

journey's end



IN MEMORY OF HANS SAARI 1971–2001

May 8, 2001, dawned with clear skies and not a whisper of wind throughout the Chamonix Valley—not normal weather for the French Alps at that time of year. It was to be the worst day of my life.

For years, the famous Gervasutti Couloir on Mont Blanc du Tacul, high above Chamonix, had been near the top of the list of mega ski classics. Locals were reporting conditions to be the best the Alps had seen in twenty years. A hundred meters to the right of the standard entrance to the Gervasutti Couloir was the rarely-formed Tardivel entrance named after French extreme skier Pierre Tardivel who first skied this variation in 1994. The line had only been skied a couple of times since. Conditions looked promising, and the Tardivel entrance quickly became the focus of our plans. The entrance had a 55-degree slope, blue ice seracs throughout the upper section, ended with a cliff and was peppered with granite stones. There was no room for error.

I was three sections into the Tardivel with Hans Saari—my perennial ski partner and best friend, and the one man I had traveled and skied five of the world's continents with. Hans was in the lead. In traditional style we had taken turns skiing, a leapfrog technique that allowed one of us to ski a short section and then pass the torch to the other. The first 100 meters had gone smoothly.

I skied down to Hans, who was standing on hard blue ice under a serac—the first shaded section we had encountered. The snow wasn't sticking to the ice in the same way it did higher up the mountain. Hans looked on edge, shaken but calm.

"I'm standing on ice. I don't know how long I can keep my edges under me," he said. There was no panic in his voice. I tried to encourage him to calmly slide back off the ice. The clarity of why we were skiing this mountain was rapidly becoming cloudy. Hans side slipped a few inches in each direction and then, without warning, his tails lost purchase. Helpless and standing a pole's length from Hans, I watched in horror as he fell into a void below.

Other climbers on the mountain watched in equal disbelief, and someone hastily used a cell phone to call in a rescue. Hans had fallen half the length of the Gervisuitti Couloir, almost 300 meters. Within minutes, a helicopter flew up to the mountain and was hovering above him. The helicopter transported him to a Geneva hospital, but the quick rescue was to no avail—Hans had sustained extensive head trauma and was pronounced dead.

Gifted motivators come in every discipline and Hans Saari represented skiing the world's grandest mountains. Hans won the respect of all who spent time with him for the decisions he made choosing lines that required not only the highest level of skiing expertise but also for his ability to climb with comfort on steep technical terrain. From the Antarctic Peninsula to the expansive plains of Tibet, Hans passionately chronicled his mountain experiences, writing the stories that came to him as the secrets of nature unfolded before his senses. Anyone lucky enough to have spent time in his company knew that he had a rare, energized spirit. Through his writings, he helped inspire a renaissance in the skiing of the classic mountains of the world.

People often asked why Hans pursued such an uncertain path in life. Why had this cum laude Yale graduate chosen a life so different from his peers? Hans' life didn't afford him a car or the gas to power it. Instead, Hans chose a life devoted to the mountains. His aspirations became his ticket on a roller-coaster journey filled with high-octane adventure, sorrow, unspoiled culture and the desire to connect the mountains around the world with just a few ski tracks. Through his pen, he expressed to the world his conviction that life is better lived on the path less traveled.

Shortly before his death, Hans wrote, "To carve turns deliberately and skillfully down the throat of the peak, from summit to base, creates the line. The vibrancy of the line means everything. Like a cello, there is no sound until the string is taut. The more you struggle, the tighter the string, the greater the music."—Kristoffer Erickson

PHOTOS: KRISTOFFER ERICKSON
HANS SKIING A SHOULDER OF HUANDUY SUR IN PERU'S CORDILLERA BLANCA, JUNE 2000.
ORIGINALLY HANS AND KRIS WERE AIMING TO SKI THE SHADOWED PEAK BUT A WHITE-OUT
PREVENTED THEM FROM SUMMITTING.