

Shelby Stanger:

Why skiing of all sports?

Ben Finley:

Because it's exhilarating. Yeah, I mean the feel of being a jackass with five foot boards on your feet, flying down the mountain at 30 miles an hour, it's like riding a roller coaster. I mean, the difference is, it's completely different than scuba diving or sailing. These are genteel things. Skiing is not genteel, it's extremely active and occurs in marvelously beautiful places.

Shelby Stanger:

It took Ben Finley a few lessons before he fell in love with skiing at the age of 24 in 1963. But something stood out to him on the slopes. He didn't see other people that looked like him. Eventually Ben joined a ski club, but still he dreamed of seeing hundreds, even thousands of other African Americans gliding down the hills and experiencing the exhilarating joy of skiing alongside him. Little did he know that ten years later, he and his friend Art Clay would found the largest gathering of African American skiers in the country, an accomplishment that would lead them to becoming the first African Americans ever inducted into the Ski and Snowboard Hall Of Fame this March of 2020. I'm Shelby Stanger and this is Wild Ideas Worth Living. Ben Finley is a rock star. I mean this man recently turned 81 and he's still skiing even though these days he's mostly avoiding black diamond runs. And he still has a passion for getting more African Americans engaged in winter sports, a cause championed by the organization he co founded, the National Brotherhood of Skiers. For someone who initially got roped into skiing by an old golf friend, his segue to the sport has been quite the adventure.

Shelby Stanger:

Ben, how did you start skiing? I recall reading it was because of a woman.

Ben Finley:

Most adventures in my life, with the exception of the Boy Scouts, started because of a woman, yes.

Shelby Stanger:

And your wife's right here. I love it.

Ben Finley:

I found her in the British Virgin Islands on a sailing trip.

Shelby Stanger:

Wow. I met my dude surfing, so I always appreciate a good love story that's met over adventure.

Ben Finley:

There you go.

Shelby Stanger:

So tell me about skiing and how you first got into it.

Ben Finley:

All right. Shelby, everything in life is tied to history. In 1963, I was dating a lady and we went up to Yosemite National Park and spent the weekend in Yosemite chasing the raccoons away from the food, et cetera. And on Sunday, we're leaving the park and she says, "Gee, why don't we stop by the ski area?" Well, I'm from New York City, never been to a ski area in my life. "All right, let's stop by the ski area." So here we are sitting at Badger Pass in the warm California sun watching people kill themselves coming down the mountain. And she looks at me, she says, "I want to learn how to ski." And the first thing that went through my mind at that point was dollar bills and broken legs in that sequence. But you know, I'm 20 some years old trying to date this lady. What could I say? Said, "Gee, I've got to figure out something real quick." And at that time, I was running a scuba diving club for North America called the Sea Sabers. And I said to her, "Tell you what," I said, "I'm looking for a dive partner. If you take diving lessons and pass your ocean checkout," said, "I'll bring you skiing." And I thought that would be the end of it. Six weeks later I was back in Yosemite National Park taking ski lessons. I absolutely hated the first four lessons. Now again, you've got to remember the time, in the 60s the skis came all the way up to your wrist.

Shelby Stanger:

Oh, they were so tall.

Ben Finley:

They were extremely long skis and in most cases they were made out of wood and I hated it. I said, "Why am I here? This just isn't worth it." And then on the fifth lesson, I could finally do a hockey stop. I said, "Yes, all right, this has got some places to go." So that year, we made a couple of more trips up there with some friends and skiing got better. And then in '64, I went back to grad school at New York and there was a guy by the name of Dick Martin who was running three buses a week out of Harlem with African Americans on board. And Dick had this club that he called Four Seasons. Dick and I happened to have gone to grade school together. So I went on bus trips all during my graduate school and basically Dick and his buddies taught me how to ski on the ice of the east. So anyway, came back to LA, went to work again. And I lived in Los Angeles, worked in Anaheim. And so we had a 30 mile commute every day. And the guy I was riding with happened to have been born and raised in Colorado. And one day I said to him, "I'd like to go skiing again." He says, "Yeah, so would I." But he says, "It's so expensive." I said, "Yeah." I said, "I know we can get group rates in Yosemite." So at that particular time, we were playing volleyball at a community center. And so we went into that volleyball group one night and said, "Hey, any you guys want to go skiing?" All we were looking for was 12 people. And instead of getting 12, we ended up with 36. And instead of taking our own cars, we ended up chartering a bus. And all of a sudden Ben and Flavius were in the ski club business.

