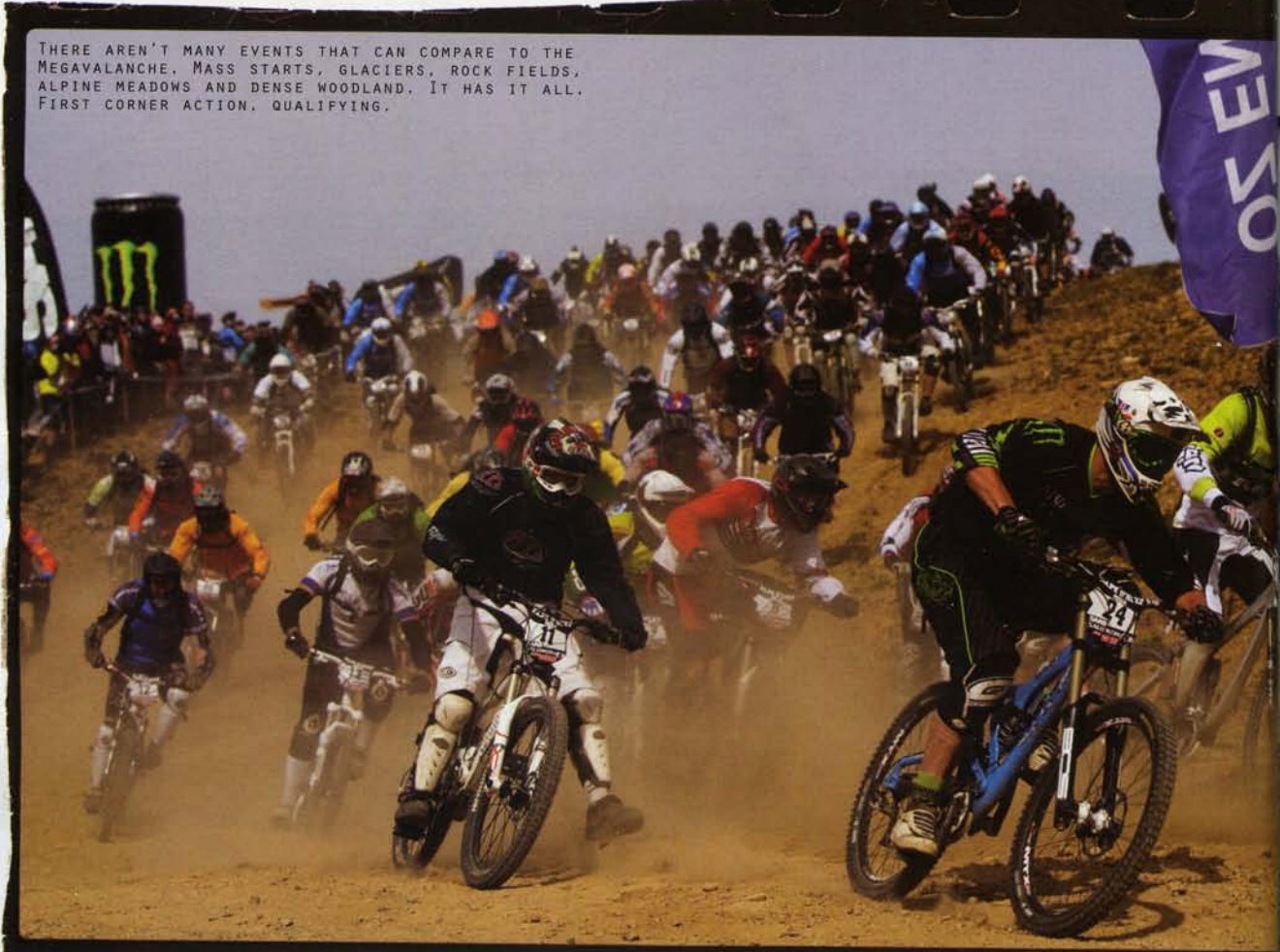


THERE AREN'T MANY EVENTS THAT CAN COMPARE TO THE MEGAVALANCHE. MASS STARTS, GLACIERS, ROCK FIELDS, ALPINE MEADOWS AND DENSE WOODLAND. IT HAS IT ALL. FIRST CORNER ACTION. QUALIFYING.



