



BANZAI!

Thanks to World Cup vet and Hahnenkamm champ Daron Rahlves, the world's ballsiest brand of ski racing doesn't take place on some obscure European piste, but in California. WELCOME TO THE RAHLVES BANZAI TOUR.

BY GORDY MEGROZ / PHOTOGRAPHY BY COURT LEVE

The goal for most Banzai competitors: stay upright.

I'm having a moment of deep, sphincter-clenching regret.

ABOUT A MONTH AGO, I SIGNED UP FOR ONE OF THE GNARLIEST ski races in North America, and now the source of my anxiety lurks below: a 1,300-vertical-foot skiercross course at Sugar Bowl Resort near Lake Tahoe, California. But this isn't just any skiercross course. Those challenge racers (typically four or five at a time) with manmade jumps, berms, and rolls as they careen through gates, jostling like pinballs down the mountain. This Sugar Bowl course has plenty of jumps, berms, and gates, but the terrain is au naturel, meaning the jumps are composed of rock formations, side hills, and knolls, and the track consists of whatever Mother Nature laid down—anything from mogul fields to powder to wet heaps of corn.

The course comes courtesy of Daron Rahlves, America's winningest World Cup downhill (with one more than Bode) and 2001 Super G world champ, who in 2011 started the Rahlves Banzai Tour. There are four stops, all in the Lake Tahoe area and all with the same carnage-generating format: Chinese downhill meets X Games. This is the final stop on the tour—and I thought I should check it out. (Perhaps the craziest part of all this is that for a \$135 entry fee, anybody can sign up for these races.)

Mind you, I raced in college, but I haven't pushed through a start gate since. This will be my first ski race of any kind in 15 years, and my competition is formidable. Many are former college racers, some compete on the big-mountain skiing tour, and the vast majority are still safely in their 20s. I'm 38. Spoiler alert: I do not win this race.

My goal, in reality, is to get a taste of the craziness without badly injuring myself, and my first test, a training run, is imminent.

"The course is clear," the starter says. "Ready when you are." I give him a nod and a half smile. "But you might want to buckle up your helmet first," he advises. Good call.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Daron Rahlves with sister Shannon; the writer (far left) definitely *not* getting the "hole shot"; jockeying for position can be brutal; the writer with the race's namesake.



AT BANZAI RACES, FOUR COMPETITORS LINE UP BEHIND A GATE that flips open shortly after the starter says, "Ready!" The top two advance to the next heat. Making sure you get out in front of the competition right out of the gate—the part of the race known as the "hole shot,"—is a crucial tactic that often determines the winner of the heat, since passing other skiers on the course can be difficult. Fighting for the hole shot can get ugly, with elbows and poles flying. Fortunately, during training runs, racers get to go down the course solo, which is good since I have plenty of other things to worry about.

I push out of the gate and descend a 70-degree ramp that quickly rockets me toward a big right-footed turn. The g-forces pull me toward a safety fence, which I nearly brush up against, then through a gap that drops off enough to launch me about 15 feet and land me hard on a section of straightaway that surges across the fall line toward a big left-footer. Overnight temperatures dropped enough to turn the bumpy, chewed-up terrain into a coral reef of frozen moguls, sheer patches of ice, and intermittent chunks of rock-solid snow, and the entire time, my whole body is rattling as though I'm being dragged across the rumble strip on a highway. Still, all I can think about is the most ominous part of the course: The Keyhole, a 15-foot-wide gap between two boulders with a 15-foot drop on the other side. Come out of the Keyhole without proper direction toward the next turn and you're bound for a wall of rock.

An hour earlier, I slipped the course, trying to get a sense of the best approach to each turn and jump. Along the way, I ran into Rahlves, who was also giving the course a look. At the end of the day, in what he calls the Super Final, Rahlves will race the four guys who've earned the most points from the series of four races. The winner of that race earns a \$5,000 check. Except for last year, when he didn't race in the Super Final because of injury, Rahlves, who's now 41 but still a solid block of muscle, always wins.

"I was amping when I set this," said Rahlves, whose laid-back California vibe belies his race-day tenacity. "I was like, this is too easy, I need to throw some stuff at these guys."

"Now we'll need to check our speed all the way down," said one of the other racers.

"Yup," said Rahlves. "It's gonna be a different race." He then grinned and skied off.

In reality, it's exactly the type of challenge Rahlves has aimed to throw at skiers ever since he started the tour four years ago.

Sugar Bowl is Rahlves's home mountain, the place where he learned to ski before going on to win 12 World Cup races, including the 2003 Hahnenkamm downhill, ski racing's most terrifying test. Rahlves had always known about a famous race held there called the Silver Belt, which dated back to 1940. It was similar in concept to the current race, except that only one racer skied at a time. The Silver Belt race was extremely popular in the 1960s and '70s, attracting big-name racers such as Buddy Werner and Greg Jones, but it died out in 1975 because it wasn't sanctioned by ski racing's governing body. After retiring from the World Cup tour, Rahlves decided he wanted to revive it. "I wanted to bring back the rowdy style of racing they had back in the day," he says. "Then make it rowdier by incorporating a skiercross element."

