SEAN WILLIAMS

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Stone Skipping Is a Lost Art. Kurt Steiner Wants the World to Find It.

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Meet an amazing man who has dedicated his entire adult life to stone skipping, sacrificing everything to produce world-record throws that defy the laws of physics. To hear him tell it, he has no choice.

On a clear-skied morning in March, Kurt "Mountain Man" Steiner stood at a lonely bend of Sinnemahoning Creek, deep inside Pennsylvania's Elk State Forest. He was dressed in a black

hoodie and Dollar General jeans that hid his athletic 56-year-old frame, and wore a brown beanie that pressed his long gray hair and Rasputinesque beard into a single wild mane.

Steiner stared across the creek and raised his right arm into an L, clasping a coaster-size sliver of shale the way a guitarist might hold a

plectrum during a showstopping solo. But rather than fold his torso horizontally, as you might expect somebody skipping a rock to do, he stretched his five-foot-nine-inch body vertically, and then squeezed down like an accordion and planted his left leg to crack his throwing arm, placing the rock under so much gyroscopic force that it sputtered loudly as it left his hand, like a playing card in a bicycle wheel.

The rock appeared for a brief moment to fly. Then it dipped and plunged, kicked up a wave, rode it like a surfboard, and became airborne again. Standing behind Steiner, I counted at least 20 skips before the rock slowed, scrolled gently right, and sank in the calm water some 50 yards away.

This would have been the greatest throw of my life. To Steiner it was a bullpen toss, and an average one at that. He grunted disapprovingly, then stooped to grab another stone from the small pile he'd gathered

from a 25-gallon tub sitting in the bed of his 1989 Toyota truck—one of the quarter-million rocks he estimates he's thrown in his lifetime. One hour and dozens of stones later, we headed back to Steiner's tiny, *Walden*-like home, 30 minutes down back roads and dirt tracks into the bowels of the forest. His shoulder was stiff, and the biggest

throwing season of his life loomed. "This could be bad news," he told me.

Kurt Steiner is the world's greatest stone skipper. Over the past 22 years, he has won 17 tournaments in the United States and Europe, generating ESPN coverage and a documentary film. In September 2013, he threw a rock that skipped so many times it defied science. This year he hopes to smash records on both sides of the Atlantic, giving him a platform for sermonizing about a sport he believes is nothing short of a means for the redemption of mankind—"a legitimate path to an essential inner balance," he says.

Skipping has brought Steiner respite from a life of depression and other forms of mental illness. It has also, in part, left him broke, divorced, and, since the death of his greatest rival, adrift from his stone-skipping peers. Now, in middle age, with a growing list of aches and pains, he must contemplate the reality that, in his most truthful moments, he throws rocks not simply because he wants to, but because he has no choice.

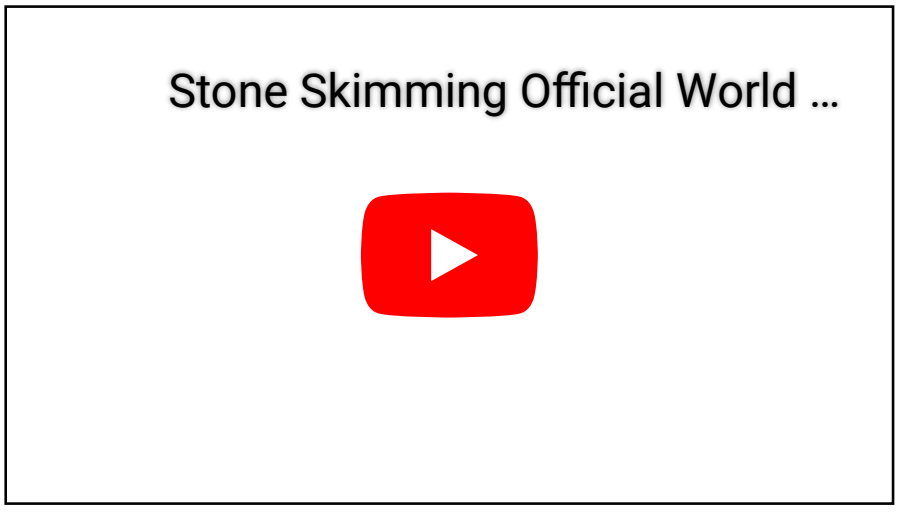
Steiner enjoying nature's vast, glorious silence (Caroline Tompkins)

