

The Unsinkable Uncle E

Broadcast legend Chris Ernst continues to keep it real—and now pays it forward.

BY EDIE THYS MORGAN



As a competitor on the Pro Mogul Tour in the early 1990s, Chris Ernst quickly realized his path to a ski career was as an event staffer, not an athlete. His boss, in turn, soon realized that Ernst's charismatic talents nicely supported the tour's vision of this new, rebellious branch of skiing as entertainment—and Ernst's alter ego of Uncle E was born.

If you've been to a major North American ski event in the past decade or two, you've likely seen a colorful character sporting an assortment of outlandish outfits, complete with crazy wigs, hats and sunglasses. He roams the finish area, leading the crowd in chants like "Hip hip HOORAY," "U...S...A!" and "Keep the FU in fun!"

He throws T-shirts into the crowd and fills in the gaps between live on-course action with quick, insightful finish-line interviews beamed out on the Jumbotron. Along with a steady supply of wardrobe changes and enthusiasm, he provides skiing-history facts, trivia and background on the athletes and the event.

This passionate cheerleader is Chris Ernst, better known as Uncle E. He's also known as a co-creator of skiercross and commentator-in-chief for a variety of action-sports broadcasts.

Over the past winter, Ernst covered 12 major ski events, hitting 14 resorts before wrapping up with the FIS Ski World Cup Finals in Sun Valley, Idaho, and the U.S. Freestyle National Championships.

Those 120 days on the road would have led most mortals to a month of bed rest. Ernst, however, kept the show going. He spent his 100th ski day of the season in mid-April at Palisades Tahoe. Dressed in a USA Hockey jersey and sporting a red, white and blue mohawk, he was "sharing the stoke of skiing with friends," he says. In May he was still skiing powder. Contrary to what his 15 1099s indicate, Ernst maintains that, "If you love what you do, you never work a day in your life."

HOW DID HE GET HERE?

"I'd really love to say there was a plan," says Ernst with a laugh. Instead, his career path was guided by one north star: his passion for skiing. Growing up in Dan-



Ernst goes big off a kicker in the Coors Light Pro Mogul Tour at California's Northstar resort in 1994. Later, as a broadcaster, Ernst used his insider experience as a competitor to color his commentary on the nuances of the sport.



Playing more of the straight man early in his career, Ernst interviews a young Mikaela Shiffrin.

ville, California, Ernst fell in love with skiing as a young kid when his mom joined a singles ski club and they traveled to the Lake Tahoe resorts, about three and a half hours away. He then turned screws in ski shops for cash and studied Tahoe's bounty of local talent to teach himself essential freestyle tricks.

At his mother's insistence, Ernst deferred his teenage dream of becoming a ski bum to attend Saint Mary's College of California in the Bay Area. However, the day he graduated, in 1991, he took his marketing degree to Palisades Tahoe (then Squaw Valley). He quickly landed jobs that put him in the center of Tahoe's deep-rooted adrenaline sports culture, working with a local bungee-jumping operator in summer and, in winter, at the newly opened Resort at Squaw Creek's ski shop.

Palisades is and was home turf for a smorgasbord of the world's best skiers and snowboarders, including the extreme skiing icons whom Ernst idolized: Scot Schmidt, the Egan and DesLauriers brothers, and Kevin Andrews. He also admired the next wave of skiers, like Shane McConkey and Kent Kreidler, who redefined the freeskiing movement in the 1990s, merging big-mountain descents with in-bounds freestyle moves.

DOING THE WORK, PART I

Ernst continued to hone his freestyle skills on Palisades' terrain. After seeing him hit a kicker in the winter of

1992, emerging freestyle star Ken Breen invited Ernst to join the Coors Light Pro Mogul Tour. Ernst parlayed the opportunity into a sponsorship from the Resort at Squaw Creek, representing the brand on the road while keeping his hotel job. When he initially caught up with the tour on its way to Whitefish, Montana, event producer and freestyle champion Bob Howard was not pleased. "This kid shows up in Winnemucca, and I said, 'Who is that dude?' I didn't need another jumper."

What he did need, however, was a hard worker. At the time, freestyle skiing was struggling for relevance, and ski areas were shying away from the liability of inverted aerials. Howard's solution was to present freestyle skiing as entertainment—a traveling show with a competition at the end. Costumed skiers jumped through hoops of fire and performed tricks and ballet moves in a scripted performance amid flocks of plastic pink flamingos. "It was like the Harlem Globetrotters and skiing," says Howard. "We made it fun."