The 2009 Megavalanche, Alpe D'huez, France

RETURN TO THE MEGA

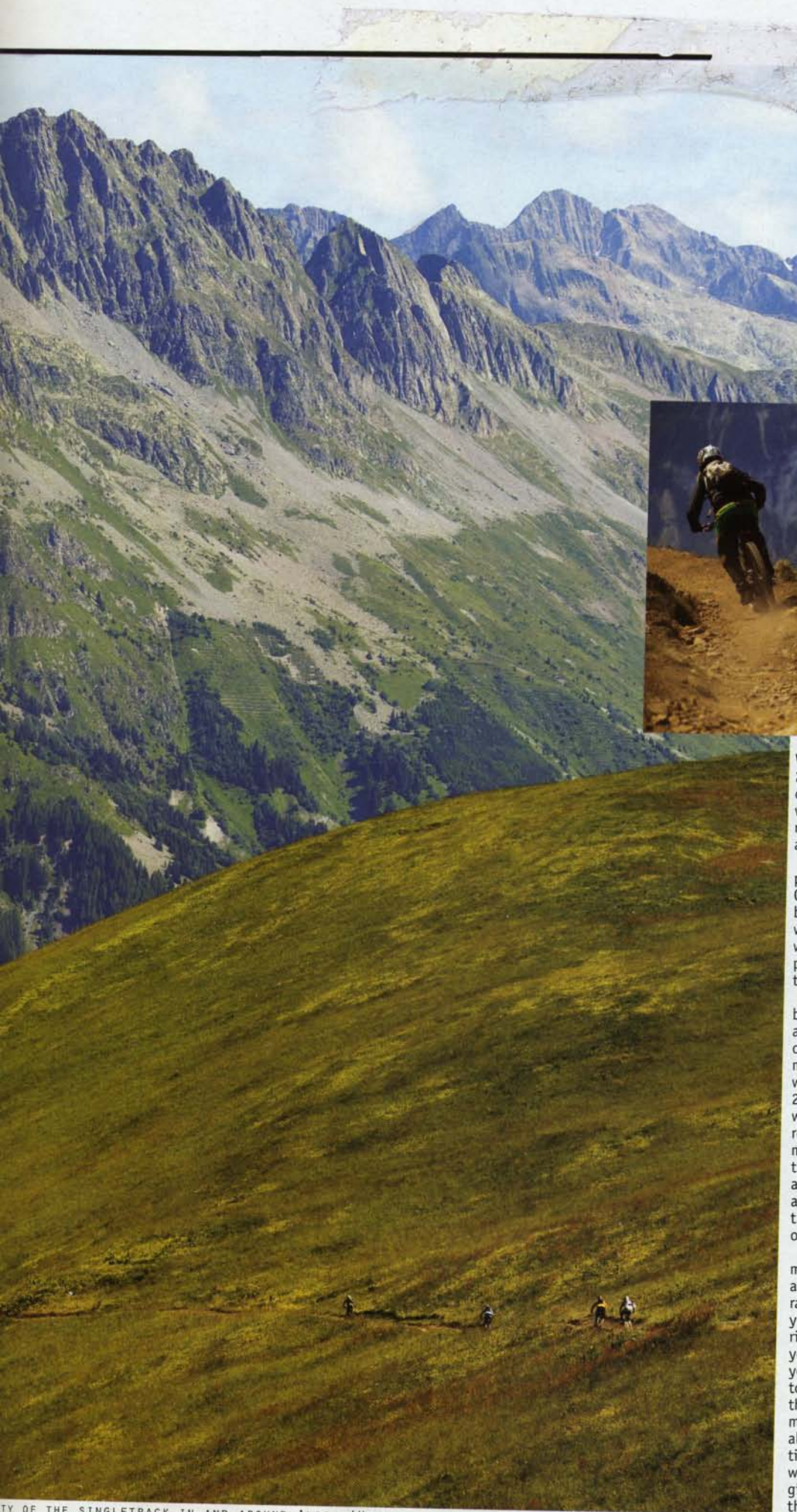
TEXT BY ANKA MARTIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SVEN MARTIN AND VICTOR LUCAS



Ahh, the mighty Megavalanche. It used to be on my to do list for many, many years, and finally in 2008, Sven (my husband) and I decided that it was finally time to tackle this crazy event and cross it off our wish lists once and for all



ALTERNATIVE RACE ISSUE



We showed up extremely ill prepared in 2008 with 5" cross country bikes, with no chain guides and no seat droppers, and boy were we in for a treat. Even without all the right gear and gadgets, we did really well and we were hooked and craving more.