Shelby Stanger:

And my guess is that was a good party time as well.

Ben Finley:

Oh yeah, yeah. See, skiing is a social sport. Most people don't recognize that.

Shelby Stanger:

So what was skiing like back then? I mean, you told me the gear, it was just atrocious. It was big, long, a little daunting.

Ben Finley:

Yeah. I mean, the skis were long, the boots were made out of leather. There were two layers of boots, an inner boot and an outer boot. Your foot was held onto the ski by something called a ski binding. It's still called a ski binding, but it was a cable binding that sort of grabbed a groove in the back of the boot. And basically it was a torture machine, which had a great capability of breaking your leg. On the other hand, the advantage was lift tickets was \$6 at June Mountain.

Shelby Stanger:

Wow. \$6 at June Mountain.

Ben Finley:

We would go up and we would have a bus full of people and we stayed at a place called Fern Creek Lodge, which had two big dormitory style rooms. And the girls would be in one room, guys would be in another room. That's where Four Seasons started.

Shelby Stanger:

And it was probably really fun.

Ben Finley:

Oh yeah, definitely.

Shelby Stanger:

All right, so there's this stereotype that skiing's traditionally been a white guy's sport and I know you guys have helped change that, but what was it like back then? Were there any African Americans skiing? Where you guys one of the few?

Ben Finley:

The answer to that question is, we were definitely a strange sight on the mountain. And people would look at you. Well let me give you a story here. Skiing Heavenly Valley one weekend and we're having lunch and these folks come over to us and they say, "Wow, we saw you guys skiing out there. Where are you appearing tonight?"

Shelby Stanger:

They thought you were entertainers.

Ben Finley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Shelby Stanger:

Wow.

Ben Finley:

And we tell them, "No, we're not appearing anywhere. We're part of the Black Panther ski team."

Shelby Stanger:

[Laughter] What did they say?

Ben Finley:

"Oh, okay. Okay." But I mean, in all honesty, with only one exception that I can think about, Four Seasons has never run into any overt racism on the mountain. None. So to my way of thinking, people basically would ask you silly questions, but that's only because, "Gee, I never saw black people on the mountain before." It wasn't a main question, it was just an interesting question.

Shelby Stanger:

Well, I appreciate that answer. It'd been funny if you guys milked it. We're like, "Yeah, we're the entertainers tonight," and let them buy you drinks.

Ben Finley:

No, not, no, no, no, they didn't go that far. As soon as you said the word Black Panther, they backed away. Again, everything is tied to history.

Shelby Stanger:

So Ben started taking his friends in the community to the mountain and he encouraged others to try the sport out. Meanwhile, across the country in Chicago, future National Brotherhood of Skiers, co-founder Art Clay, was learning to ski and getting hooked as well. How did you learn to ski and when did you learn to ski?

Art Clay:

Well, I started skiing about '68. '67 or '68 and got hooked.

Shelby Stanger:

How old were you then?

Art Clay:

35.

Shelby Stanger:

And you got hooked at 35 learning to ski? Because it's not an easy sport to learn.

Art Clay:

Yes. And I know that now I'll be 83 next month and I know it's not easy, but I'm still trying to get folks involved at any point that I can.

Shelby Stanger:

So when you got hooked, tell me about what skiing did for you. Take me to that moment where you just were like, "I'm addicted to this and I got to keep doing it."

Art Clay:

Well it wasn't quite like that. Actually it was during the time when I was out of the service and out of school, had nothing to do. And you know like most of the activities around Chicago in the winter, it had to do with going to the bar and having a drink or carrying your little whiskey case with you and going wherever you were going at the time. I found that it was cheaper to ski on a weekend than it was to just stay around the city for the weekend. Back then it was only about \$75 to go skiing for the weekend for one day. And we would go up to the Playboy Club here and just places that were close to Chicago.

Shelby Stanger:

Wait, wait, wait, back up. What's the Playboy Club?

