



BY BRIAN IRWIN

RESCUE ME

KEEPING A WATCHFUL EYE—AND NOSE—ON MOUNT WASHINGTON

The snowpack crackles as air pockets vanish under the settling weight, forming an icy sarcophagus. Then darkness. And helplessness. But there's still hope. Suddenly, a blinding slash of amber light slices the cold black tomb. Noise erupts. A dog's wet nose and tongue fill the void. It's Cutler, the search and rescue dog from Mount Washington, rehearsing his avalanche skills on a buried skier.

"Under one minute. Not bad boy!" Chris Joosen hollers to the yellow Lab. "Now get over here!" He slaps his knees and Cutler bounds back for his prize, an old chewing rope. Scenarios like this, where volunteers are buried to test a dog's rescue skills, are just part of the daily grind at the Mount Washington Avalanche Center in New Hampshire's Presidential Range.

As the center's head snow ranger, Joosen, 41, and his dog spend about half the winter in a drafty cabin situated downhill from the famed Tuckerman Ravine. Moldering and yellowing 1950s black and white photos of USFS Rangers wielding bullhorns and binoculars hang, in contrast, on institutional lime-colored walls; ropes and skins dry over the railings of the four bunks that house the rangers as Joosen pecks away on a laptop, compiling data from that morning's snowpits. Cutler, named after the stream that bypasses the cabin, wears an orange SAR bib, and waits patiently to go to work.

Joosen and Cutler are responsible for 5,000 acres of rugged terrain, much of it above treeline, on the eastern slopes of Mount Washington. With the "Rock Pile," as it is commonly called, constituting the most popular backcountry ski destination in the East, and claiming the country's most notoriously bad weather, Joosen and his colleagues are integral to the safety of thousands of skiers and hikers. On a spring day, more than 4,000 people might flood the east face of Tuckerman Ravine. Last year, in one hour, backcountry patrollers attended to 10 injuries, mostly caused by falls on icy conditions. Another day, two avalanches in a 10-minute period swept a half dozen people down the slope, though none were seriously injured.

"Our ravines are relatively small areas, but are used for recreation by a large num-



PAWS AND PENCILS, CUTLER AND JOOSEN ARE TOTAL BFF'S. PHOTOS: JOE KLEMENTOVICH

ber of people," Joosen says. "Upslope flow can generate significant slabs in little time. This, plus our high concentration of visitors, means that if any instability exists someone is likely to find it."

A Connecticut native and lifelong skier, Joosen's first job in Tuckerman was in 1990 as a backcountry caretaker for the Appalachian Mountain Club's Hermit Lake lean-tos and campsites. After three years he joined the Forest Service as a snow ranger and became lead ranger within six years.

Most of his work focuses on visitor education, rather than active avalanche control with explosives, which took a backseat to the more passive approach after two rangers were injured in an accident with an Avalauncher in 1966. On a daily basis, Joosen and the other rangers post avalanche conditions on slatboards and the Internet, position themselves so that almost every person is counseled regarding conditions, and provide classes and lectures year round.

Although he can find world-class skiing right outside his office door, Joosen doesn't get to strap on the boards and ski during his shift. While everyone else is slicing up the fresh, Joosen busies himself by bootpacking all over the eastern side of Mount Washington. A Recco unit, fire-engine-red snowcat, and snowmachines wait in the wings for extrication. Usually laden with 50 pounds of SAR gear on his back, Joosen and Cutler forecast conditions and perform technical rescues in often horrific conditions, like the minus-40 degree, sustained 70 mph whiteouts that make Washington infamous.

"It's challenging," says Joosen. "We're married to these jobs that we love. We know we make a difference, but that comes with a burden."

Not only does Joosen have to forecast a very busy area, carry out administrative duties and serve as the SAR leader for half of Mount Washington, he has to be on-call and able to immediately respond to an incident 24/7 from December through May. But the variety and excitement is part of the job he loves. "I don't go anywhere without my gear," he says, "and the dog."