

On The Road Again

Claes Axstal Lights Up The Slopes

by Rich Smith



All photos © Claes Axstal

Flash photography provides the control to overcome reflected ambient light.

The trick to capturing razor-sharp images of skiers hurtling downhill or leaping across snow-laced ravines at speeds in excess of 60 mph is to take control of the light. Yet nowhere is light more difficult to control than high atop a mountain dusted with frosty white powder.

"Ambient light is an extreme problem in ski photography because of snow, which is a strong reflector of sunlight," says Claes Axstal of Sweden, a much-in-demand chronicler of the interna-

tional whoosh-and-shoosh set. "You have these vast white backgrounds; also, when you get way up high, the air is thinner, which makes the sun shine more intensely on this very reflective material."

Snow reflections can throw skiers into unpredictability, because the varied contours of the surrounding landscape serve to create a situation roughly akin to setting up a crazy quilt of wall-sized mirrors inside a studio. And uncontrolled ambient light also plays havoc with depth of

field. For Axstal, whose signature is the gonzo action shot that freezes the skier's motion into an image as crisp as a wintry morning in the Rockies, depth of field is a crucial matter.

Axstal gains the upper hand over ambient light by shooting extensively with a flash—an admittedly uncommon strategy. "Flash photography in this kind of environment provides the control to overcome the reflected ambient light," he says. "The flash fills the shadows, and, at the same time, helps the camera 'see' the motion of