Art Clay:

The Playboy Club is up Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and it had a ski area. I mean it was small. Well you wouldn't call it a ski area, they just called it a hill. But the hills in the Midwest where learning to ski were pretty challenging. And as we progressed, we started going out west and meeting more and more. At one time if you went skiing and you saw another African American on the slopes, you would speak and have conversations. By the time the day was over you were good friends. It went on like that for a number of years. And now going to a summit is like going to a big family reunion. There are people there who went to the first summit. We aren't skiing as much anymore and it's a little more difficult getting the younger folks involved in what we were doing, but they are still coming out.

Shelby Stanger:

That's fantastic. Why weren't there that many African American skiers back then and do you think there are more today?

Art Clay:

Oh, there are more today than ever and there will be more. It's a fun sport now. It's easier to learn now than it was back then. And folks who never had the experience of using a 210 inch ski or cable bindings or leather boots, the ski industry is a lot different today than it was then. And it's a lot harder getting kids out of the neighborhood to go skiing, it cost too much. The cost today is prohibitive. When lift tickets were like \$15, that was high back in the day. And to see lift tickets today starting around \$75 and then you had to get there and you know, it's difficult. And we're going to find a way, we're going to find a way to continue getting kids from the community out on the slopes.

Shelby Stanger:

Leading ski clubs on day trips is pretty different from growing a national organization with thousands of people gathered for an annual summit. So how did one ski club outing turned into a 45 plus year old organization?

Ben Finley:

In 1971, I had a friend of mine who was living in Chicago by the name of Joe Dorsey. And Joe called me up one night and said, "Hey Ben, there's a black ski club here in Chicago." I said, "Nah, really?" I mean because the only ones that I knew about the one here and the one in New York City. So he gave me the name of one of the leaders of that, who is Art Clay. And I called Art, we had this long conversation and we stayed in touch for about three or four months. And then on one of our conversations I said, "Art," I said, "Maybe we ought to get our ski clubs together." He said, "Yeah, that's a great idea." So I sat down

and I wrote a proposal and I sent it to Art and every other black ski club that we knew of. The response that we got back said, "Yeah, let's do this."

Shelby Stanger:

Let's do this, of course.

Ben Finley:

So all of a sudden Ben and Art are in the trip business leading a group into Aspen. And then we started getting calls from individuals. And individual people would say, "Hey, I hear you guys are going to give this event." They said, "I want to come." And both of us said, "Yup, you can come, but you got to have a ski club. You can't come as an individual." So that was the catalyst that led to the formation of another seven ski clubs.

Shelby Stanger:

What cities where these ski clubs in?

Ben Finley:

Seattle, Washington, Oakland, California, Washington, D.C., Gee, that's what I can remember.

Shelby Stanger:

So you get these ski clubs. Seven more now, so there's seven plus Chicago plus your ski club.

Ben Finley:

Okay. The plan here, again, history, '73, the end of the black power movement. None of us felt safe letting Aspen know that this group of black folks were coming to town. And so each club just went out and made individual reservations over the phone for whatever number of people.

Shelby Stanger:

At the same hotel or different places?

Ben Finley:

No, we scattered.

Shelby Stanger:

Scattered, okay.

Ben Finley:

All over the place.

Ben Finley:

Then I start getting calls from Schlitz Beer. And Schlitz says, "Hey, we want to come out and sponsor your event." "Sponsor? What does the sponsor do?" I'm an engineer. So then who else called, United Airlines called. And I finally figured out what a sponsor was. That's somebody that wants to pay for something, great. So United paid for our souvenir journal and Schlitz underwrote the races. So, you see,

this was a learning experience, none of this is planned, it just is coming together. And about two weeks before the event, somebody said, "We ought to really let Aspen know." So we send them a press release. And apparently, as I found out seven, eight years later, the press release caused Aspen to go into the anxiety mode and they ended up having the Colorado National Guard put on alert for the week. We didn't know that. So it had no impact on the event. But when you look back upon it, it's funny as hell now.

Shelby Stanger:

So funny. What was Aspen like then?

Ben Finley:

It's a ski mecca, ski mecca of the United States.

Shelby Stanger:

It was the place.

Ben Finley:

It was the place, definitely.

Shelby Stanger:

That's right. For those of you who don't know, who weren't born in the 70s, Aspen was the spot.

Ben Finley:

It was the spot. And we ended up with 350 people.

Shelby Stanger:

350 People? There's a lot of people for the first summit.

Ben Finley:

It was very interesting from the standpoint that you had people from the East, the Midwest and the South and the West coming together who had no idea who the other groups were. And they melded like a deck of cards. It didn't matter what your occupation was, you are a skier. We were there to have fun and obviously great social interaction occurs.