It was the very first event that got pencilled into our schedules for 2009. Come hell or high water, we were going back and we were going prepared. Armed with our new 6" Santa Cruz Nomad beasts, with chain guides, Joplin seat post droppers and proper downhill casing tires to truly hammer the Alpine terrain.

The event itself is completely mind blowing. First you have the absolutely amazing mountain scenery – it just goes on for ever and a day, with miles and miles of singletrack trails to be ridden wherever you turn. Then you have about 2000+ entrants from all over the world, who all congregated here for the same reason – to simultaneously race down the mountain as fast as humanly possible and to pass or take-out as many competitors along the way. Pretty cool if you think about all the like-minded people out there in the world wanting to race each other down a very big mountain.

This race is really a great 'value for money' event. You get to ride pretty much all week before the qualifying and actual race, so by the time Sunday rolls around, you have done a great deal of superb riding in the French Alps. So much so, that you are knackered and can't believe that you actually still have to race. You have to qualify on a completely separate track the day before to earn your spot in the main line up the following day, and it is also a great way to suss out your competition for the main race. My qualifying time was 31min, putting me in 10th place and giving me that coveted front row spot in the final of the women's race...YES!

This year there were 65 women's entries, which is a great amount for any mountain biking event these days, and awesome to see so many women out there ripping it up, tearing past the guys and loving life. What I love about this event is the fact that you get to race with former DH World Champions, with Masters World Champions, with current World Cup racers, and with girls that have never raced before – a pretty unique scenario as far as racing goes. The only common denominator is the fact that we are all passionate about riding our bikes down, steep, fast and technical terrain (and the fact that you get to beat loads of men is a really satisfying feeling in this male dominated sport of ours).

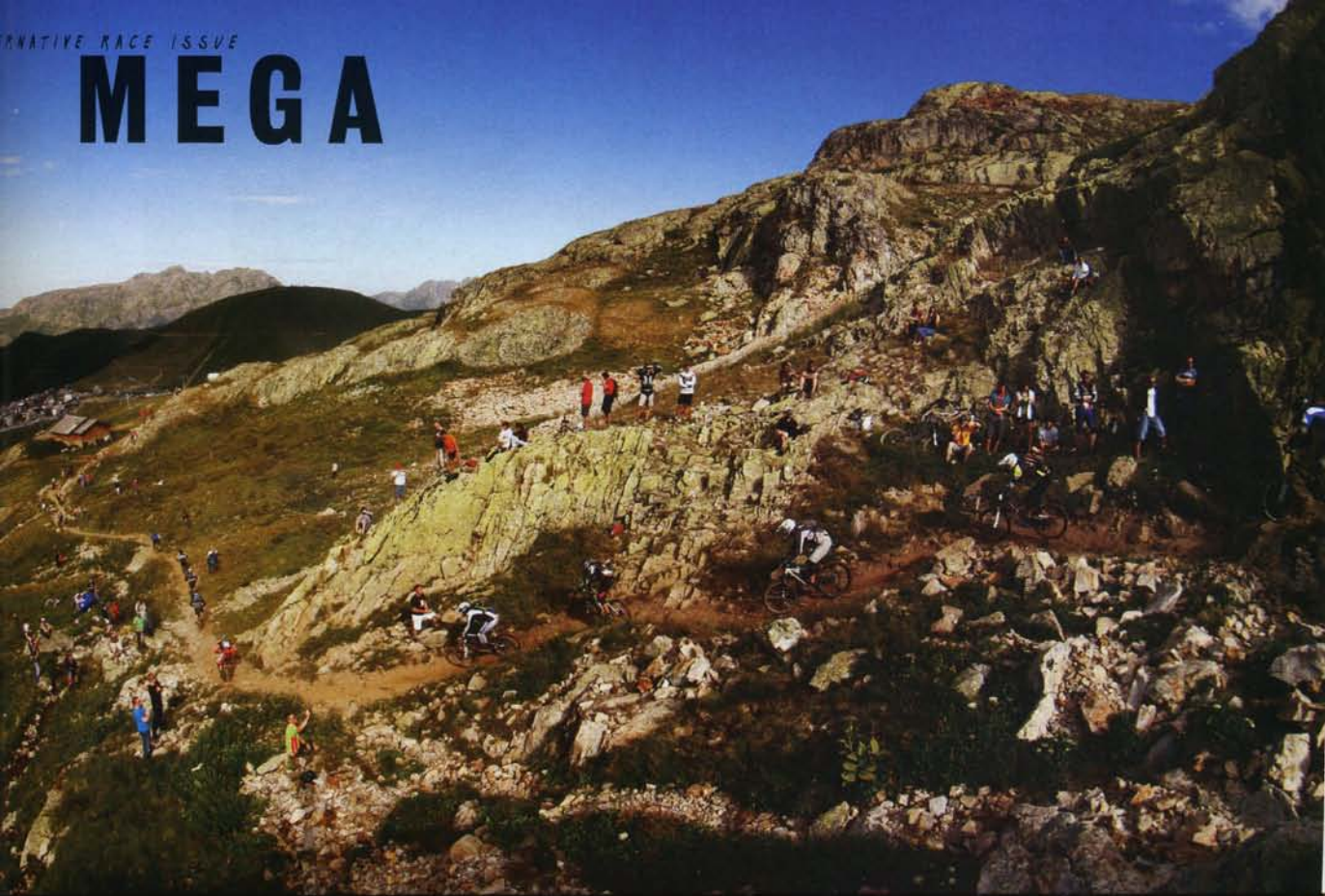
Race day was nerve wracking like any other race day morning. The fact that we had to mass start at the top of the Sarenne glacier at 3300m, and descend as fast as you could on ice, and then through pretty treacherous terrain, trying to pass people on super technical lines that you've never practiced before, made this morning a little more anxious filled for me than usual. Not to mention that I was lined up and rubbing elbows with legends like Anne Caroline Chausson, and the fact that I am from Africa, and don't know the first thing about racing down glaciers (when most of my competitors seemed to have that part pretty dialled) didn't help my nerves that much either.