Bringing the circus to town required heavy grunt work: building the moguls and jumps; hanging banners; setting up sound, scaffolding and cameras; and, of course, performing. As the hardest-working guy, Ernst was embraced by the team and, eventually, by Howard. Besides, he was fun to hang out with. The events ran the gamut from nationally televised competitions to consumer

"dog-and-pony" shows to 50-guest bar mitzvahs. "We did some hokey things," recalls Howard.

Ernst picked up the first of his many taglines while working under Howard: "A good leader knows the way, shows the way and goes the way." He saw Howard pitch in on every aspect of the production, creatively filling gaps as needed. Ernst also got some valuable perspective, watching a rash of serious injuries occur in a six-week span. He quit competing and moved into the role of tour announcer, where his quick wit and off-the-cuff creativity were gold. Says Howard, "All of a sudden, because of his humor, my show started blowing up!"

Around that time, Ernst created his alter ego, too. Needing a nickname for the 1994 Cushing Classic pond skim, he chose Wicked Uncle Ernie, which was then shortened to Uncle E.

A UNIFYING VISION: LORD OF THE BOARDS

Palisades' legendary peak KT-22 was a proving ground for athletes across a growing spectrum of snowsports. There was so much friction between skiers and snowboarders that fights broke out in the KT liftline. One day Ernst was chatting with speed skier Jim Morgan and big-mountain snowboarder Nick Perata about the heated vibe. They envisioned an event that would unify the snow-sliding disciplines, showcasing them head-to-head in one arena to determine the



COURTESY OF CHRIS ERNST



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Left: Fearless and always camera ready, Uncle E sports a Speedo to get his point across at the 2022 Beijing Winter Games. Above: Credited as one of the originators of the skiercross format, Ernst approves, in Beijing, of the evolution of the event into an Olympic medal-awarding discipline.

top “multi-glisse super Alpinist,” a.k.a. Lord of the Boards.

The three formed a production company and in 1996 ran the first Lord of the Boards event at Homewood ski area. Contestants pushed out of a group start and down a banked course designed motocross-style, with jumps and whoop-de-dooos, in what became the first official skiercross event. The following year Budweiser came on board, sponsoring three stops. After the first winter X Games, in Big Bear, California, in 1997, organizers were in search of more exciting events. The Lord of the Boards concept—and the movement behind it—fit the bill. Skiercross launched into the spotlight at the 1998 X Games and the rest—including its 2010 debut as an Olympic sport—is history. (The new discipline has a few related names. The generic term is skiercross. ESPN, which ran the X Games for almost 30 years, called it Skier X. The Olympics officially christened it Ski Cross.)

FROM X GAMES TO OLYMPICS

As the winter X Games exploded, Ernst was along for the ride. His calendar quickly filled up with 12 to 15 events each season, from halfpipe to slopestyle to big air to skiercross. “The X Games was really a bread-and-butter staple for 20 years,” he says.

Meanwhile his childhood friend Paul Crandell had worked his way up

to head of events and sports marketing for a company new to North America: Red Bull. He hired Ernst to become the voice of then-obscure action sports. At his peak, Ernst covered 32 events in 30 weeks, commenting on everything from hang-gliding and cliff-jumping to kite-surfing and street-luging. “Red Bull is massively influential in the development of my career,” says Ernst.

The X Games is also where Ernst first worked with then-field producer Christy Nicolay. Nicolay would go on to become what Ernst calls “the queen pin of all live-show entertainment for any sport in the world.” When she became executive producer of sport production for the 2002 Olympics (a role she has played for 12 of the past 13 Olympics), she hired Ernst as talent. It was his first of four Olympics so far.

Since then, Ernst has also been a fixture at major skiing events in the United States, including Vermont’s Killington Cup and Beaver Creek, Colorado’s, Birds of Prey World Cup races, where he works closely with Hayden Scott of eef4k Productions. “There’s absolutely nobody as good as him to be in the stadium,” says Scott, who notes Ernst is just as skilled in the booth, calling any snowsport. Scott ticks off his qualities—likable, respectful, humble, kind and reliable—and calls him “a complete genius.” Ernst is known not only for his lightning-fast wit but also for his ability to nail his role in a

tightly choreographed show that moves quickly between the competition, commentators in the booth, finish-line interviews and wrangling the crowd. “We only have three windows to send it down to him,” Scott explains. “The whole hit takes exactly two minutes, and he never puts a word wrong.”