Is there a more universal littoral pursuit than skipping rocks? Russians call it baking pancakes. Czechs throw froggies, while Swedes say they're tossing sandwiches. Competitors of Japanese *mizu kiri,* which translates as "cutting water," are judged not just by a throw's distance or the number of skips but by its aesthetic beauty.

Ancient Greeks held stone-skipping contests, and Tudor Britons later took it up, calling the pastime "ducks and drakes." Eighteenth-century priest and scientist Lazzaro Spallanzini determined how stones can push down on the surface of water to generate lift, knowledge humans

later employed to kill each other more effectively—first with skipping cannonballs, then with the bouncing bombs invented by British engineer Barnes Wallis to bombard Nazi dams.

Today's professional stone-throwing world is divided into two disciplines on either side of the Atlantic. British tournaments measure distance, not skip count. This is called skimming, and the World Stone Skimming Championships take place every fall at an abandoned slate quarry on the Hebridean island of Easdale. Perhaps the greatest stone skimmer is Scotland's own Dougie Isaacs, who has won eight world titles and holds the Guinness World Record for the longest skim: 399 feet.



American skippers have no such global title to compete for, but the most prestigious event has, since 1969, taken place every July 4 on

Mackinac Island, Michigan, a wooded, high-end tourist destination wedged between the state's Upper and Lower Peninsulas. Competitors have six chances to impress a handful of judges—some on the shore, some positioned knee-deep in the water. The thrower with the highest average score wins, with a contestant's second-highest-scoring throw used to break ties. The victor receives a trophy—and a pound of the island's renowned fudge.

Anybody can show up and pay $5 to enter Mackinac's amateur event. But to throw for the fudge at its pro tournament, you must win one of a small number of regional events, by far the most popular of which is the Rock in River Festival in Franklin, Pennsylvania, which, since its inception, has become Mackinac's principle feeder. The rules at Franklin are identical—only, to compete among its pros, you must skip a rock at least 30 times at its amateur event, held an hour before. Miss that milestone and it's back to the showers for another 365 days.

In recent years, smaller competitions have cropped up in Vermont and Arkansas. But Mackinac and Franklin are skipping's major championships, and each has its peculiarities. Franklin, which considers itself blue-collar, is held at a pan-flat confluence of French Creek and the Allegheny River that fans out like an easy fairway and rewards strength and raw technique. Mackinac's festivities happen in and around the Grand Hotel—a vast, colonnaded national historic landmark that has welcomed Mark Twain, Thomas Edison, and at

least five U.S. presidents. The event's competitors face a stretch of Lake Michigan crammed with tourists, piers, and ferries that churn the surface. Typical winning throws at Mackinac may total half as many skips as you'd see at Franklin, because even the best pros throwing their best rocks can lob skipless duds into the surf. "You can't use all your power," Kurt told me. "It'll ruin your shot. You have to finesse."

My time with stone-skipping's greatest living legend began late one evening in February, when Kurt picked me up from the Greyhound station in Erie, Pennsylvania, and drove us to his sister's Victorian home, in the city where he spent almost all of his youth. The next morning we drove half an hour along the shore of Lake Erie to a secluded bight where, under frigid gray skies, we gathered rocks and aimed them down a thin, unfrozen vein of water. Throwing the stones felt meditative and timeless, transporting me back to childhood weekends on the pebble beaches of southern England.

Back then I imagined myself to have a pretty good arm. Kurt quickly put that idea to rest, fizzing stones down narrow lanes and bending them around promontories and broken masonry while I janked mine into the shore. His throws were trick shots he'd developed as a kid, when he wandered the edge of the lake between fishing trips and family camping holidays. These were happy times in an otherwise difficult childhood. Kurt's mother, Nancy, a retired flower-shop owner

in Erie, and his machinist father, Karl, were teenage trailer dwellers when they had their first and only son in 1965. Nancy gave birth to a daughter, Erika, two years later. But the couple split in 1973, when Kurt was eight, and the kids lived with Nancy in an old cottage house in Erie.