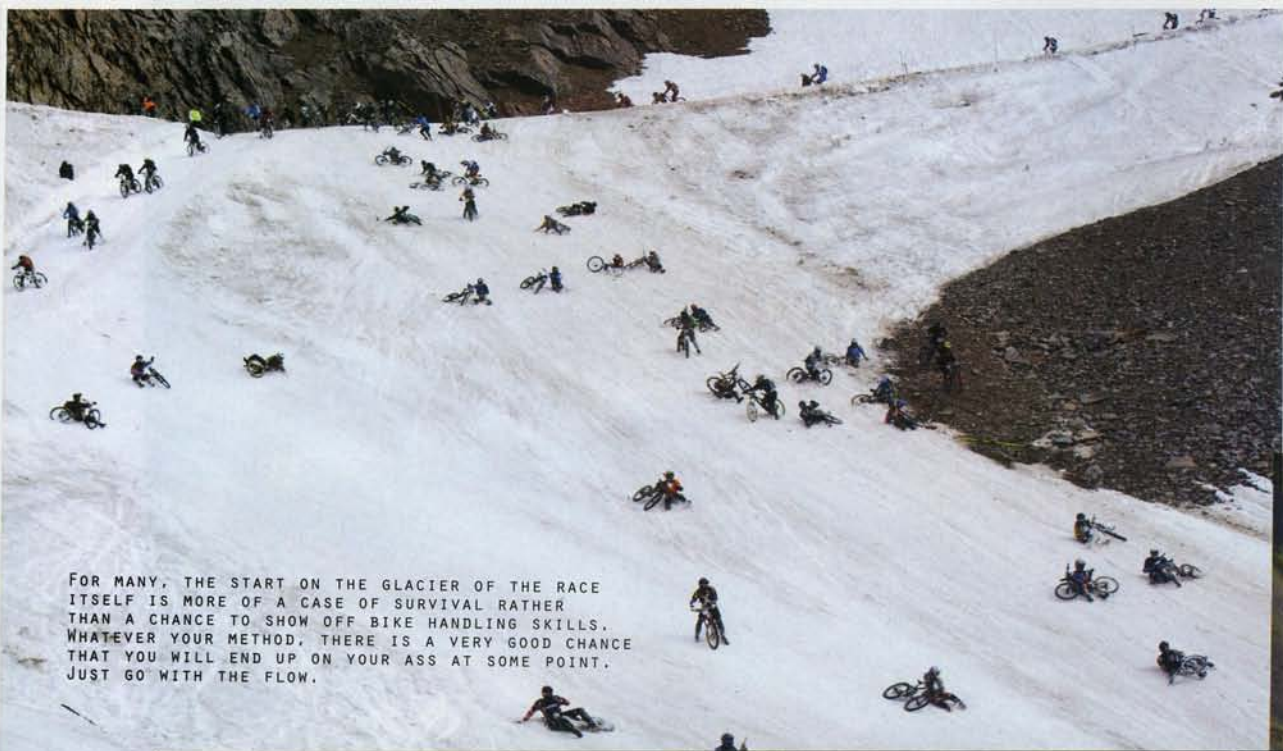
ALPINE SINGLETRACK MAY LOOK PRETTY, BUT TRYING TO OVERTAKE ON THIS STUFF IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE.



