

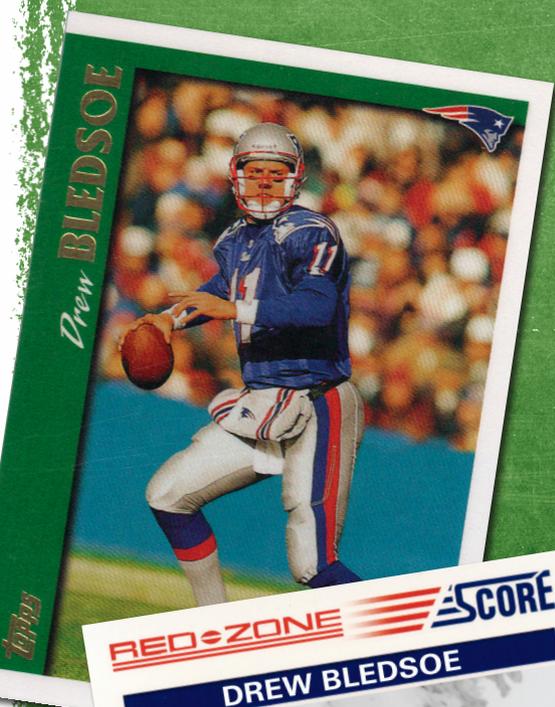
Drew Bledsoe rolls right and looks deep. Whitefish, Mont.



Out of the Pocket

How skiing kept NFL legend Drew Bledsoe grounded

by Brian Schott | photos by Simon Peterson



Drew Bledsoe stares down a steep sidecountry line a short bootpack from the Summit House at Montana's Whitefish Mountain Resort. We're in and out of clouds that dropped eight inches last night into early this morning. Light as it is, the new snow sticks to the sparse trees and freezes to rime, building layer upon layer on outstretched limbs until the trees look like frozen spir- its. They're imposing figures unless you've been fighting hungry linebackers for nearly your whole life.

At six-foot-five, Bledsoe, now 40, retains his boyish looks and flashes a big, white smile below his rainbow-mirrored goggles. And while a lot has changed since he was the #1 overall pick in the 1993 NFL draft with the New England Patriots, a lot hasn't: He still loves to ski powder. As the photographer readies below, Bledsoe plants his poles, reads the line, kicks off and explodes through a drift, arcing powerful, tight turns down the chute.

Not necessarily known for his mobility in football, he speeds down the treed alley, dodging spruces like defenders on a quarterback sneak for the goal line. Of course the snow ghosts don't move. They just shudder.



"I'd go ski for 20 days a year and call it good.... They were expensive ski days, but it wasn't something I was willing to give up." Bledsoe hits the road to Canyon Creek.



Shortly before beginning his second season with the Patriots in 1994, and sporting the richest contract ever for an NFL rookie (according to an ESPN report, Bledsoe's contract was worth \$14.5 million for four years, including a \$4.5-million signing bonus, and additional incentives starting in the third year of the deal), Bledsoe remembers telling billionaire team owner Robert Kraft about a heli-ski trip he had recently taken with his dad.

"I remember Kraft looked at me and nodded his head and didn't say anything," said Bledsoe, last winter after diving down that chute before we began a short tour of the Canyon Creek backcountry near Whitefish, where he owns a home. "But when I signed my next contract, it had this very strict language about how much I had to pay the Patriots back if I got hurt skiing—which were big numbers."

Big numbers, indeed—and it included giving back signing bonuses—literally many millions of dollars. Later, in 1995, Drew signed a \$42-million, seven-year deal—at the time the highest average salary and signing bonus in NFL history. In 2001, he signed a then-record,

10-year, \$103-million contract.

So what does a young, hotshot quarterback do when he reviews the terms that the lawyers have outlined? Or when coach Bill Parcells tells him not to ski? He finds a Lloyd's of London underwriter that will insure him for 20 ski days a year with a one-of-a-kind insurance policy.

Skiing was too much a part of his soul.

"So I'd go ski for 20 days a year and call it good," he says, in a deep, confident voice. "They were expensive ski days, but it wasn't something I was willing to give up. When I got to the NFL, I wasn't going to stop skiing—it's a big part of who I am."

