

2021 HOF

Jan Reynolds

Crisscrossing the globe to shatter the Glass Summit on record-setting ski adventures, Reynolds now chronicles indigenous cultures as an award-winning photographer, prolific author.

Jan Reynolds earned widespread acclaim for fast-and-light, record-setting high-altitude adventures around the globe; for helping spark the first backcountry explosion on edged cross-country skis; and for pioneering corporate sponsorships as the first athlete to be signed by The North Face as a professional skier and adventurer.

She accomplished this as the only woman in a pack of testosterone-driven males, all of whom quickly realized that Reynolds could not only hang with them but that she brought an invaluable resolve into what were often life-and-death endeavors. In 1984, *Esquire* named her its Athlete of the Decade, *Ultrasport* dubbed her “Indiana Jan,” and Reynolds was making regular appearances in national media, ranging from the “Today” show and “Good Morning America” to NPR and the *New York Times*. “I earned a Ph.D. in adventure,” Reynolds says.

But being the first woman to ski from the summit of 24,757-foot Musgata Peak in Pamirs, soaring (and crashing) in a hot air balloon at 29,000 feet over Everest for an award-winning film, or being the leader of the first U.S. women’s biathlon team merely set the foundation for her life’s work. Those experiences would coalesce into her ultimate calling as a globe-trotting, award-winning photographer and naturally gifted storyteller. With a focus on culture and gender issues, Reynolds has produced 20-plus books, mainly documenting vanishing cultures and written for children.

Reynolds was born April 30, 1956, on a dairy farm in Middlebury, Vt., the sixth of seven children. The Reynolds family didn’t have the means to pursue an activity like skiing, but when Jan learned the local high school would provide the gear if she made the ski team, it was game on. Starting out in sweatpants, her athleticism, strength and endurance soon propelled her to national prominence, with help from coach John Caldwell and chasing the

likes of Bill Koch. As a self-proclaimed “muscle-head” at the University of Vermont, Reynolds excelled in a four varsity sports (soccer and cross-country in the fall, Nordic in winter, and track in the spring). She capped off her career by winning the final leg of the national collegiate cross-country ski championships at the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, handing UVM the combined title (while also earning her teaching degree).

On that same day, she was drawn into the world of global adventurer Ned Gillette (inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2000), who was managing the Trapp resort and agreed to hire her into what would be much more than a job. Trapp’s served as a winter headquarters for Gillette’s now-famous merry band of climbers and skiers, who dubbed themselves “the unemployables.” Warned by Gillette that his expeditions involved “short periods of joy and glory interspersed with long periods of monotony and nastiness,” Reynolds fully embraced the lifestyle. This would begin a roughly decade-long companionship with Gillette that included the first free-heel ski and climb of the Southern Alps in New Zealand in 1979; a trek *around* Mt. Everest; a journey as the first Westerners to ski and coach in Manchuria with *SKI*’s John Fry; and the Friendship Expedition to Pamirs culminating with the high-altitude skiing record that stood for eight years. In 1982, Reynolds and Gillette were named as TNF’s first professional athletes and were paid equally. Hundreds of outdoor companies soon followed, and the stage was set for thousands of future athletes to flourish with corporate backing in the coming decades.

While carrying a 50 lb. pack and navigating steep, unstable terrain with variable snowpack, Reynolds and her companions found that dropping into a telemark turn was much easier than attempting a parallel. The need for control led to the addition of steel edges to their cross-country skis, and to the first generation of modern-day telemark skis. On long, grueling and dangerous expeditions, often stranded for days at a time with no food, Reynolds was always part of an all-male team, including the likes of Gillette, Galen Rowell, Dick Dorworth, Jim Bridwell and Steve McKinney. In this laboratory, Reynolds was an open-eyed observer and a unique asset to the team. She learned that with an extra layer of fat, women were better suited to long term stamina over days and weeks; she also stayed calm and cool under duress. While men often react to trouble with a “fight or flight” mentality, women “tend and befriend,” and Reynolds soaked up the culture on every expedition. Later, she would chronicle her breakthroughs in *The Glass Summit*, providing a

template for women to excel not only in the field but at home and work. “Women can do anything with positive validation,” writes Reynolds, whose books are honest, humorous and full of life lessons.

A desire to control her emotions led Reynolds to learn the shooting part of biathlon, and in particular the challenge of finding the calm to accurately fire her rifle (which she nicknamed “Sweetie”) after 30 minutes of full-burst skiing. She ultimately qualified in the top spot for what was once hoped to be the first U.S. Women’s Olympic Biathlon Team in 1984, but only the men were sent to compete in Sarajevo.

In 1990, while rehabbing from injuries, Reynolds dedicated herself to shaping the future— and to advocating that the world is “one human family” — with a series of “Vanishing Cultures” books for children. In documenting indigenous cultures on all seven continents, she covers their day-to-day struggles and triumphs in an ever-changing and threatening world. Reynolds has dined on rancid whale blubber with the North American Inuit; bonded with the Lion Queens of India (dedicated to preserving the endangered Asiatic lion); and even chronicled a Saharan matrilineal culture (based on kinship with the mother) in which the men wear veils rather than the women. Her current book project is the Bajau people in Maritime Southeast Asia, a culture that lives almost entirely offshore. She uses social media to engage students and educators in where she’ll go and what she’ll do next (donations can be made to GoodFun-d.org).

In her late 30s, Reynolds home birthed two children. She and her then-husband, Javin Pierce, both used a surname; Briggs Tulley Pierce and Story Hubbell Reynolds are in their 20s. Reynolds is a highly sought-after speaker appearing before audiences ranging from kindergarteners to the Explorers Club, and for corporate clients from TNF to Nike and IBM. It’s no surprise that Reynolds, who’s been a skydiver, hot air balloonist, scuba diver and ice climber on her numerous exploits over the decades, still enjoys every form of sliding on snow, including cross-county, telemark, snowboarding and alpine.

Career Accomplishments

Born: April 30, 1956 (Middlebury, Vt.)

1979: Leads University of Vermont to combined collegiate ski title.

1979: Completes first free-heel ski and climb traverse of Southern Alps in New Zealand.

1980: Skis highest descent from a mountain summit in Friendship Expedition.

1981-82: Co-leads Everest Grand Circle Expedition.

1984: Named Esquire "Athlete of the Decade" in the special edition entitled "Celebration of the New America Woman."

1990: Enters UVM Athletic Hall of Fame.

1997-2003: Homebirths two boys.

2008: Earns entry into the Vermont Ski Museum Hall of Fame.

2011: Joins prestigious Explorers Club after being voted in.

1991-2022: Continues "Vanishing Cultures" series of books, churning out new titles on cultures around the world every couple of years. List now numbers more than 15 titles.