



# Teton Gravity Research Comes of Age

**Often perceived as simply the best ski filmmakers in the business, Teton Gravity Research is more deserving of recognition as pioneers in digital media and sheer business savvy.**

By Aaron H. Bible

Many companies can celebrate a 20th anniversary, but two decades of doing anything well is nothing to sneeze at. Only one company in the action sports lifestyle industry is choosing to celebrate its legal drinking age instead, which Teton Gravity Research (TGR) begins in January 2016.

However, if shot gunning PBRs and high fives all around is what first comes to mind when picturing legendary ski filmmakers TGR, it's time to think again. In their wake lies more than 21 years of sophisticated snowsport, digital media and film making history.

Case in point: last month TGR filmmakers and athletes swept the annual Powder Awards in Salt Lake City, UT, taking home Best Line (Angel Collinson, *Paradise Waits*), Best Female Performance (Angel Collinson, *Paradise Waits*), Best Male Performance (Sage Cattabriga-Alosa, *Paradise Waits*), Best Documentary (For Lack of Better), and Movie of the Year (*For Lack of Better*).

More than 100 people may be working for TGR on any given day in the winter season, engulfed in projects ranging from filming for its upcoming surfing documentary on the legendary Andy Irons in Hawaii, scouting lines from a helicopter in Alaska, or scripting television programming for Unreal TV, with up to 55 people buzzing around its headquarters in Wilson, WY. (The company moved to Wilson from its enviable offices at the base of the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort tram about three years ago, where it officed for 10 years.)

TGR employs about 41 people year round including some of the most talented names in business management and media development, not to mention content and film making as well

as retail, admin, production and the film tour department.

At its core, however, there are two people credited with the vision and determination to bring this media house to age, and that's brothers Steve and Todd Jones, who are still involved in every aspect of the business from management and finances, strategic growth, planning, filming, editing and directing.

"In the beginning we were ski bums with a vision to make films to showcase skiing and snowboarding from our eyes, the way we wanted it to be. Right out of the gate we had pretty big ideas, for all things action sports, a vision and a brand, and we wanted to be recognized," TGR Co-founder Todd Jones, 43, told *SGB* from his Wyoming office. "We went to the school of hard knocks and now we're 20 years in. We learned it the hard way, and sometimes the easy way, through success and failure."

It's actually hard to find someone in the ski world who has not been influenced by TGR and the Jones brothers.

"When I think of what they have done with TGR it's like a proud mom. I waited on tables with Steve and Todd in Jackson Hole when it was just a dream," said Kelly Blake, another 20-year vet of the outdoor industry and partner at Verde Communications. "They made skiing young and fun and cool. And they made it a lifestyle."

Founded in 1995, right out of the gate TGR's first film, *The Continuum*, in 1996 won the International Ski and Snowboard Film Festival - and was ultimately inducted into the Ski Hall of Fame for transcending the genre with the first true multi-media distribution platform and appearances on Oprah and ABC. They are widely credited as one

of the first film companies, and one of the first companies in the ski industry really, to have a functioning and interactive website.

Most agree that what TGR did in the late 1990s laid the groundwork for what we today call social media. "TGR notably was the first online forum for ski bums, and one of the early online forums for any consumer group, launching the famed TGR forums in 1996. They were the ones that planted the seed," explained Eric Henderson, former Jackson Hole and Alaska ski guide whom, like many of his ilk, grew up with and took inspiration from the Jones brothers. Henderson is an account executive at Backbone Media, assisting TGR with its global public relations.

"The year we launched TGR we launched the website and put the forum up, so we effectively had an early version of a social network," said Todd Jones. "We were deeply passionate about the idea that everyone in the world would be connected and have the ability to reach the global population with no barriers."

Jones said one of the brand's most enduring qualities is to embrace change. "We always loved how free the digital and online atmosphere was making our world and the opportunities for independence it presented. That's been with us since day one. We were also one of the early adopters of short form content," he continued, which has led to a monumental content and distribution effort, including social media, branded content, editorial, television, relationships with mainstream entities like *USA Today* and Disney, as well as real world interactions with fans through the film tour.

Shortly after the launch of the first film tour, which evolved into one of the largest action sport

film tours in the world, TGR quickly launched its branded merchandise, playing off the growing forum base, and the following year was enlisted to consult on the first X-Games.

“We’ve always been insanely focused on and believed in action sports as a lifestyle and the personalities behind these things. When we consulted on the first X Games, believe it or not they had shovel racing as a sport. The early days had this particular portrayal of action sports, but what we were seeing was this brilliance in the athleticism, that goes beyond the act of sport,” Steve Jones said. “Even in our first year we wanted to create this brand that’s representative of a lifestyle - it goes beyond the sport. We worked really hard to transcend just a core product and communicate that lifestyle, and make it consumable to a much broader audience. That’s always been a driving force...there’s an opportunity to be a real brand in a real sport, more than what someone might see as a guy hucking off a 60-foot cliff just to get a rush.”

By 2000 TGR had expanded into surf film making with *Gondwana*, filmed on 16mm film with pro surfer Pancho Sullivan, and in 2001 produced *Adrenaline X* as a reality TV series for NBC, bringing extreme sport lifestyle to the mainstream. Before this time, one of the only ways to see these films was to attend the premiers, or buy the VHS in a shop and pass it around your buddies’ raspy ski town apartments. The TGR website became

one of the first places you could watch video clips, comment, and get engaged.