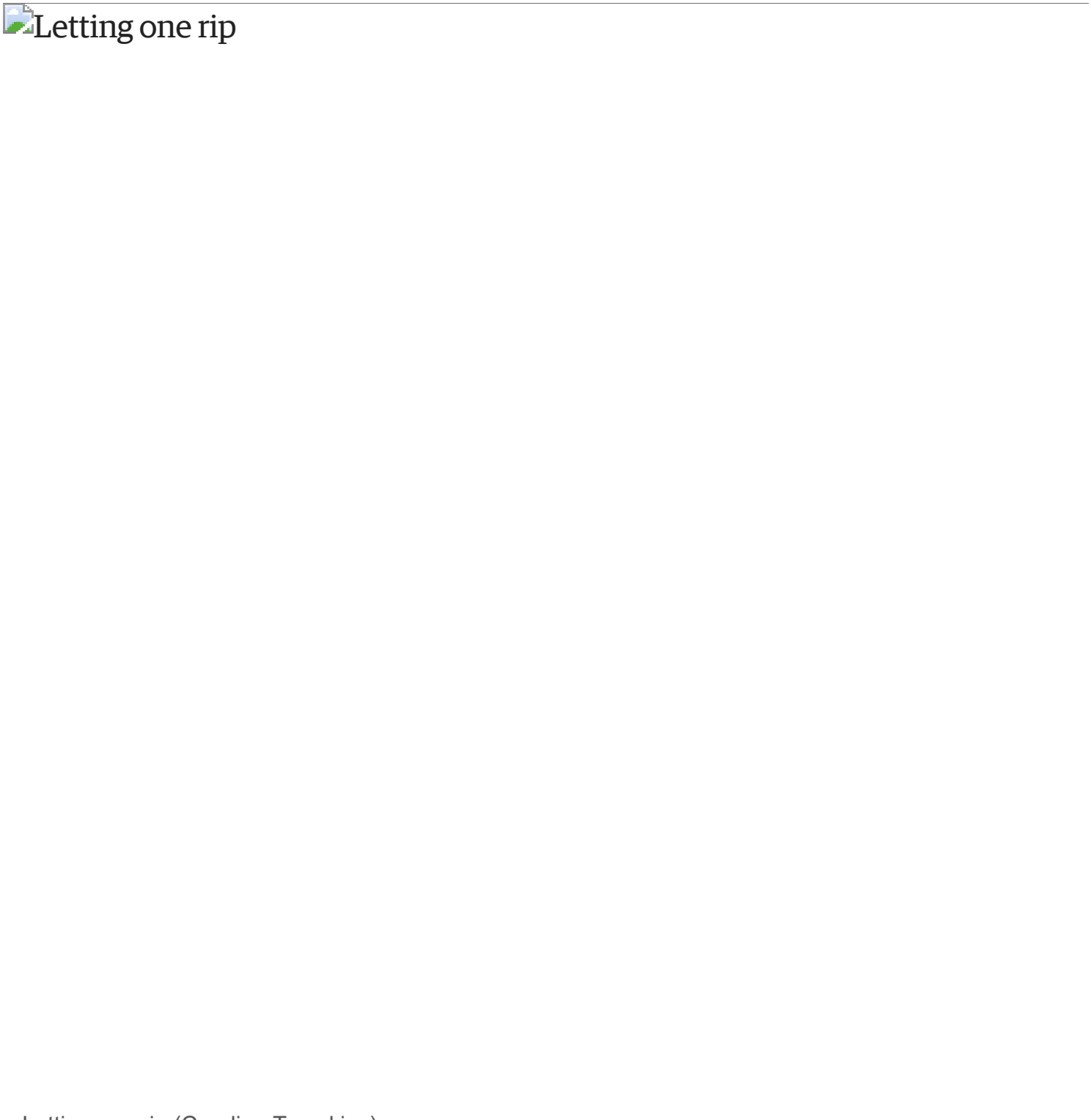
Kurt never quite felt like he fit in the world. He struggled to eat, hobbled by a compulsion never to mix the items on his plate. While other kids burst with energy, he often felt exhausted. He craved sleep so much that he winnowed his morning routine—waking, showering, scarfing some breakfast, and running to the bus stop—down to 11 minutes. Doctors suspected he was fatigued or hypoglycemic, but tests for those conditions came back negative. Physically he was healthy. He excelled at science and loved to write, but he struggled with social interaction.

