

BACK TO BACK

KRIS LANNEN FROM SKIER TO SURFER AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

I HAD BECOME A SURFER. IT WAS LIKE GOD HAD GIVEN SURFING TO ME AS A GIFT TO REPLACE SKIING

WORDS AND MAIN PORTRAIT NINA ZIETMAN

Breaking your back once and making a full recovery is lucky – but twice is a miracle. Kris Lannen has survived both. Now aged 40, you might expect a broken man but there are few people more alive and at one with the world than Kris. When I first emailed him, he said he was happy to speak about his life so far but noted, “It is really that interesting?” After starting out as a top freestyle skier, Kris went on to journey of self-discovery before moving to Cornwall and pioneering Pizzeath’s first surfery “chill” earlier this year his folk band The Grenaways were pursued by two music companies both looking to secure record deals, an independent Sheffield-based label and global giants EMI.

It’s clear that Kris’ life has been anything but ordinary, but it hasn’t always been smooth riding. From the age of 10, he was sent to boarding school near Perth in Scotland. “I found it really tough. Eighty per cent of my time there was a nightmare, twenty per cent I enjoyed.” That twenty per cent was spent playing rugby and skiing for the school. By the time he was 14, Kris was a star sportsman among his peers. “Every winter, there was so much snow that we used to build jumps in the grounds and practice tricks off them.”

Skiing quickly became the driving force in Kris’ life. At 18, he wanted to move to the mountains, but his parents and school encouraged him to go to university first. So he studied 3D Communication and Design for Fashion at the University of Central Lancashire. “Looking back, I would not have gone to university aged 18. I wasn’t ready to study. I ended up spending a lot of time in the pub, which is where I met my wife Ness, so it wasn’t all bad.”

With a degree under his belt, Kris was free to pursue his dream of becoming a professional skier. He spent the next three winter seasons shredding the slopes of Val D’Isere in France. “Even back then in the mid ’90s, there was a strong division

between skiers and snowboarders,” says Kris. “But I was accepted into a pack of English freestyle snowboarders all chasing the dream of sponsorship and an endless winter. We built up a reputation for being pretty good.” Among his friends were Ed Leigh, now presenter of Ski Sunday on BBC Two, and British professional snowboarder Anthony “Gumby” Gumbley. “It was an exciting time, being with a bunch of professional snowboarders and skiers. We lived and breathed our sport.”

Like many ski resorts, Val D’Isere has a legendary reputation for parties, and Kris and his friends were quickly swept up into a rather hedonistic nightlife. “We partied hard back then. Drugs were very much

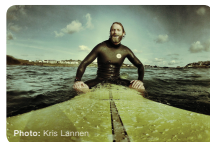


Photo: Kris Lannen

a part of my life. Looking back, I think I would have been a better skier if I hadn’t smoked so much pot!” It wasn’t long before word of this semi-professional band of freestyle skiers and boarders reached international sponsors. In the space of a week, Kris was offered sponsorship by French snow brand Rossignol and a job as a top ski guide with a local ski school. Everything was slotting into place. He was on the brink of taking his first steps as a professional skier – before fate took a turn for the worst.

“Gumby and I were out riding backcountry on Christmas Eve in 1996. It was snowing, so the

slope wasn’t as defined as you’d hope. We were checking out this 20ft cliff to drop. Gumby went first, dropped the cliff but hit a rock on the landing. He was fine but told me to go bigger to avoid it. I hiked further up and launched off. Everything was great in the air, but I overshot the steep slope and landed pretty much on the flat after maybe 30ft of air. My legs just couldn’t take the impact, so next thing I was down on my backside and my body just crunched forward. My skis flew off and all I could feel was masses of pain in my back.

“My instant reaction was to grab my skis. So I jumped to my feet but immediately crumpled over again. I was in absolute agony. Gumby came over and said, ‘You’re just winded Kris. You’ll be alright.’ But I knew it was worse than that. By the time the rescue helicopter got there, I had been lying in the snow for over an hour. It was at that point, I knew the dream was over.”

Kris was flown down to hospital in Modjeres where doctors discovered he had crushed the lumbar vertebrae in his back. He was placed in a full body cast and told the break would take six months to heal. The accident left Kris devastated. He returned to Val D’Isere and spent days lying in the apartment while his friends were out riding. “They were all really supportive but I began to mentally collapse. There were points when I felt suicidal at the thought of never skiing again.”

Bed bound and alone, Kris had time to think about his choices so far. “Life in the mountains can be a very laytate existence. For us, it was all about fun, taking drugs and pushing ourselves to do crazy stuff. It wasn’t true-to-life.”

It wasn’t long before Kris realised he couldn’t carry on life as a seasonaire. Within three days, he returned to England to live with his parents in St Anne’s-on-Sea near Blackpool. Ness, his girlfriend at the time, gave up her job in Edinburgh to move in with them and nurse Kris back to health.