Bledsoe's passion for skiing started in 1973 a few weeks before his second birthday, and his backcountry roots spread out from his backyard in Ellensburg, Wash. His father, Mac, cut the last two feet off an old pair of skis, put a strap of leather over the toe, and a piece of rubber inner tube around the heel. "That was my first touring setup," Bledsoe laughs. "I would go traipse around the backyard in rubber



wading boots.”

Drew made his first turns later that winter at Alpental near Snoqualmie Summit, Wash., taught by his mom, Barbara, and Mac, who had queried a ski instructor for the best method to get a youngster going. Mac, now age 66 and living in Kalispell, Mont., spoke with me over coffee at the Buffalo Café in Whitefish this summer.

With his cowboy hat, jeans, belt buckle, and boots, he looks more like a rancher than an ex-football coach and school teacher (he coached Drew in high school)—and he’s clearly proud of his son and the choices the younger Bledsoe has made in his life. Mac rarely grants interviews, but a story about the importance of skiing to his boy is, well, important to him.

“The instructor told me not to talk about muscles and leg angles. He said just get Drew out at the top of a small hill and turn him loose, call his name so he’ll look and make a turn.” So Mac and Barbara did, and when it came time to go home, Drew started bawling and throwing a fit. Mac says Drew has had a love for the sport ever since: “Skiing is the

microcosm of the person that Drew is. It’s been an indicator of what’s important in life.”

Bledsoe was six when his brother, Adam, was born. “So Drew was my ski buddy that winter,” says Mac. “We’d go night skiing at Stevens Pass: pack into our VW Squareback and he’d sack out in the back in a sleeping bag on the way home. We’d ski both days of the weekend, and I’d get free lift tickets working with the pro patrol, blasting avalanches in the morning. Drew would be in his red overalls and red mittens, and we’re blasting 7th Heaven at Stevens—a super-steep area.”

When Mac showed up one morning toting little Drew with him, another patroller asked him what he was going to do with his kid. “I said, ‘Don’t worry about him.’ It was waist-deep powder, and Drew never fell. He’d be there at the bottom panting like a little puppy dog. The little punk was skiing the most challenging terrain in the most difficult conditions.”

In the seventh grade, Bledsoe’s first contact football coach told him that he had no future as a quarterback—and Mac says that his son >>



Bledsoe at Gillette Stadium in September, 2011, with wife, Maura, and their children Stu (14), John (13), Henry (11) and Healy (9). // Photo: Courtesy Drew Bledsoe



"The freedom you have on a pair of skis is unlike anything else—you can go anywhere you want, as fast as you want." Bledsoe explodes out of the pocket.

was not a superior athlete at this time. "But he was a hell of a skier. The coach loved him—he just didn't want him to be frustrated."

While Drew continued to work on his throwing arm, he was also honing his ski skills at Alpentel, White Pass and other areas in the Cascades. As his brother grew older, family ski trips involved packing into a '53 Chevy station wagon—Adam and Drew stretched out in the back with some sleeping bags—as Mac and Barbara continued annual treks up to Apex and Alpine in British Columbia, a tradition Drew has only missed twice in his 40 years.

"Whatever vehicle we had was always packed to the gills," says Drew. "We'd go meet up with some friends and find a cheap hotel to stay in and go ski. They were always great family trips."

Today, his family trips replicate those early years—with a little more style. Two days before our February backcountry tour, Bledsoe piled his three boys, daughter, and wife, Maura, into an RV for the 12-hour drive to Whitefish from his primary home in Bend, Ore. He and Maura have owned their home on Whitefish Lake since 1996, and use it as a family retreat during the summer and for winter ski vacations several times each year.

"I had my trucker's cap on and the kids were in the back watching movies," says Drew. "We rolled on in at about 4 a.m. and went skiing the next morning. The kids love it, although they are getting to the age now where we get to the top of the mountain and they're like, 'See ya, Dad. Have fun. We'll see you at the end of the day.' It's probably my favorite family thing to do—get up here and slide around."

