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The Canadian falls ... Fest mourns loss of Lacelle

Strange how death came for Guy Lacelle not from some big heroic alpine fall, as may have befitted one of the world's most legendary free solo climbers, but from a freak accident. As the saying goes, Lacelle was merely in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

By **Samantha Tisdel Wright**

The Bozeman Daily Chronicle reported that Guy (pronounced 'gee' with a hard 'g') was climbing a gully in Hyalite Canyon during the Ice Breaker competition, an event taking place in conjunction with the Bozeman Ice Festival, when a team climbing above him triggered a spindrift avalanche. Lacelle's climbing partner was uninjured.

"A small pocket of snow pulled out and caught him," Doug Chabot, Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center director, told the Chronicle. "It hit him and took him off the cliff, down the ice."

Spindrift, fine-grained snow carried by wind and gravity, frequently sloughs off of very steep faces such as the one Lacelle was ascending on Dec. 12, the day he died. Indeed, climbers often encounter spindrift avalanches, and unlike their slab cousins, they're rarely even considered to be dangerous.

And yet, this cough of finespun snow set loose by climbers from above was in the end all it took to claim the life of one of the purest, and most beloved, climbers among the brethren of the Ouray Ice Park.

It is a loss that will reverberate throughout the Ouray Ice Festival in this, its 15th year.

"Guy has been around since the very beginning," said Ouray Ice Park co-founder Bill Whitt. "He was the sole hold-out from the Jeff Lowe days; he's been coming since Day One. He was the kindest, mellowist guy you can imagine – a very soft-spoken man, and a genuine individual. He always had time for people. And, he was without a doubt the best pure ice climber out there. As far as ice climbing goes, he's as good as it gets."

Lacelle's death by spindrift was very much in keeping with the way he pursued his life, defining the edge of what's humanly possible. He lived light, sloughing off anything that came between him and the pure being-ness of the climb. That often meant climbing without partners, or protection.

Described by one Ouray climbing expert as "a cagey veteran," Lacelle established and repeated many of the most extreme ice climbs in the Canadian Rockies. In 1997, he did the first free solo link up of three WI5/6 climbs on the very exposed Trophy Wall on Mount Rundle in Canada: Sea of Vapors, Terminator and the Replicant. He completed the feat in a mere five hours.

"For most people, any one of those climbs would be a career, and he soloed them all in one day," Whitt marveled.

Lacelle's resume was full of other histor-



ical ascents, too, like linking Weeping Pillar and Polar Circus in a day; French Maid, Curtain Call and La Pomme D'or in Quebec; Au-delà des Ombres in France; and Hydnefossen in Norway.

For these and other achievements, Lacelle received the prestigious Summit of Excellence Award from the Banff Centre for Mountain Culture a decade ago. He was a regular on the ice festival circuit, winning the Festiglace Competition in Quebec in 2004, as well as the Pure Ice Competition in Ouray in 2000 and 2001.

But accolades aside, Lacelle didn't accumulate much through his 54 years of life. Just the deep love and admiration of those who knew him, including his wife Marge Lachecki as well as countless friends in the climbing community.

"Many top climbers are admired for their great skills and Guy was no exception in that regard," reflected Mike Gibbs, a Ouray climber who knew Lacelle well. "However, a better way to describe Guy amongst those that knew him was that he was a beloved figure in ice climbing circles. No big ego, always a welcoming smile, keen to hear about what you had been climbing – Guy was a gentle soul with a kind heart. He'll be greatly missed."

Whitt concurred. "Besides the fact he was a hellaciously good climber, he was such a good guy; nobody had anything bad

to say about him."

Lacelle lived a simple, straight-forward life. Climbing up trees all summer as a silviculturist in the British Columbian wilderness. Climbing up ice all winter. Most frequently with only his dogs to keep him company. And often at the Ouray Ice Park.

"Guy was an annual fixture in the local ice climbing scene and a lot of the long-time ice climbing locals like myself, Mark Miller, Bill Whitt and Mike O'Donnell always looked forward to his visits," Gibbs recalled.

"He lived to ice climb," Whitt added. "He would never work in the winter. Once the ice came in, he would just climb."

A marginal living, perhaps. But for Lacelle, that wasn't a problem. "People just gave him stuff," Whitt said. "He didn't whore himself. He didn't pad his resume to get sponsorships."

And, Whitt observed, in spite of Lacelle's legendary reputation, he maintained a very quiet and humble presence in the Ice Park.

"You'd never even know Guy was around, unless maybe you'd see his old

ratty coat, with his dog lying on it, and a rap line going over the edge. And you'd think, obviously, he's down there somewhere."

As far as anyone can remember, Lacelle never missed a Ouray Ice Fest. Back in the early years of the competition when pure ice climbing was an integral part of the event, Lacelle was everyone's favorite to watch.

"He was such a true master of his craft," Gibbs recalled. "Personally, I have never watched a finer pure ice climber than Guy Lacelle. Perfectly in balance, precise in his placements and flawless in his economy of motion – he was like watching a polished dancer. He was truly a remarkable ice climber."

Solo climbing is considered the "most pure and dangerous form of climbing," according to Alpinist magazine, which published an interview with Lacelle in 2008. In response, Lacelle posited that death could just as likely come from rope climbing, or even driving a car.

Or, as it turns out, from a spindrift avalanche knocked loose from above.