Literature offered an escape; so did his high school's Apple computers, on which he coded rudimentary mazes. But for him, nothing could match the vast, glorious silence of nature, and Kurt would disappear for hours into the forests surrounding Erie. At the lake, he was perfectly happy to skip rocks, alone, for hours.

Over time he developed a sixth sense for the adjustments required for a mean toss. The first morning he and I skipped stones together, it took him mere minutes to suggest changes in wrist rotation and foot placement that I could use to "attack the water" better. Within an

hour, I could skip a rock a dozen or so times. When he told me that one of my throws was good enough for tournament competition, the endorphin rush almost completely masked the painful throbbing of my blown-out elbow.

If Kurt teaches stone skipping like a Zen master, he talks like he's on his seventh cup of coffee, at a breathless pace, switching between topics rapidly. As we stood on that shoreline, we touched on Socrates, George Carlin, Albert Einstein, Paulo Coelho, quantum physics, Taoism, the Sanskrit *Mahabharata,* and how the dogma of Christ's divinity was, according to Kurt, "where the Western mind went off the rails." He has theories on the true purpose of the Antikythera mechanism, an ancient Greek device used to track astronomical positioning. "Ask him, 'How do you tie your shoes?' " Paul Fero, a close friend, told me, "and you could be there for half an hour."



Letting one rip (Caroline Tompkins)

A few good skippers (Caroline Tompkins)

first encountered Kurt online in 2018, in a video posted on *Wired*'s

I website. It asked whether it was physically possible to beat his 2013 world record, and I quickly plunged down a hole of YouTube videos, podcasts, and subreddits detailing his achievements and his shamanic views on the sport and life. It took me another year to reach him via email; Kurt often goes weeks without cell coverage or access to the internet. We exchanged dozens of messages before he agreed to spend a week with me—first for a few days in Erie, then at the far-flung Pennsylvania cabin he's been building for several decades. But then the pandemic hit, and pro sports at all levels wound down. Mackinac and an unsanctioned Franklin tournament went ahead, but they were pared back, and only professional throwers were able to attend.

In 2020, Kurt placed first in Michigan and second in Pennsylvania, and then, competing under the same restrictions in 2021, he scored a win at Mackinac and third place at Franklin—so it seemed, on paper at least, that he was as strong as ever. By October of last year, restrictions had lifted and I was planning my trip. Then I received a text file labeled "appologies" [*sic*].

"October through March is pretty much my psychic recovery phase," Kurt wrote. "I will spend most of the next six months in super-isolation—no power, no heat, no water, no phone … getting high, maybe drunk … watching video, reading, writing, taking hikes … and

crapping everyday in a bucket in the basement. All just trying to get myself centered for the next year.

“I need this time for mental health,” he added, “and that has to be me alone.”

Finally, in February, after pursuing Kurt for more than two years, I flew from Europe to Detroit, where border guards had a hard time believing I was entering the U.S. to interview a stone skipper. Then I showed them a video of Kurt’s magical record throw, and before long a group was gathered around a computer screen, counting the skips and hollering *“No fucking way!”* before letting me through. From the moment I met Kurt in Erie a day later, it was clear that his hibernation had ended. By 10 p.m. on our second evening, when he fashioned a can of Monster energy drink into a makeshift bong, we’d spoken for 12 hours straight.