After six months recovery, Kris took up a job as a sports teaching assistant at a Christian school for ▶▶



IF YOU'VE HAD A TOUGH DAY IN THE OFFICE OR AN ARGUMENT, YOU CAN PADDLE OUT BACK, SIT THERE AND EVERYTHING JUST SEEMS TO DRAIN AWAY

children with learning disabilities, but Kris couldn't work a full day without being in pain. One afternoon, his parents' vicar phoned up the house. "He was coming over to pray for me," I said, "No you're not. I didn't believe in that kind of stuff and neither did Ness." The vicar insisted and brought with him a man who claimed to have healed his 70-year-old wife's broken neck with prayer. After much protesting, Kris gave in. "As they prayed, I remember feeling this deep sense of peace. They said that God would heal me but I needed to sort out a few things in my life first. After they left, I cried for hours. I couldn't help but think about all the awful things I'd done in my life."

Ness came home and Kris told her he felt like he needed to become a Christian. "She thought I was going crazy." They decided it was time to move out of Kris' parents' house, away from their Christian lifestyle and work things out for themselves. So they piled their possessions into an old VW campervan. It was either left or right – back to Kris' homeland in Scotland or down to Cornwall where the couple had spent one summer season together. They chose Cornwall.

Ness and Kris moved into a caravan in Mawgan Porth, near Newquay. A year after the accident the pain still hadn't subsided, and Kris went to see a specialist. They said he would have to go on painkillers on his back but there was a fifty per cent chance he would never be able to walk again. Weighed down by this prospect, Kris decided for the first time in his life to put his faith in the Lord. "We turned up at the Newquay Christian Centre one Sunday and we liked it because it was young and community orientated." It was this point that Kris felt he needed to make those life changes the vicar had mentioned so many months earlier. So he gave up drugs and proposed to Ness. They marked the occasion by hiring apart until their wedding, day to symbolise the start of his new life. "Two weeks after I moved out, my back stopped hurting and never bothered me again. It was never tested medically but in my heart, I felt I'd been healed."

When you live in Cornwall and love the outdoors, surfing is often a natural progression but for Kris, it

became a lifeline. "I mourned skiing for a very long time. Even when I was surfing, I struggled every winter knowing I wasn't going to the mountains. "I remember sitting out back at South Fistral one day, asking my mate Gumbly what was more special – surfing or skiing? By the point, I realised the mourning had stopped. I had become a surfer. It was like God had given surfing to me as a gift to replace skiing."

As surfing became rooted in Kris' daily life, his back became stronger. Adventure took him from the UK to France, Australia and Costa Rica on surf trips with friends. "For me, skiing was never about racing. It was about adventure and the camaraderie with my buddies. There's so much of that in surfing, if not more."

But rather than any tropical destination, it was the cold water surf that Kris found a deep connection with. "The western isles of Scotland were amazing, really raw and roasty. Cold water produces a different kind of surfer, doesn't it? I liked the whole Celtic vibe up there, which is echoed so strongly in Cornwall. You really get stuck into that heritage when you surf here in winter. It's much more soulful. It feels like you're connecting with something ancient."

Over the next decade, Kris built up a community in Newquay around surfing, music and Christianity. He became the youth pastor of Newquay Christian Centre before leading the town's Christian Surfers group. But something still wasn't right. "I struggled with church culture. It didn't relate to the core lifestyle in Newquay of surfing, music and pubs. Churches can create this bubble that people find hard to be a part of. It's always been a passion of mine to break down those barriers." One evening in 2006, as Kris and Henry were playing at band practice in their local church, the Reverend Gareth Hill came in. He said he was looking for guys to run a project to create Polzeath's first surfers' church. "We knew we had to apply," said Kris.

Kris and Henry drew up a dossier illustrating their vision of what a surfers' church would look like, including a Fair Trade café and a half-pipe as a puppet. "We presented it on 16th October and

afterwards went for a surf at Polzeath. As we came out of the water, we got a phone call saying they thought we were the guys to run it. It's now nearly seven years to the day since we received that call." It's been an interesting journey seeing guys that initially looked up at the Tubestation thinking "I'll never go there because it's where all those crazy Christians hang out" to seeing them here every day. That's because we're not about converting people. It's about creating a community and feeling the spirit here, whatever that means to each different person."

When Henry and Kris took on the Tubestation, they were pioneers of a new community. Seven years on and changes are beginning to stir once more. After their initial indecision, The Grenaways chose to work with independent record label Dine 2 B. With their first album Be Still Young Heart due to be released at the end of October and the possibility of a tour next year, it's not known what Kris' future will hold. But when life becomes overwhelming, he knows he can always retreat back to the ocean. "It's a good place to be still. If you've had a tough day in the office or an argument, you can paddle out back, at there and everything just seems to drain away."

Only three years ago, Kris went skiing and broke his back for a second time. Luckily, the '90s repercussions were not as bad as before, but there's still some pain. "The thing I've grown to love about surfing over skiing is it's way more soulful. I've used a longboard this year more than ever before. I love the soul and creative side to longboarding, plus you catch more waves. Every time you take a ridge and drop a cliff in the backcountry, you're putting your life on the line. You can easily get the same incredible feeling riding a head-high wave early in the morning with hardly anyone out on the water, not more. And all you need is your wetsuit and a board."

You can listen to Kris' band The Grenaways here thegrenaways.org or visit the Tubestation online at tubestation.org



Top to bottom: Kris playing with his band; Kris playing in the sea Photo: Ness Lannen