Shelby Stanger:

The National Brotherhood of Skiers isn't solely about getting more African Americans on the slopes though. At their second gathering in 1974 in Park City, Utah, they came up with the name for the organization and they also came up with a mission to get black athletes on the U.S. Olympic ski team. That mission though has been harder than they anticipated.

Ben Finley:

in '74, the group came together in Park City Thanksgiving weekend and they decided to form a national organization. They went around with 15 to 20 different names, finally settled on the National Brotherhood of Skiers. And they had to have a mission, at least as far as Ben was concerned, he needed

a mission for this organization. And it had to be something different than, "Let's get together and party every two years." And so they finally settled on, "To find, fund and select black athletes who would go out and win Olympic medals to support the U.S. ski team." Because you all needed a real lot of help at that time. So that's been the mission of the organization.

Shelby Stanger:

How's that mission gone so far for you guys?

Ben Finley:

It's struggling. It's struggling only because of what it takes to make the U.S. ski team.

Shelby Stanger:

Talk to me about that a little bit. I'm a surfer, I don't know too much about skiing, snowboarding. I just know it's a ton of money, a ton of work. And that sport is, like I said, it's expensive.

Ben Finley:

Well, let me give you the positive. I think at this point we've had four or five athletes, three of which have been disabled, who have started at the Paralympics. The first was Bonnie St. John and other one I think it was Ralph Green. And I can't remember the third.

Shelby Stanger:

How about Errol Kerr?

Ben Finley:

Errol Kerr was-

Shelby Stanger:

Errol Kerr was on Jamaica.

Ben Finley:

Yeah, he skied for Jamaica. He was at NBS Kid, who we gave scholarship money to, but obviously Jamaica needed a skier or water skier. Errol says, "Here I am." And he skied for Jamaica.

Shelby Stanger:

That's awesome.

Ben Finley:

Seba Johnson, I believe, skied for The Bahamas. She was another one. And that's what I remember so far.

Shelby Stanger:

So you've had a couple of Paralympians then you also had these two siblings, Andre and Suki Horton.

Ben Finley:

Yes. They were the two that came closest. They made whatever the ski team is right underneath the U.S. ski team. Both of them were there. And the whole thing of making a U.S. ski team is dependent upon your reducing FIS points. In order to reduce FIS points, you have to compete. In order to compete, you have to travel. Well, in our case, we're dealing with high school kids who did not live at ski areas. So we ended up giving scholarships to places like Burke Mountain Academy, which were high schools in the New England area to go to high school and sort of ski half the day and learn half the day. The problem that every youngster has if you want to make the U.S. ski team, is basically you got to do it full time. It's a full time occupation, not unlike ice skating or gymnastics or basketball. And that requires, in some cases, that you delay your college education to do that. And in the African American community, if you've got enough money to allow your youngster to participate in this expensive sport, delaying college education is a hard sell. So it's a challenge. And by the way, most of us do not live in ski areas, so now it's a weekend thing as opposed to five or six days a week. So it is a disadvantage, but it's still a challenge. It's still a good mission.

Shelby Stanger:

When we come back, Ben talks about what a typical summit is like and he shares some big news for him and his co founder.

Shelby Stanger:

Surfing is my number one favorite activity, and even though I'm surrounded by water, staying hydrated is key to staying out there. That's why I love the Trail Series water bottle from Hydro Flask. It's the same look and feel you know and love from Hydro Flask, but 25% lighter. And lighter doesn't mean your ice will melt or your coffee will get lukewarm: The double wall vacuum insulation protects the temperature for hours. Add in the lightweight leak proof cap and you've found yourself the dream water bottle. You can find Hydro Flask at REI and you can find out more about Hydro Flask and their Trail Series water bottle at hydroflask.com/wildideas. Stay hydrated, stay happy!

Shelby Stanger:

Everything I've read or watched about these summits makes them look like they're so much fun, but I had to hear from the man himself. What actually goes down at one of these summits? Tell me really quickly what a typical gathering is like for one of your summits, you ski, you party, then you fundraise and give back to people who want to get to the Olympics or the Paralympics.