Sorting stones at Presque Isle State Park, in Erie, Pennsylvania

Sorting stones at Presque Isle State Park, in Erie, Pennsylvania (Caroline Tompkins)

Kurt toiled with the duality of his mental life throughout his teenage years, lurching from hyperfocus to apathy. Classmates would crowd around to watch him at a pinball machine, where he could go hours without losing a ball. He excelled at chess, could pick apart a radio and put it back together, and racked up an *Asteroids* score so crazy he assumes it broke any known record. “He was seeing the back end of the coding rather than the graphics on the screen,” Victor “Chip” Susol, one of Kurt’s oldest friends, told me.

But the thought of dating filled him with dread, so instead he indulged in wild sexual fantasies and wrote poetry encrypted in a shorthand only he could read. He was a skilled linebacker in football but wouldn’t learn the plays. He enjoyed the “pure contest” of wrestling, but during one bout, an opponent dumped him on his collarbone, and Kurt took a year off from the sport. By 1985, when he enrolled as an English major at Penn State Behrend, in Erie, he says he was more interested in “me-against-myself stuff”: cycling, weight training, canoeing. Hiking became an obsession.

At first Kurt hit established trails near home. Then he linked up sections of abandoned railroad, ATV trails, and footpaths, sleeping wherever it worked out. Before long he was bushwhacking for weeks across mid-Pennsylvania with a compass and a 75-pound pack, fasting for days and testing the limits of his body’s endurance. Fellow travelers were good for a quick chat here and there; then they were

gone, just the way Kurt liked it. Walking gave him the time and distance to restock his mental stores before returning to the city.

Whenever he discovered a body of water on these sojourns, he skipped rocks. It felt natural, as if by clasping a stone he was anchored to the planet, able to "hold infinity in the palm of your hand," in the words of William Blake. Skipping was "safe from development and capitalism, and in control," he told me, at odds with a society that seemed "hell-bent on detaching itself from the natural world."

He was great at it, too, able to exert enough spin on the stone that it would stabilize after each skip, maintaining the same gyroscopic effect that holds a spinning top in place. When Kurt returned to Erie, skipping became something of a circus act. His friends would hand him a random lump of something and he'd skip it. "He threw a cinder block," said Susol, "and it actually skipped."

After Kurt graduated from Behrend, he earned money delivering flowers for his mom and laying bitumen roofs. But he couldn't face regular work, and eventually he registered for unemployment. Doctors refused to prescribe talk therapy, and for the general sense of depression that would later be refined to diagnoses of schizoaffective disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, he was given only Zoloft, an antidepressant, which he sometimes supplemented with recreational psychoactive drugs. During one week in 1994, he couldn't

get his prescription filled and got into a store argument that involved the police.

Shaken, Kurt left Erie and headed out on a 300-mile trek from Mount Greylock, in northwestern Massachusetts, to the Canada-Vermont border, searching for Thoreau's "tonic of wilderness." When he returned, he moved to a motel in Reynoldsville, two hours southeast of Erie, and enrolled in a welding program at a local vocational college. In December 1995, he bumped into a woman named Paula, who was clearing out her locker following a course. After almost a year of exchanging letters, they got together again in person. A year after that they got married, moving into the home of Paula's elderly mom in Kane, an hour north of Reynoldsville.

The couple enjoyed hiking together—Paula nicknamed them Pair o' Pathetics, a pun on "peripatetic"—and hoped to honeymoon somewhere far from Pennsylvania. But Paula's mom was housebound, and neither of them were fit to work. They lived on welfare and rarely hung out with friends.

"There were always three people in our marriage," Kurt told me on day four of my trip, as we passed Kane on the three-hour drive from Erie to his cabin. "We really had the cards stacked against us."

In September 2013, Steiner threw a rock that skipped so many times it defied science. This year he hopes to smash records on both sides of the Atlantic, giving him a platform for sermonizing about a sport he believes is "a legitimate path to an essential inner balance," he says.

