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EGadd!

Will Gadd, one of Canada's foremost adventurers, debunks adrenaline, big balls and Atlantic Ocean iceberging

By Darren Davidson

IF THERE'S ANYONE WHO KNOWS precisely at which intersection the limelight of brains, nerve and 21st century adventurism collide, it's Canmore, Alberta's Will Gadd. Slings an unparalleled expedition resumé, the 42-year-old has recounted his feats everywhere from *Sports Illustrated's* online pages to Conan O'Brien's couch.

Over the last decade, few of Gadd's contemporaries have managed to match his well-calculated ken for athletic accomplishment and audacious exploit as an ice and mixed climber, paraglider and spirited self-promoter. He's won the Winter X-Games climbing championship twice, the Ice Climbing World Cup and was the first to paraglide across the continental US, the Grand Canyon and the Andes. He climbed Mount Robson—the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies—in a day, and beyond his Red Bull-sponsored skills on ice and in the air, Gadd is also a class V kayaker, skier, mountain biker, spelunker, author, TV star, public speaker, dad-of-one and husband of former ice climbing world champ Kim Csizmazia. In 2005, *Outside* magazine's special issue, entitled "Faces", billed Gadd as one of the 20 greatest athletes competing in adventure sports today.

At 1,000 feet, Hunlen Falls, located in British Columbia's remote Tweedsmuir Provincial Park, is one of the world's tallest frozen waterfalls. In February 2009, Gadd and climbing partner EJ Primley were the first to ascend the falls, what Gadd says is the most dangerous and exciting climb he's done. Photo: Christian Pondella

“THE IDEA OF ‘BURL’ AND ‘BALLS’ IS STUPID; THOSE WHO DEFINE THEIR ADVENTURES BY THE USE OF EITHER TERM ARE DEAD OR GOING TO BE DEAD. ADMIRATION FOR EITHER CHARACTERISTIC IS RIGHT UP THERE WITH ADMIRING CRACKHEADS OR FRAT BOYS WHO DRINK TOO MUCH BEER AND BRAG ABOUT HOW MANY TIMES THEY PUKED.”



Gadd rigs his motorized paraglider for an iceberg scouting mission in Makkovik, Labrador. Photo: Christian Pondella

Travel writing godfather Tim Cahill gleaned on Gadd’s “almost intolerable modesty,” while *ESPN* magazine tagged him a “Type-A yapper.” He rocks, he talks—but dodges to humour and humility when asked about his undeniably radical career. A political science major, with an ear for Fugazi and The Crystal Method, Gadd exemplifies a reason to live life on the edge of anything but the sofa. *KMC*’s Darren Davidson interviewed Gadd this winter, just before he and climbing partner EJ Plimley successfully topped Hunlen Falls—Canada’s third highest waterfall at 1,000 feet—in BC’s remote Tweedsmuir Provincial Park.

KMC: You say you hate adrenaline. Why? Will Gadd: It sucks. I think the moniker “adrenaline junkie” is just wrong. That’s a common misperception in the world, that people who do these sports are adrenaline junkies looking for their next fix. I can’t think of anyone who breaks into drug

stores to steal adrenaline. If I just wanted adrenaline, I could rob banks. I would get a lot more of a buzz and the money would be better.

So is the physical rush of adventuring not what you’re searching for? What is it then? Mental achievement? A spiritual quest?

It’s a physical rush when you’re doing something well that you’ve prepared for and trained hard for. It’s having a series of moments that are the execution. It’s about doing things that are meaningful—and bringing back memories you’ll carry with you until your death.

What are your thoughts on outdoor lovers who do drugs when they recreate?

The people I climb or fly hard with, when we’re pushing the limits, they’re not baked. You can’t be baked and function at a super-high level. But there’s a lot worse things

than smoking a joint. Alcohol’s a lot worse than marijuana. If you want to kick back and smoke up, that’s your thing. Just don’t do anything that actually matters.