Ben Finley:

Summit is like a gathering of family and their kids. Summit nowadays for the registrants who are still participating, most of them are in their 50s. And then you have a contingent that we refer to as the renegades, who are the younger folks who do not want to pay registration fee for the convention but still want to be there for the party. And that makes up probably another 25% of the contingent. So you've got these two African American groups competing for space, party space on the mountain. For the older folks, it's like, "Gee, let's get together for the next year's reunion. We haven't seen each other in a year or so." So it's a great big opportunity to see your friends. For the, now millennials, it's a hunting party. Basically.

Shelby Stanger:

I love how you just said that.

Ben Finley:

It's a hunting party and it's wonderful. The hunt goes on and they have fun. I've learned that we can't fight them, so you might as well figure a way to join them. So it's two different groups of people, but the mountain absolutely loves it because of the dollars we bring to town and the atmosphere that comes along with us.

Shelby Stanger:

I imagine you guys are pretty fun to hang out with. How many people are in the National Brotherhood of Skiing today?

Ben Finley:

The NBS doesn't like to give out a number and I don't really know what the number is. We're down to about 60 ski clubs.

Shelby Stanger:

Still a lot of ski clubs.

Ben Finley:

It's a lot of clubs. But actually getting the membership numbers from each one of these clubs is sometimes difficult. For example, most clubs charge dues. But there are other clubs like Four Seasons West who has never charged dues. So how many people do we have? I don't know. We send out 2,000 constant contact emails a month, but what's our membership? I don't know.

Shelby Stanger:

That's okay. You got 60 ski clubs, about 2,000 and a bunch of people who have gotten married.

Ben Finley:

Yeah, a whole lot of people got married.

Shelby Stanger:

And some travel trips too, as far as New Zealand.

Ben Finley:

We've been to Austria. Four Seasons has skied Europe, all over the place. The NBS did a summit, I believe it was in Austria. Four Seasons has skied Australia. Yeah, we went to Japan year ago.

Shelby Stanger:

Can you tell me some success stories that have come from it and people have gotten married probably?

Ben Finley:

Oh, there are tons of marriage stories. My older son and his wife, current wife, were both on the Four Seasons youth race team when they were kids. And they went off to college. She got married, got divorced, and they suddenly got back together in Steamboat, Colorado.

Shelby Stanger:

Oh, that gave me goosebumps. That's a good story.

Ben Finley:

And they got married two years later and now I have a two year old grandchild. So now I have four new grandchildren.

Shelby Stanger:

Congratulations.

Ben Finley:

Yeah, it's wonderful. So there's all sorts of stories like that that percolate through the group. As an engineer, I had a lot of traveling to do at one point. And I would go into airports and run into people from the summit and I'm saying, "What are you doing here?" And they sort of looked down and said, "Well, I'm visiting such and such."

Shelby Stanger:

Who they met at the summit.

Ben Finley:

That they met at the summit.

Shelby Stanger:

You should just start a matchmaking service, Ben.

Ben Finley:

No. Nope.

Shelby Stanger:

Matchmaking friendships and skilled athletes aren't the only things that have come out of the National Brotherhood of Skiers. Ben and his co founder, Art Clay, are being inducted in the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall Of Fame this March.

Shelby Stanger:

So you guys were recently elected into the Ski and Snowboard Hall Of Fame.

Ben Finley:

Yes.

Shelby Stanger:

So what does that mean? Where were you when you got the news? And congratulations, by the way.

Ben Finley:

Thank you.

Ben Finley:

I got the news or we got the news in late August of this event. The story that goes along with this is that four years ago, one of the former presidents of the NBS, by the name of Joe Long, insisted that Art and I apply for admission to the Ski Hall Of Fame along with the National Brotherhood of Skiers. So he convinced us to apply and Art and I applied as individuals and the NBS applied. Well, the result of that was that the NBS was denied because they don't take organizations. Art and I were advised to apply as a pair. And so in year, whatever, two years ago was, we applied as a couple and didn't make it. As far as Ben was concerned, that was the end of it. But last year in Steamboat, Billy Kidd offered to assist us in our applications. This is Billy Kidd, the Olympic skier. And using Billy as an advisor, we applied again and he wrote a supporting letter to that effect. So his support plus this film that REI generated, the Brotherhood of Skiing, I think the combination is what got us selected this time. I'm thrilled by it. I'm absolutely thrilled by it. I am more thrilled by the fact that the National Brotherhood of Skiers is now a voting member of the Ski Hall Of Fame. So all of a sudden the NBS has a seat at the table. What's even more interesting is if you look at the people who have been inducted into the Ski Hall, it's individual athletes, the ski companies, the ski patrol, it's people who service the general skiing population. But the NBS is the first organization who represents the general skiing population. And I don't know if people recognize that. Ben recognizes that and that's a thrill.