In 2011, two years after Rahlves had restored the Silver Belt race, he launched races at Alpine Meadows and Kirkwood. A year later, Squaw Valley joined and Rahlves had around 100 skiers and boarders signing up for each race, most local but some coming from as far away as Canada and sleeping in their cars just to compete. Bank of the West and Alaska Airlines soon came on as the main sponsors (each course has an "Alaska Airlines Flight Deck," where racers can win \$100 toward an airline ticket for "Best Air"). With Red Bull and several smaller sponsors, the Tour now offers a purse of \$80,000, with the winners of the men's ski races taking home \$3,000 (and \$2,000 for men's snowboard; \$900 for women's ski and snowboard). Not that the average Banzai racer needs any more incentive

to ski faster, but the money does help athletes justify playing Russian roulette with their ACLs.

I'm a little more cautious with my approach. I throw in a serious speed check before the Keyhole, rattle my way through a bobsled-like corridor, and pound my body through frozen moguls to the finish line. Good enough to qualify for tomorrow's main draw, skiercross-style. My nerves are already fraying.

"WE'RE AT BANZAI TOUR, WHERE THE SKY IS BLUE, THE SNOW IS soft, and the babes are looking good—at least after a few Sierra Nevada Pale Ales!" blares the announcer from the finish line on race day. Banzai Tour is as much a party as it is a race, and the crowd below indulges in burgers and beers as they await the first skiers on course.

Some of the competitors are feeling festive too. Near the start, Zac Horrocks, a fishing and hunting guide who lives in Salt Lake City Utah, and Lake Placid, New York, pounds liquid courage in the form of PBRs and suggests that body armor for the race could be made from used beer cans. "It would make a good back protector," he says. Then he crushes the can and moves toward the start gate for his first run.

I head to a spot overlooking the course with Kyle Coxon and Jesse Maddex to check out some of the action. Maddex, 34, works for a global cloud-computing company in San Francisco, spent time as a young racer on the U.S. Ski Team's development squad, and has won a Banzai race in the past. Coxon, 24, is a recent University of Utah graduate who now works for an oil company. He shined as a junior racer and has won each of the previous three events this season. Both guys are capable of opening up 10-second gaps on me on this course (eons in ski racing), but like everybody here, they make me feel part of the club. "There's a mutual respect," says Coxon. "If you have the balls to send yourself down this course, you're one of us."

That point is hammered home as a quartet of racers speed by. The skier in second hits the second big jump on the course, flies 40 feet through the air, and explodes on impact, leaving a constellation of gear on the side of the mountain. Miraculously, he's fine (even more miraculous is that there have been only two injuries—both blown knees—on the tour in four years), and he gathers his things and makes his way off the course. The scene is bit unsettling, but Maddex and Coxon seem unfazed. "The most fun thing about this race is going as hard as you can and making it down in one piece," says Maddex.

I MAKE IT PAST THE FIRST ROUND AND START FEELING COCKY. Each run is a little more comfortable. In search of a bit more speed, I even trade my all-mountain skis for GS race skis (the ride favored by most of the competitors), which I borrow from one of the other guys. But in the round of 16, I find myself up against a trio of seasoned Banzai competitors, including Coxon, who easily wins. Only two advance to the next round and I finish fourth. I'm relieved to have come through unscathed, but I'm also pissed. Not only was I getting faster, but the race was becoming more fun.

I head to the bottom and grab some food and take in the rest of the race. I see a skier launch through the Keyhole and land on the back of Coxon in the semifinal, knocking him out of the Sugar Bowl final and opening the door for Shawn McGee, a Truckee, California, resident, to win his first Banzai race. McGee didn't make it past a semifinal last year, but he told Rahlves that racing on the tour motivated him to get stronger in the off-season so he'd be more competitive. He's elated after his victory, but the win has also qualified him for the Super Final, so he's forced to calm his emotions and head back to the top. Coxon is there, too, to take on Rahlves for the big payoff, and despite the chewed-up terrain, all the racers arc down the Silver Belt trail like it's a mellow groomer.

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Nate Holland (right) with Daron (left) and Daron's kids, Miley and Dreyson.

Once again, Rahlves nips the field for the win.

He's happy to keep the \$5,000 in his pocket, but nobody is more fired up than McGee, who celebrates with friends and exclaims that the Super Final was the

THE SKIER IN SECOND HITS A BIG JUMP, FLIES 40 FEET THROUGH THE AIR, AND EXPLODES ON IMPACT, LEAVING A CONSTELLATION OF GEAR ON THE SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN.

most fun and exciting thing he's ever done. And he adds, "Getting to race against Daron is pretty humbling."

Rahlves just seems relieved to have another year of Banzai in the books, and after the awards ceremony he heads to the bar. Between course setting and maintenance, dealing with everything from timing issues to protests from racers who say they were interfered with, and preparing to race himself, Rahlves has been in constant motion. We grab a beer and he excitedly starts talking about the tour. "You have to face your fear and live up to the moment," he says. "And you find out that you have more courage than you think you have. There are people who think it's too gnarly for them to do it. But people who do it get a confidence boost and realize it's possible."

I tell Rahlves how I was just starting to really enjoy myself in the course when I got knocked out. "Well, you'll have to come back next year," he says. I'm a little surprised by what comes out of my mouth next.

"Maybe I will," I say. ♦

Gordy Megroz lives in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he's spending the ski season training for the next Banzai Tour. Or not.