You’re a Red Bull sponsored athlete: Red Bull and vodka, Red Bull and Jägermeister or Red Bull and . . . ? Red Bull and water mixed in the hydration bag. Go mix!

On adventure sport and growing up: When I was a teenager, I had a pretty healthy streak of juvenile delinquency in me. That was pure boredom. These sports offer a healthier alternative for teens. I’d rather my daughter risk her limbs mountain biking than go down to the mall and smoke meth. Some kids need very high levels of stimulation.

What’s been your most serious accident? I hit an elk with my truck. Well, the elk ran

Oh. My. Gadd. Six Will Gadd Stunts You’ll Never Pull Off

I. Polar Circus: His First Major Ice Climb (1985)

Two decades ago, Polar Circus, a 1,600-foot waterfall in Banff National Park, was considered one of the planet’s toughest ice climbs. With the temperature dropping to -30°C and climbing mostly in darkness, Gadd tops the route in 18 hours. His conclusion? “Circus taught me that ice climbing is cold, dangerous and masochistic,” he tells *ESPN* magazine. He doesn’t attempt another serious ice climb for seven years.



2. Paragliding Long Distance World Record (2002)

Gadd sets his first long-distance paragliding world record of 290 kilometres in 1998. Four years later, flying out of Zapata, Texas, narrowly avoiding power lines, Mexican airspace and dropping one of two Pop Tarts he packed for lunch, Gadd shatters his previous best, sailing back into the record books with a flight of 423 kms in 10 hours and 38 minutes.



3. The Aweberg Iceberg Climbing Expedition (2006)

A trip conjured up while sitting at a bar in his hometown of Canmore, Gadd and climbing cohort Ben Firth travel to Newfoundland in an attempt to climb grounded icebergs. Instead, they end up scaling mammoth ice chunks floating in the frigid Labrador Sea. The ice is unpredictably buoyant and fragile. “We learned that mountain boys may well be out of their depths in the North Atlantic,” Gadd tells *National Geographic Adventure*.



4. Filming Fearless Planet (2007)

Gadd stars in a six-part series for the Discovery Channel, which airs right after the globally acclaimed *Planet Earth* series. Shot in one two-month globetrotting stint, the series follows Gadd on a selection of over-the-top adventurous efforts, including swimming with sharks off Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, BASE jumping Venezuela’s Angel Falls and sand-skiing the Sahara Desert.



5. The Ice Mine Ice Climbing Adventure (2007)

In search of massive ice rumoured to have frozen deep in the abandoned 600-year-old iron mines of Dannemora, Sweden, Gadd, Swedish climber Andreas Spaak and a film and photography crew descend 400 feet into an underworld labyrinth of spectacular climbing. “I felt like a vandal in a museum,” Gadd says. “The scariest part was the echo of the ice falling into the dark below us. The mines seemed to keep going to the center of the Earth.”

6. Paragliding the Stratosphere . . . Well, Almost (2008)

In the summer of 2008, paragliding just 48 kilometres from the Denver International Airport, Gadd rides a series of thermal updrafts to an altitude of 17,990 feet. The Federal Aviation Administration’s flying limit for paragliders and hang-gliders is 18,000 feet. On his blog, Gadd recalls being passed by three jets—one underneath him. Slowly freezing, Gadd nearly passes out due to extreme hypoxia but manages to land safely on a large lawn in rural Colorado. He then hitchhikes 97 kilometres back to his truck.

Photos 3, 5 and 6 by Christian Pondella

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into me. I was almost run over in England when I looked the wrong way. This winter I did a long slide on ice while driving to Calgary. I've had lots of close calls both in normal life and in the mountains, and every single one of them was a failure of some kind. I'm not proud of them, and I beat myself up mentally until I feel I've changed my game enough to avoid that situation in the future, or at least radically lower my odds of experiencing it again. I run away a lot. The public only sees the "success" stories, but for every one of those there are at least twice as many trips that just don't work out for one reason or another.

Just to clarify—the elk ran into your truck?
The accident report said the elk was heading west and I was heading east. (Laughing).