Shelby Stanger:

That's huge when you've brought so many people who wouldn't of traditionally maybe gone to the mountain, to the mountain.

Ben Finley:

Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

That's awesome. Congratulations.

Ben Finley:

Just doing that was fantastic.

Shelby Stanger:

I didn't realize that you needed to raise money to be inducted though. So can you explain what can we do to help?

Ben Finley:

Oh, you can do a lot to help.

Shelby Stanger:

All right, talk to us.

Ben Finley:

As part of this podcast, let's talk about the issue first of all. We were elected and Art and I have been welcomed dramatically into the organization. And no one ever said to us, as individuals or as a couple, anything about money. However, a month after we were elected, it became sort of obvious that, "Uh-oh, the induction is a fundraising event." And so the Ski Hall, appropriately so, but unbeknownst to us, approached the NBS and said, "Hey, we sure would like you guys to produce \$10,000 for this thing." And so that was the challenge that was offered to us. So anybody out there, if we could say, "Gee, we'd like to set up a GoFundMe page at the end of this broadcast, there will be a link to a page that you can go to to kick in ten, \$20 bucks, whatever you think might be worthy of the National Brotherhood of Skiers co founders being inducted into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall Of Fame."

Shelby Stanger:

in addition to helping support their induction into the hall of fame, I wanted to know what else can we do to support these men in their mission to get more people of color participating in winter sports and involved in the National Brotherhood of Skiers.

Shelby Stanger:

What's your advice to get more people, especially people of color, into the skiing today?

Art Clay:

You see, skiing is not a sport where you can roll out a basketball and five or six guys can play, or baseball or soccer where there are ten people on each team. You out there by yourself and the more people know how to ski, who will spend a little time with those who can't ski, that's what we really need to do a lot more. Talk about how great a skier I am, I'd rather donate my time now to teaching younger kids to ski.

Shelby Stanger:

You're a good egg. Is there anything else our listeners should know about the National Brotherhood of Skiing and how we can support the awesome work you're doing? How do people join, for one, because I'm sure we have a lot of listeners who are interested in this.

Ben Finley:

Yes. You can go on to nbs.org and the NBS ski clubs are broken up into regions, Eastern, Midwest, Rocky and Western. Find a ski club, go to their website, find out how you join. In the age of social media, it's not very complex to find a way to get there.

Shelby Stanger:

That's awesome. Where are you guys going next?

Ben Finley:

The next summit is February 29th through March 7th in Sun Valley, Idaho. We will totally occupy the mountain and we can guarantee you that you will have a marvelous experience.

Shelby Stanger:

Will you guys ski Bald Mountain or Dollar?

Ben Finley:

Both. Bald is the big mountain.

Shelby Stanger:

Bald is terrifying.

Ben Finley:

Bald is terrifying?

Shelby Stanger:

Well, I just took my snowboard up there. We saw Clint Eastwood in the lobby hanging out and then that mountain was like straight up down from the side.

Ben Finley:

Nah.

Shelby Stanger:

It was pretty fun, though.

Ben Finley:

That's a medium class mountain.

Shelby Stanger:

Well, I'm a baby then. I've only done like Mammoth.

Ben Finley:

Oh, Mammoth is perfectly groomed now. Sun Valley is a little bit more challenging.

Shelby Stanger:

And then Dollar is pretty fun for little kids. And people like me snowboarding out of bounds.

Ben Finley:

Precisely.

Shelby Stanger:

Any advice to people who have a wild idea like this? I mean your idea was just kind of a wild idea. "Let's get some skiers together and go to the mountain," but to pull it off took some work. Any advice to other people who have a wild idea and want to make it happen?

Ben Finley:

Sure. If you have a wild idea and want to make it happen, Ben would suggest that you first find a partner to assist you in this wild idea. And then the two of you, or maybe three of you go off and do it, at least try to do it. You'll probably be successful, but the challenges, who knows what's going to happen. This

was not planned at all. This was a wild idea to take some people skiing from Los Angeles that we found in a community center playing volleyball and all of a sudden life changed.

