



Olaf Sueters and Hayat Tarikov close the deal with a firm shake.
PHOTO: PIERRE AUGIER

Pushing Weight

The plan to bring skiing to remote corners of the developing world

BY KADE KRICHKO

DEEP IN THE WALNUT FORESTS of Arslanbob, Kyrgyzstan, a villager dreamed of turning snowy hillsides into downhill playgrounds. His friends laughed when he stepped into hand-fashioned wooden planks in 2005, but over the next few years, he grabbed a European-lent touring setup and began teaching local children to ski.

By 2015, Hayat Tarikov had 20 ski pupils, dragging them five kilometers uphill to a hike-only ski field twice a week. Yet the incoming trickle of ski gear from Russia and the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek struggled to meet demand, and the 48-year-old worried his dream of establishing skiing in his hometown might never come to fruition.

Little did Tarikov realize that, 4,000 miles and a world away, he was exactly the person Olaf

Sueters was looking for. Sueters, a 43-year-old Dutchman, is the sole operator of Gear4Guides, an initiative hand-delivering donated ski equipment to places like Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and India to help ambassadors like Tarikov build a ski culture. Sueters is not an industry veteran or a ski pro (he skis the Alps a handful of times a year), but he has already made lasting strides where many before have fallen short, spreading skiing to remote corners of the globe—free of charge.

“My passion is skiing,” says Sueters. “My aim is to help out

local guides who don’t have the same means, but share that same passion.”

Sueters’ quest began on a trip to Bulgaria in 2004. A few years after falling for the sport as a Dutch tour liaison in the French Alps, he joined friends on a touring expedition to Rila Monastery. His guides used elastic-band bindings in place of traditional touring setups, and while impressed by their creativity, Sueters worried about the

guides’ safety over a long winter. Two years later, in Turkey, his guides could not afford proper skins. Not wanting to leave them empty-handed, Sueters left his skins with his new friends.

It was a simple gesture, but one that got the wheels turning. Shortly after Turkey, Sueters began G4G, scraping up excess gear across the industry. Following some initial donations from brands like Black Diamond and K2, he started to work on more trips, including an initial outing to Kyrgyzstan in 2010. With the help of Ryan Koupl, a Coloradan running a yurt skiing operation in the country, Sueters connected with Tarikov and donated two full touring setups the first time around but left knowing more could be done.

Sueters spends days as a full-time account manager for a Dutch sailing company, while nights and weekends are dedicated to the ski gear pipeline. During his vacation time, his recipient vetting system is based off recommendations and face-to-face meetings (like Tarikov’s), to avoid handing over gear to someone with ulterior, black-market-oriented motives.

Unfortunately, without an official 501c3 nonprofit designation, many companies have balked at his requests, and Sueters has struggled to se-



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cure the large donations he feels could truly make a difference in areas like Arslanbob.

“It is frustrating because it’s a really good project, but people don’t take it seriously,” says Sueters.

That changed last fall when an intern at Verbier, Switzerland-based Faction skis introduced the project to Team Manager Beanie Milne-Home.

“What resonated about Gear4Guides was the goal of helping create a sustainable industry for locals and building it with them, giving them the tools to do it by themselves,” says Milne-Home.

Faction donated 850 pounds of gear (including 15 pairs of skis and seven touring setups, along with outerwear) and Sueters’ ticket to return to Kyrgyzstan. Reuniting with Tarikov in March of 2015, Sueters also brought a crew of Faction athletes to teach Arslanbob’s budding skiers. The experience was eye-opening for both sides.

“It’s so rare in skiing to see the sport flourish in an area of poverty,” says Arnaud Rougier, a Tignes-based skier that helped construct a pump track for the kids in Arslanbob. “They are going to use that equipment for life.”

Though Faction funded his latest travels, Sueters is adamant about keeping G4G a plat-

form, rather than a brand-affiliated service, for companies to “do good” in the developing ski world. Eventually he hopes to organize multiple trips a year with different groups, handling travel logistics and local connections in exchange for the gear that drives his organization.

As the program expands, the G4G model will also incorporate backcountry education. While the Kyrgyzstan trip provided some shovels and probes, Sueters foresees knowledge as “the overall vision” for long-term sustainability.

After last year, G4G is keeping this season’s efforts closer to home, working with Faction on a trip to Kosovo and Montenegro.

G4G supplies local skiers with tools and know-how to share with their communities.
PHOTO: PIERRE AUGIER

In the meantime, G4G is filing for nonprofit designation to provide the legitimacy necessary for corporations to comfortably back Sueters’ donation efforts.

“I am about helping people ski,” he says. “That is the bottom line.”