THE HUMAN CONNECTION

Ernst exudes a contagious positivity that puts people at ease. For this, he credits the birds. One of his earliest off-season gigs was a six-month stint hosting wildly unpredictable live-bird shows—420 of them—at Sea World in Ohio. There, his emcee skills took flight, too. “These birds, metaphorically and realistically now, are the people that I work with,” he explains. “I can extract anything out of anybody, because I’ve learned to be comfortable with them.”

Then there are Ernst’s costumes. He has acquired more than 500 goofy hats since beginning his collection at Squaw Valley’s Beer Garden in 1992. They complement his two closets of zany costumes, including the fan-favorite piñata suit.

No matter the size of the crowd, Ernst brings his A-game enthusiasm, which harkens back to another of Howard’s maxims: “If there’s one or if there’s 1,000 people, you’ve got to make everything as important as you, in your mind, think it is.” When he boarded an empty 747 to do live shows at the 2022 Winter Olym-



COURTESY OF CHRIS ERNST

Ernst catches up with frequent interviewee Lindsey Vonn.



COURTESY OF CHRIS ERNST

The “ah-ha” creation of Ernst (left) with two friends in 1996, the Lord of the Boards competition brought together all forms of snow-sliding down a motocross-style course to determine top bragging rights. Paul Crandell (right) later joined Red Bull and hired Ernst to be the voice of the hot new action-sports category for the beverage company.

pics in Beijing, it was a harbinger of the lack of crowds to come at the pandemic-restricted event. Ernst summoned all his skills to generate excitement, screaming and yelling to the sparsely populated stands. He reported to Howard from China, “I thought about that bar mitzvah we did, and I just got that smile on my face.”

Whether in the booth or the stadium, Ernst’s goal is to “educate, entertain and inform.” To do that, he meticulously researches the athletes, venue and standings. “It helps that he knows literally everyone,” says Nicolay, who worked with him most recently at the World Cup Finals. Those he knows, he knows authentically, thanks to another of Ernst’s favorite taglines: “constant correspondence and communication.”

The selfie master snaps roughly 5,000 pictures each year and perpetually circles back to people with images, photo books and emails recalling moments together. He also chronicles every ski rendezvous on his Instagram feed. In this way, too, Ernst adds value to any event. “You’re getting all that extra coverage by having him involved,” says Scott. Ernst is also a natural in his role as ambassador for Akova outdoor apparel, for which he manages a global team of 70 sponsored athletes.

DOING THE WORK, PART II

Just as Uncle E the character relies on taglines in his professional life, Ernst the person follows taglines in his philosophical outlook. First among them is TIME, an acronym for This I Must Earn. He overflows with gratitude for the good life he has earned the hard way. The event world includes ample partying, and Uncle E was the life of those parties while also raising three young kids with his wife, Tracy. When he took a corporate job for security, it came with corporate stress, for which he medicated with the accessible supply of drugs and alcohol.

“Uncle E became very egocentric,” he explains. Ultimately, Ernst committed to a sober life and the ongoing work of recovery. A key piece has been creating the division between the person and the persona, and (in another tagline) “letting Uncle E go.” Gone is any trace of snarky sarcasm, and he runs all communications through a simple filter: “Is it kind, necessary and true? If so, it can’t be bad.” Today, he enjoys good relationships with Tracy, whom he is now divorced from, and his adult kids.

While Ernst has always been deeply religious, recovery brought him to spirituality, which he finds in the mountains.

When the lifts stop spinning, he retreats to the backcountry. “The Great Out Doors is an acronym for GOD,” he points out. “I spend time and literally talk to God as I’m hiking down, and he speaks back by his beauty.”

PAYING IT FORWARD

Ernst continues to “do the work,” professionally and personally. He mentors the next generation of broadcasters while hosting events and is working with Crandell on summits to educate younger athletes on the highs and lows of action sports. That includes mental health and the post-event/season let down. “I’ve come up with some very good tools that help with falling off that slope,” says Ernst. He also has a book in the works.

Ernst is inspired by taglines from some of the sport’s historic enthusiasts, including Warren Miller (“If you don’t do it this year, you’ll be a year older when you do”) and, above all, Klaus Obermeyer: “The days we don’t ski—they don’t come back.” ❄️

Two-time Olympian Edie Thys Morgan writes frequently for Skiing History. She reported on the evolution of on-course safety in the March-April 2025 issue.