Shelby Stanger:

Ben and Art are pretty amazing guys. They saw that accessibility was limited for black athletes in snow sports and they decided to do something about it. They provided opportunities for people to learn a new sport, to forge connections all while making a huge difference in the diversity of winter sports. Of course, I had to finish my conversation with Ben with a few wild questions.

Shelby Stanger:

What's your favorite mountain to ski?

Ben Finley:

At this point in my life, Mammoth Mountain.

Shelby Stanger:

Perfect five hour drive.

Ben Finley:

Five hour drive, I know the mountain. I can ski it with my eyes closed.

Shelby Stanger:

What's your favorite run at Mammoth?

Ben Finley:

Probably at the top of 22.

Shelby Stanger:

Oh, that's a good one.

Shelby Stanger:

What mountain has the best food?

Ben Finley:

What mountain has the best food? That I can afford? I would say Vail.

Shelby Stanger:

What mountain has the best party scene? I guess it's wherever the NBS is.

Ben Finley:

That is the perfect answer. Because other than that, it's hit and miss. Yes.

Shelby Stanger:

What's your favorite snack to take with you on the mountain?

Ben Finley:

A hydro pack with water in it.

Shelby Stanger:

Your favorite snack is water?

Ben Finley:

Water. Got to have water.

Shelby Stanger:

You're hilarious. Okay, so if we were to make a movie on your life, what is the soundtrack music playing in the background?

Ben Finley:

Atomic Dog.

Shelby Stanger:

Atomic Dog.

Ben Finley:

Atomic Dog would be my soundtrack.

Shelby Stanger:

What's your message to people who want to get into adventure? Whether it's sailing or skiing, but they're a little intimidated by it.

Ben Finley:

The normal advice I would give to anybody, do it one step at a time, one day at a time. Don't jump into it with all four feet and go and sample it. For example, if you are scared of roller coasters, go ride a wooden one first and see how it feels before you do one that takes you 360 degrees around the loop twice and do it slowly and see how it feels. Apprehension will go away with time. Go take some lessons and the lessons will be totally mild and calm and you can decide after the first series of lessons how far you want to take it.

Shelby Stanger:

I think that's good advice in a lot of sport. Take a lesson. And I think skiing now does a really good job of offering lessons at almost every mountain.

Ben Finley:

I would never take anybody skiing without putting them into a lesson. Snowboarding or skiing.

Shelby Stanger:

Agree. Well I teach surfing. Ben, and I just throw this out to you.

Ben Finley:

Are you a professional instructor?

Shelby Stanger:

I'm a professional instructor, not a professional surfer. So if you'd ever like to come surfing, I'd be happy to take you and your wife out in La Jolla, San Diego.

Ben Finley:

There you go, sweetie. We can go surfing.

Shelby Stanger:

So you think about it. It's a little cold right now, but it's okay. You're a skier so you can handle it. We've got wetsuits. You're a diver, you'd be fine.

Shelby Stanger:

I think a lot of people, I mean myself included, feel like we have to throw ourselves into a new adventure, sport or hobby. But I like Ben's advice to go one step at a time. This man has quite a bit of life experience, so I trust Ben's wisdom.

Shelby Stanger:

If you want to join the National Brotherhood of Skiers head to nbs.org where you can find a registered ski club in your area to join. They're actually in the middle of their 2020 summit right now in Sun Valley, Idaho. So to any National Brotherhood of Skiers members who are listening, I hope you're having a blast. If you want to donate to Ben and Art's hall of fame induction fundraiser, you can see the show notes at whatever podcast player you're listening on or go to rei.com/wildideasworthliving. Let's help these guys meet their goal.

Shelby Stanger:

Thank you so much to Ben Finley and your wife for hosting me in your home and for telling me such great stories. Thank you, also to Art Clay for chatting with me on the phone and to both of you for doing what you do. Join us week after next as we talked to musician, Mike Posner, about his walk across America, his latest mountaineering adventures, and so much more. Wild Ideas Worth Living is part of the REI podcast network, it's hosted by me, Shelby Stanger, written and edited by Annie Fassler and produced by Chelsea Davis. As always, we appreciate when you subscribe, rate and review the show where ever you listen and remember some of the best adventures happen when you follow your wildest ideas.