affect the snow, where the pockets of instability sit, and when it's best to outrun his own shadow by straightlining a face.

"Sometimes I see 'Tof ski and think what he's doing is a bit stupid,'" says Julien "Pico" Henry, a local UACM mountain guide and professional steep snowboarder. "But on the other hand, speed is a definite advantage... Some places have a slab or crevasse."

Saves for hitting a tree in Japan in 2015 and suffering serious internal injuries, Henry has a pretty good safety record. "People think I am just crazy and go, but everything is calculated," he says. And that's the side of him that Instagram followers and après bar flies don't see.

After a few days of fresh snow in mid-April, the forecast popped blue on a Saturday morning. All the lines would be refilled with just a few fresh tracks ready to be had on the north face of the Midi. On the phone the night before, Henry declared that he would be the first one at the top of the Col du Plan the next morning, opening up the line before running off to teach a morning ski school lesson, which he still does to supplement his income from sponsors.

Indeed, as the first public bin rose into the blue shadow of the north face at 8:00 a.m., an all-black figure was putting smooth turns on the open face above an exposed sere before traversing skier's right and disappearing into the tight chute. But the skier was not Henry; it was Wallace. Henry had pulled the plug when he woke up that morning and felt his head was off. "Back in the day, he would have just gone to thrash it," says Wallace.

Back at Henry's tiny apartment, amidst skis crowded into every corner of the room (the smallest is the Armada Invictus at 108mm underfoot), Henry plays a video of himself roped up, intentionally releasing slabs by ski-cutting a wind-buffed slope with two belayers, to show what kind of precautions he takes.

It claims his appreciation of risk has shifted in the past few years. Instead of throwing himself off of massive jumps or pulling some freeride tricks on medium-sized cliff drops, he's pushing his limits on steep lines where even a minor mistake means certain death. "I really like it and I'm doing good. I think this is the way to go," he says. "I'm not trying to be the best pro skier or mountaineer, I just want to make the most experience out of my good feelings. I'm not thinking about the result, just my passion."



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LAST SPRING, Henry showed up hungover and in a crabby mood to ski the technical Pain du Sucre after making the first ski descent on the Triplet the day before. Once on slope, though, he switched over to focused leadership, setting the skin track and giving encouraging tips to a filmer struggling to make kick turns on the slushy approach. At the summit, Henry dropped in first, painting powerful, arcing turns on the face as if it weren't perched directly above a sheer 300-foot cliff face. It was another mega classic that rarely gets skied, but later that night at dinner, Henry again shifted the conversation to family.

"It's hard to combine the passion and family," he says. "You can't be both top of ski and top of family life." For someone who won't speak with his father, rarely visits his ailing grandmother, and interacts with his nearby sister more on Instagram and WhatsApp than in person, he professes a strong love for family values. He sees his son once or twice a week when he's not traveling or filming. "The only way for me to do it is to do what I love and try to see him as much in person," says Henry, whose desire to provide for his son is another force driving him to the top of his game.

He told a story about meeting a 60-year-old American man with no wife, no kids. "But I have the ski!" the man said, Henry was dumbfounded. "Imagine finish like this," he says. "So bad. He is missing so much."

Toward the end of the meal, he lit up describing the day Jules skied the Vallée Blanche at the age of 5. "He loves to make the 'smoking turn' rooster tail like Dad." When asked if he'll let Jules ski the Mallety, a serious look fell across his face. "I'm gonna tell him it's a bad drug." *

ABOVE: Tof Henry skied the Mallety, one of the most iconic steep skiing descents in the world, the day after his wedding.

LEFT: There are two ways to ski from the needle-point summit of the Aiguille du Plan.

This is Tof Henry's favorite.

BELOW: Henry looks forward to the off-season when he takes time off from traveling and filming to spend time with his son, Jules.