MEGA



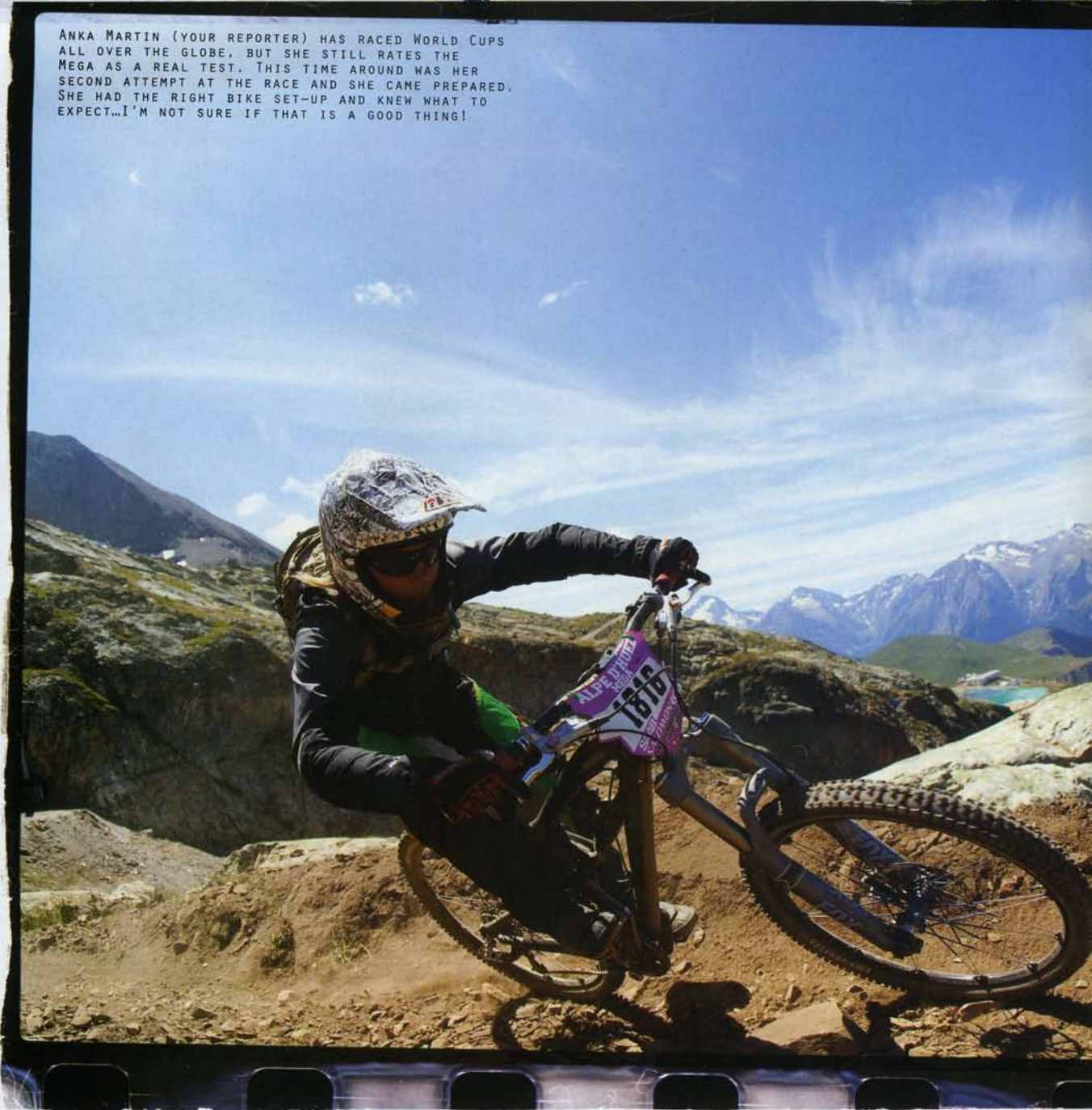
THIS IS ABOUT MID-WAY DOWN THE COURSE, PAST THE BARREN ROCK FIELDS BUT STILL ABOVE THE TREE LINE, JUST BEFORE RIDERS GO PAST THE TOWN OF ALPE D'HUEZ. THE COURSE WAS DIFFERENT IN 2009 TO PREVIOUS YEARS, IN THAT IT DIDN'T ACTUALLY GO THROUGH THE TOWN ITSELF BUT TOOK A NEW ROUTE JUST ABOVE IT. AND THE RIDER? WELL THAT IS NONE OTHER THAN NICOLAS VOULLOZ! THIRD PLACE THIS TIME AROUND.