During his years playing for the Pats, Drew never skied in New England because he was afraid that the press would turn his ski time into an exposé, and it would become a media mess. But he still skied in Montana, and it never made news.

"Of course I skied a little more sensibly while playing ball than I did when I was younger, but I think it helped me as a player," he says. "It was always interesting coming out of football season. I'd get beat up for a few months and then roll into ski season thinking I'd be in shape—but I never had my ski legs."

After our first quick descent, we're now hiking to Flower Point for deeper and steeper turns in the Canyon. We decide to head out the ridge toward Gooley Point and soon click back in after we peer over the lip and see a steep field of uncut snow. Bledsoe pops off a small cornice at the top, arcing compact turns through the open field, and then disappears into tight, old-growth spruce and pine.

Like during the intricate dance of skiing through steep terrain, deep snow, or narrow alleys, a quarterback's mind operates at a higher level than most, demanding incredible speed to process information. This fluidity is readily apparent in his ski style—bold, fast, confident, and playful, as if his large frame is full of air.

"The strength and balance that you get from skiing was certainly

beneficial for me in playing football," he says. "Playing quarterback all starts with having a good, strong base underneath you. I think growing up skiing and being on snow a ton really gave me the strength and balance to form the foundation for throwing the football. Outside of that, just learning early decision making and reacting to elements—I know that helped me as an athlete."

Over the years while he was playing professional football, Whitefish became a haven, a decompression chamber from the pressure of the NFL. Bledsoe started all 16 games that first season in 1993 and set single-game records in pass completions and attempts, leading the team to their first postseason appearance in eight years. He went on to set an NFL record in pass attempts, becoming the second NFL quarterback to complete 400 or more passes in a season, and led the league in passing yards. In the 1996-'97 season, he took his team to its first Super Bowl in 11 years, where they lost to the Greenbay Packers.

But during the second game of the 2001 season, Bledsoe was clocked by New York Jets linebacker Mo Lewis and suffered a sheared blood vessel in his chest, requiring surgery. Replacing Bledsoe at



quarterback, Tom Brady led the Patriots to a Super Bowl championship that season. Though he never regained his starting role, Bledsoe did help seal his team's Super Bowl appearance when he replaced an injured Brady in the AFC Championship Game against Pittsburgh.

Because the emotional wear and tear of playing the quarterback position can be pretty heavy, Bledsoe says, returning to Whitefish each winter was a ritual he grew to love—the mountains serving as a place where he could renew his spirit.

"It was a physical feeling when we would get back to Whitefish. I could feel myself exhale—like this pressure was lifted from my shoulders," he says. "After the craziness of the football season, the day I arrived in Whitefish was always special. I was on the ski hill less than 12 hours after the Super Bowl ended in 2001."

Bledsoe went on to play for the Buffalo Bills from 2002-'04 and the Dallas Cowboys from 2005-'06. Thankful for his deep role in the success of the Patriots, fans would cheer Bledsoe on his returns to Gillette Stadium as a visiting player until he retired from football in 2007. In 2011, fans voted him into the Patriots Hall of Fame.

Bledsoe's backcountry skiing tradition runs deeper than his boyhood backyard, a legacy that began with his grandfather. Stu Bledsoe, Mac's dad, ran the Flying B Ranch in Washington, running 700 head of Angus cattle on 6,000 acres. Mac would pile into the back of the old Jeep cattle truck and go out on the range to the top of a hill and ski laps.

Other days, his dad would take him to ski the rope tows at Blewett Pass in the Cascades. Ski industry pioneer Webb Moffett, the proprietor of one such rope tow, would divide the cost of running the rope tow by the number of people skiing. It was a half-mile hike to the ski runs, and if Mac couldn't carry his skis, Stu said, he couldn't go.

One day when they were in a lift line at Snoqualmie, Mac's dad said to him, "You know you're the only one in line with cow shit on your skis?"