What were some of your Evel Knievel moments?
I've had a lot. I consider Evel Knievel a great marketing ploy but a failure when it came to his stunts... The moments I've almost died are most I really regret. This is a great life. To cut your self off from that... you're an idiot. And I've been an idiot lots. I look at those moments as colossal fuck-ups. What I'm into is executing really cool trips with the biggest safety margin I can create.

What are some of the most dangerous adventures you've been on that you'd deem successful?
Climbing icebergs off the coast of Labrador was definitely one. We came up with that one in a bar in Canmore. We figured, "we can climb ice, how hard can it be?" We discovered that climbing floating icebergs in the Atlantic is substantially different than we thought, just by looking at the pictures. But it was fantastic. Setting some of the distance records I've set paragliding over the years were fantastic experiences too. Took a lot of work and dozens and dozens of days watching the wind blow the wrong way or too hard or not enough.

How far off the ground are you on a long distance paragliding run?
Up to about 15,000 feet. The highest I've flown is 22,300 feet.

What are some of the other big names in your realm of adventure sport?
In ice climbing, Jeff Lowe, Guy Lacelle, Ines Papert. In paragliding, Nevil Huett and the Valic brothers.

Who's got the biggest balls out there?
OK, I've beat around this question enough. The amount of "go for it, dude!" will only tell you who is most likely to die or end up in the hospital. I admire people who go big and get it done safely because they don't just huck their meat. But the idea of "burl" and "balls" is stupid; those who define their adventures by the use of either term are dead or going to be dead. Admiration for either characteristic is right up there with admiring crackheads or frat boys who drink too much beer and brag about how many times they puked. Seriously, it's not about who has the most balls but who executes an idea well. If you get bit off throwing down after a lot of thought, then that's life, but relying on either burl or balls to get things done is wrong.

Who do you really admire and for which adventure in particular?
Those who do a lot of what they love for a long time. My dad has done a lot of climbing over the years and still does. Guy Edwards and friends did their ski trip the length of the Coast Mountains. Guy Lacelle pushes hard but stays alive. That's who I look up to among many other people who are living a life they love. It doesn't matter to me what someone has done or does—what matters is how they work to realize their dreams, whatever those may be.

For better or worse, skilled or just plain stupid, what mountain town do you think has the most high-stakes adventure citizenry in the world? Chamonix? Canmore? Boulder? Whistler?
Any town in Afghanistan, Somalia or most of Africa. These "adventures" are deliberate; people in the middle of a civil war are dealing with far more than any of us ever will. You want burly adventure? Go talk to the Chinese immigrants I've met crossing high passes on the border of Nepal. Those people have some real tales to tell and are risking everything to have a better life. We're all over-pampered poseurs compared to most of the world.

What are three adventures you haven't embarked on that you hope to one day?
I'd like to fly the Rift Valley in Africa and paddle a new river in northern BC this summer. We climbed a really big waterfall in BC this winter.

You've got your finger on the global adventure sport pulse... Where will we go next?
There's a great mix right now of air, snow, gravity and flight coming together in sports, like wingsuit flying, speed gliding on skis, kite skiing/boarding, traction kites, etcetera. We are truly alive in the best possible decade ever for an adventure sports athlete.



Scotch on the rocks and climbing icebergs, Labrador Sea, 2006. Photo: Christian Pondella

"I RUN AWAY A LOT. THE PUBLIC ONLY SEES THE 'SUCCESS' STORIES, BUT FOR EVERY ONE OF THOSE THERE ARE AT LEAST TWICE AS MANY TRIPS THAT JUST DON'T WORK OUT FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER."

You do a lot of motivational speaking. In a sentence, what's the most common message you give to folks?
I'm actually a demotivational speaker. I don't believe anyone ever needed motivating to do something they really wanted to do. The trick is to figure out what you want to do in life, and then try to do it. This may mean changing everything in your life, which is terrifying, but the rewards of living your own life instead of someone else's are fantastic. ☐