FOR MANY, THE START ON THE GLACIER OF THE RACE ITSELF IS MORE OF A CASE OF SURVIVAL RATHER THAN A CHANCE TO SHOW OFF BIKE HANDLING SKILLS. WHATEVER YOUR METHOD, THERE IS A VERY GOOD CHANCE THAT YOU WILL END UP ON YOUR ASS AT SOME POINT. JUST GO WITH THE FLOW.



ANKA MARTIN (YOUR REPORTER) HAS RACED WORLD CUPS ALL OVER THE GLOBE, BUT SHE STILL RATES THE MEGA AS A REAL TEST. THIS TIME AROUND WAS HER SECOND ATTEMPT AT THE RACE AND SHE CAME PREPARED. SHE HAD THE RIGHT BIKE SET-UP AND KNEW WHAT TO EXPECT...I'M NOT SURE IF THAT IS A GOOD THING!



MEGA

THE MEGAVALANCHE ALWAYS ATTRACTS BIG NAME RIDERS EACH YEAR WHO COME TO TRY OUT THE MUCH TALKED ABOUT EVENT. FIFTEENTH PLACE FOR ANDREW NEETHLING.



On the other hand, you cannot go into this event with any kind of expectations, as there are just too many unforeseen variables that can throw your planning right out the window. In my case, I knew what I was in for, and I knew how much pain and suffering was waiting for me. As a three time Cape Epic finisher, I have endured quite a bit of pain on my bicycle, but this is just something else. It is harder and more intense than any hour of pain that I have ever endured during the last three years of long dark epic days. It is not something that you can explain to anyone, because until you experience it for yourself, you will never truly understand the intensity and mindset of this unique, absolutely crazy, but amazing event. You will love it, hate it, curse it, want to quit it and praise it, all within the first 15 minutes of the race, while your mind battles it out with your body.

In the men's race some of the biggest names in the sport battled it out. Remy Absalon won with a time of 49:28.21, Mega specialist (and multi-time winner) Rene Wildhaber was second with 49:44.12, and the legendary Nico Vouilloz was third in 51:36.16.

Anne Caroline ended up taking the win with a time of 1hour 1min, Pauline Dieffenthaler with 1h 7min, Birgit Baumann with 1h 8min, and I ended up in 7th place with a time of 1h 15min. I was extremely happy with my race and with my placing. Of course I could have been fitter, as always, but being better prepared this year with the right equipment made me feel so much more confident and it made the event as a whole so much more enjoyable. I hated it, loved it, cursed it and when asked if I would be back next year, there was no hesitation in my answer: hell yeah, fitter of course, but I'll be back.

It is truly a great week of riding and racing with your mates and it truly epitomizes the meaning of mountain biking. 