Drew got into true backcountry skiing about seven years ago, mostly bootpacking around at first, in and around Bend. While his explosive, athletic power on the slopes is evident in every turn he slices through the thigh-deep snow, amid **>> continued on page 90**

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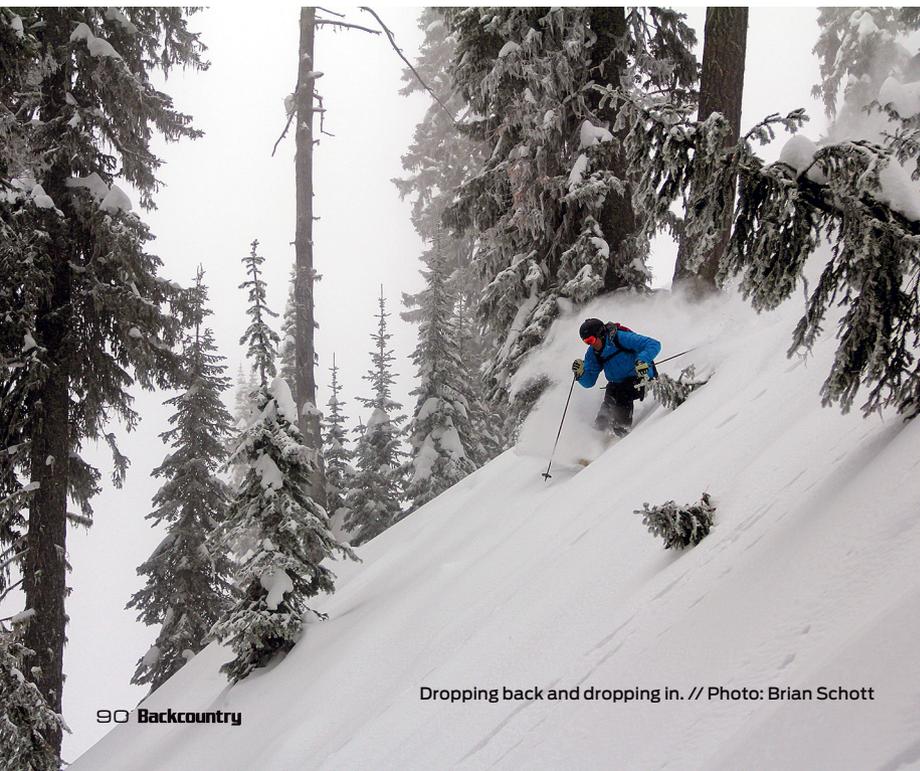
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Dodging trees like defenders, Bledsoe finds an opening in the Canyon Creek backcountry.



Bledsoe trades the pigskin for two planks with custom artwork featuring the number he wore throughout his career.



Dropping back and dropping in. // Photo: Brian Schott

tall, thick cedars dripping with lichen, Drew says he is still very much on the novice side of backcountry skiing but enjoys “packing around and finding some fresh tracks.”

His friends talk a bigger game for him.

“Drew is typically hiking and skiing in October if there is more than 18 inches in the mountains,” says Chris Justema, president of Bend-based Cascade Lakes Brewing Company. “You will see him strapping on his skins and charging the cinder cone for a few hot laps in the morning. Consistently Drew is the first to check the snow conditions and head to the mountains if it looks good. Even when we are all skiing lift service and the lines get nutty, we are often clicking them off and booting around for some deep snow and ‘80s-style big airs.”

Justema says Drew skis better than 99.9% of the people he knows, and I don’t doubt his claim, watching Bledsoe’s effortless turns. “Sheer speed, raw talent and his ability to fall hard in crazy terrain and laugh is always a treat to watch,” adds Justema. “He has even been known to skin up the back of Tumalo Mountain with his lovely wife for a backcountry date.”

While the camaraderie of the sport—and the après ski beers at the Bierstube in Whitefish—is something that this 40-year-old boy still loves, the solo part of skiing is what Bledsoe relishes more than the team aspects of football.

“Sure, there’s some competition to see if you can keep up with your buddies, but skiing is a different kind of sport,” he says. “The freedom you have on a pair of skis is unlike anything else—you can go anywhere you want, as fast as you want.”

His athleticism and the joy he gets in flying down this mountain are obvious, but as we traverse to a new line for some photos, we talk about the quieter side of skiing—how the aesthetic of the backcountry and the sensory experience are important to him. We’re on the steepest and most beautiful pitch in the Canyon now, where massive Douglas firs are spread out, thick trunks reaching for the sky. Of course with fewer anchors on the 40-degree slope, it’s also the most dangerous.