In 2002 they were named one of the “20 most influential companies” in the outdoor industry by *Outside*. TGR’s first kayak film, *Nurpu*, hit the market in 2003, followed by the Fox Sports television series “*Untracked*” in 2004, running 39 episodes.

### Keeping The Dream Alive

“They created aspirational dreams,” remembered Henderson. “It was something that for me personally, moving to Jackson Hole and knowing there was Todd Jones and Micah Black and Rick Armstrong and these guys making these movies, it created dreams and it drove me to become a ski professional.”

“It has so many legs that it’s going to continue to grow over time, it’s not gonna end,” continued Henderson. “They’ve created such a successful platform and business model that they’ve created a trust that will be passed on to their children’s children, in a multi-faceted business plan that is really 360 degrees.”

The word trust, however, might just be a four-letter word to the Jones brothers, as they were not handed anything during this process. The business was essentially funded from the two’s work in the fishing industry in Alaska, working each summer to catch as many fish as possible to come back to Jackson Hole and put that money into TGR.

Importantly, those Alaska summers are also where they gained their passion for, and logistical knowledge of, the Alaskan ranges that would be the focus of so many TGR films over the years.

Part of that focus includes pioneering the cameras themselves, working with Vio to help launch the first consumer digital Point of View (POV); partnering with GoPro, with Sony Action Cam; and also helping develop the most cutting edge 4K aerial camera systems.

But again, it’s their business acumen that continues to rise to the top, as even Steve Jobs called out TGR in a 2008 keynote address at Apple. A year later they produced a commercial spot for the iPhone.

“We’re part of the changing media landscape and we’ve managed to stay on the cutting edge of that. We’ve always wanted to be in the future and not in the past, and we’re passionate about where the media landscape is going,” Todd Jones said.

They’ve studied not the competition but businesses in worlds other than their own. “We’ve learned a way to allow us to succeed, taking what we see and applying it to what we’re doing in our landscape,” said Todd, who has been influenced by Disney (one of the largest media companies in the world), Patagonia and Vice. “I spend a lot of time trying to understand and follow where the media space is going and bring that back into our company. If you look back eight or nine years ago, we started

Photo credit Mark Fisher - Fisher Creative





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to trend from a company that makes surf, kayak and ski movies, and realized we needed to apply a lot of that to our company and our business model to stay relevant and future-proof the company.”

However, Todd said, “we figured out a long long time ago that the name of the game is distribution and reach.” In contemporary media, truer words have never been spoken. “We’ve gone about building a vast distribution network, our database, relationships with networks like Fuel TV and Outside Television, the New York Times and Vice, with tetongravityresearch.com reaching a million uniques per month on average.”

Distribution allows them to make what they do quantifiable and tangible.

“More and more brands are coming to us and saying we want to reach your audience, tell us what we need. So now we’re doing a lot of creative services for those brands - original, custom content creation for brands out of our Creative Services branch of TGR. I hope that they believe in our position and where we’re trying to go, while also maintaining authenticity to an audience that has a desire to experience this lifestyle that is this action sports space,” Todd explained.

It’s one thing to produce a piece of content, but it’s another thing to distribute a piece of content,

Todd attests, but the other major component of what TGR does is story telling. “The story is the true art form,” he explained emphatically. “A lot of what our teams focus on is high-end story telling.”

#### The Legacy Continues

“Work hard, play hard,” is the mantra both brothers offer up unprompted as the defining characteristic of their upbringing. “There’s no limits to what you can do if you apply yourself to it. It takes a lot of failure and willingness to fail to make it happen. You can’t be afraid,” Todd told me. “Some of this aggressive business side was a little less on the surface in the early days. We wanted to travel the world and do cool stuff with our friends and for people to consume. We’re just doing it now in a larger world with a lot more business acumen. You can’t continue to invite people into the world to do this unless you’re successful.”

“Things have changed since the older days, both of us have families now,” said Steve, 46. “We’ve been lucky to have good balance and be incredibly impassioned by the business. Throughout our lives we’ve always been taught work hard, play hard, and that’s a part of our DNA.”

Todd and Steve were both sponsored skiers in the early 1990s when they made the full-time

move to Jackson Hole, discontent with the current product at the time action sports were coming into vogue. “We thought things could be more reflective of a youth culture at that time,” said Steve, so they began skiing in, shooting, editing, bringing in sponsorship dollars, and producing their own ski films. To this day the brothers are very hands on with all content coming out of TGR, and they each still make at least one trip to Alaska each year.

Looking back, Steve seems slightly astounded that they were able to be out front of companies that should have been much more sophisticated than two ski bums from Cape Cod. “Some people took us seriously and were immediately intrigued, undeniably because of how much we believed in it,” he said.

From the very first TGR films, Steve and Todd delivered results to sponsors and walked the talk of becoming a media company – while delivering to this day on its promise of telling the stories behind the athletes that make a lifestyle reality. “We had a vision of creating a brand, and knew eventually we’d figure out different ways to monetize it.”

The acronym itself has come to symbolize the lifestyle Steve, Todd and their many peers and cohorts pioneered, a twenty-first century tribal brand, and a logo that has endured all 21 years. ■