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Bridging the Gap

Montana's Ridge Mountain Academy teaches gap-year students to train and live like athletes

by Tess Weaver Stokes

When the five 17- to 19-year-old skiers and snowboarders from Whitefish, Montana's Ridge Mountain Academy (RMA) landed in a helicopter at Valkyr Lodge in April for a week of touring in B.C.'s Selkirk Mountains, none of them had ever spent a night in a backcountry hut. In fact, none had even used touring equipment until three months prior. But thanks to a semester at RMA, a campus-based mountain-sports-training program for men and women ages 17 to 20, the student athletes managed their own gear, rotated 5 a.m. cooking shifts, contributed to morning guide meetings and took turns route finding and setting the skintrack.

"We weren't skiing low-angle tree lines—we were touring on ridges and skiing alpine lines," says RMA coach Burket Kniveton. "The guys were functioning so well that it felt more like skiing with a group of friends than skiing with a group of student athletes."

The trip marked the end of RMA's inaugural semester and a dream realized for the academy's founder, ex-professional skier Billy O'Donnell. Five years prior, O'Donnell set out to build a unique mountain-sports program around the growing trend of the gap year—an experiential semester or year between high school and college to deepen practical,

professional and personal awareness.

"It's an age group that's in transition, that needs a bit of support," O'Donnell says. "I wanted to create something with an academic component, but also a place to train, to live every day as an athlete. Somewhere to learn how to fit it all in—training, skiing, backcountry days, nutrition, fitness, appropriate rest, work and even grocery shopping and laundry—all the things you need to know to live on your own."

Between January and May, RMA's first five participants completed a Wilderness First Aid course and an AIARE Level 1 avalanche course, studied snow science, honed their technique with five full-time ski and snowboard coaches (including pro snowboarder Sean Busby and accomplished ski mountaineer Ben Parsons), interned with local businesses and organizations, learned to eat and cook like professional athletes and practiced balancing school, work and life with an elite training schedule.

When Jack Clark, 20, took a semester off from his freshman year at St. Lawrence University, the program at RMA appealed to the ex-ski racer from New Haven, Connecticut. His mother, Alice, had never heard of Whitefish, but O'Donnell convinced her the program was a fit for her son. The first month, Clark says, proved challenging—skinning 2,353

feet up Whitefish Mountain Resort four mornings a week wasn't exactly a fun introduction to ski touring, and baking with coconut flour and swapping milk for almond milk took some getting used to. But as the weeks passed, Clark says he learned more about the relationship between nutrition and performance. After a long break from skiing, he "improved enormously from daily one-on-one coaching," he says. And his outdoor skill set grew to include rock climbing, ice climbing, mountain biking and skimo racing.

"I was excited about getting more into challenging, big-mountain terrain and the backcountry," Clark says, "and that's exactly what I got to do."

Alice says she barely recognized her son when he returned home in May. "His legs were literally twice the size," she says. Along with his arsenal of backcountry knowledge, Clark returned to St. Lawrence this fall with a geology credit for the mountain-science field course he took at Ridge, which included regular field trips into nearby Glacier National Park and an internship at The White Room Mountain Shop.

And according to Alice, the semester at RMA was well worth it. "The experience, education and life skills he gained... Compared to a college semester, it's the best money I ever spent."

Clockwise from left: Ridge student athletes seeking higher education in the Canadian Rockies and filling gaps in their savvy knowledge near Whitefish, Mont. Coach Tom Danley fine tuning his teaching technique. **Burket Kniveton**