“Sometimes I like to just hang out at the top of a peak and look around,” says Drew, the moisture from his breath hanging in the motionless air. “Being out in the snow, out in the trees, out with Mother Nature—it’s just the coolest feeling. It’s something that’s been a big part of my life since I can remember.”

Making wine from the vineyards he owns in Walla Walla, Wash. drives Drew’s business passion these days. Doubleback’s inaugural release, a 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon received 95-point scores from both *Wine Enthusiast* and *Wine Spectator* and a spot on the *Spectator’s* annual Top 100 list.

Bledsoe also serves as the spokesperson for Montana Ski Company, which he partially funded through his private equity group, Bledsoe Capital. The group also recently invested in a water treatment system that separates oil from water and has been used in places like the destructive >>>

BP oil spill in the Gulf.

On our tour, Drew has been busting through the powder on the 188 cm "Soldier" model with a custom #11 topsheet. "I've only been on them for three days and I just absolutely love them," he says. "They are snappy, responsive, but still really smooth and damp." Montana Ski Company builds their skis in the USA with sustainable wood products from Montana's forests.

"It's kind of funny," he says. "Everybody started using all these exotic materials, and it turns out that just good old-fashioned wood is a hell of a good material for skis. The goal for the ski company is not to ever become really big, but I think we can have some fun, make a little money, and give people a killer product that has a little piece of Montana in every ski."

As jobs go, Drew can't imagine a better one than he had—playing a game, making good money, and getting part of the year off. And while his days as a star on the gridiron continue to fade, he reminisces about that feeling on a Sunday afternoon when he was heading out to play football. His deep voice drops even more, the same as when he reminisces about heading out to the slopes as a child, climbing a skin track as an adult—or launching off some backcountry cliff.

"I got to a certain point where I made a conscious effort to really appreciate a thing that so few people get to do," he says. "Walking down the tunnel on a Sunday with thousands of screaming fans and playing the best athletes and trying to beat them—it's a feeling that can never be duplicated. I'll miss that."

While football was a joy for Bledsoe, it was also a job—a profession—an often cutthroat business. But for him, skiing was, and remains, his passion. This kind of talk might not sit well with diehard fans, but he doesn't look back. Mac—who never asked his son about contract figures because he never wanted money to come between them—tells me that Drew never allowed football to define him.

"His attitude was that he'll play football for a few years, but ski all his life," Mac says. "He maintained, 'I am not just a football player. I am a person. I am a skier.' His attitude about skiing, and how it fit in with the rest of his life and his relationship with football, was powerful. All the powers that be—Bill Parcells in particular—wanted him to quit skiing. Drew viewed things in terms of the bigger scheme of life. Skiing in Drew's life has been so important because it kept him grounded."

And while his 2001 injury was devastating, and some NFL commentators called his release from the Patriots a betrayal, his transition away from football was natural, according to Mac, because he was not defined by it. "He was defined by personal values, ethics, family, and a whole lot of loyalty. He walked away from football and never looked back. In fact, he doesn't even watch football much now on TV."

A few years back, Mac found a trash bag full of old footballs in a garbage bag destined for the dump—some of the balls that Drew was given as "Player of the Week" or for some other honor. Mac asked his son if he could keep them, knowing these memories might have more importance to him later on.

"Drew never approached football the same as friendships and relationships—and it's not even in the same hemisphere as his kids," says Mac. "The only place in his house that you would know that he played in the NFL is in his office where he has some memorabilia. All around his house are just photos of his family and his kids." Plus, some killer photos of Drew and his dad on that awesome heli-ski trip.

Before we make our final turns to the floor of the steep canyon, Drew sizes up a lip of snow piled up on a fallen tree. He points his skis and launches—catching way too much air—and butt checks into the snow. His laughter bounces off the walls of the Skook Chutes across the ravine. On his feet again, Drew brushes the snow from his shoulders, smiles, shrugs, and pushes off down the mountain. ■



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