Twenty-five years later, Kurt still doesn't jibe with Kane or other parts of "Pennsyltucky," Pennsylvania's Appalachian interior. Partly this is because of his half-redneck, half-Talmudic-prophet appearance: he looks like a figure who stepped off the stained glass of a local prayerhouse to score Big Gulps and jerky. It's also an outgrowth of his politics: in a region dominated by Let's Go Brandon flags, he donates to Bernie Sanders, fears climate change, and despises evangelists. He worries that cashiers judge him when he uses food stamps, and he shrank with embarrassment as we loaded up on supplies at Costco.

In 1997, feeling trapped in Kane, Kurt searched for somewhere that he and Paula could escape to. He unfurled a map of Pennsylvania and

focused on the green areas. Then he triangulated a spot as far from crowded areas as possible, landing on a corner of Elk State Forest, around 15 miles from the lightbulb-manufacturing town of Emporium.

There he found a 16-acre plot that backed onto a creek and faced south. The moment he saw it, he felt time stand still. It was a "heaviness," he told me. "The weight of the silence, like a deep cave."

With help from Kurt's dad, the couple bought the plot, and they spent the next two years driving between there and Kane, occasionally camping under star-filled skies. Kurt leveled the land and dug the foundation using nothing more than a shovel and a wheelbarrow. He scavenged timber wherever he saw it and scored remnants from local construction sites, but by 2000, he still hadn't completed the core of what became a two-story home, so he and Paula camped in sleeping bags.

In the fall of 2000, Kurt was reading local classifieds when he came across an advertisement for an amateur stone-skipping contest being held 100 miles west in Franklin. It would be the city's first, and a feeder for the July 4 tournament on Mackinac Island. Kurt still had a pretty mean throw, and Paula encouraged him to sign up. "My marriage played into my skipping," he told me. "Ironically."

That September, Kurt lined up on the bank of Franklin's Riverfront Park, ready to put his years of throwing to the test. Beside him was a

local guy named Russ Byars, who had a towering physique and a shock of blond hair. The two were neck and neck going into the final throw, but Kurt nailed it and won the event, qualifying for the following year's Mackinac pro tournament.

Byars won at Franklin the following year, earning his golden ticket to Mackinac. Kurt struggled during his debut on the island's choppy water. This meant that, in 2001, both men would meet in Michigan. It was the beginning of an era-defining rivalry.

"You can fall in love with a rock," Dave "Spiderman" Ohmer, a five-time Franklin winner, told me. "It's that rare—it's just got everything." It was my third day with Kurt, and the three of us were sitting in the corner of an Erie bar, several IPAs deep and discussing the topic of searching for competition-worthy skipping stones.

"You can search for years and say, 'OK, this is the best stone I have found,' " said Kurt. "And then you'll find another one. And if you take the time to look at the differences between the two, they have unique

characteristics. And it's not just size, it's not weight, it's not thickness. It's every little feature. You start to pick up on things over time."

Becoming a world-class stone skipper is as much an asymptotic quest for the perfect rock as it is about honing technique. Some skippers, and most skimmers, use slate, specifically the kind of slate most commonly found in Britain and the northeastern United States. Japanese throwers mostly skip sparkling, metamorphic schist.

Kurt has only sourced rocks from Lake Erie, whose 13,000-year-old basin is crammed full of the kinds of wafer-thin, Devonian-shale chunks that cause skippers to swoon.

To find rocks, Kurt combs the lake for about an hour, appraising the stones like a diamond merchant. One in three he picks up makes it into his five-gallon bucket. Ideally, it weighs between four and seven ounces, has a smooth, flat bottom, and measures between a quarter-inch and five-sixteenths of an inch thick. Once he's gathered 60 pounds' worth—around 200 rocks—he sits on a crate and sorts the rocks into four rows of descending weight, arranged left to right.

He also sorts them for quality, placing better ones—those with tapered edges or easy-to-grip lobes—at the top of each row. "If I can find one stone in a hundred that I really like," he told me, "that's about right." Then he puts them back in the bucket in four layers: decent midsize stones; large, heavy, poor-quality stones he calls "chunky junkies";

high-quality midsize stones; and lighter ones he can skip at the end of practice without throwing his arm out. On rock-searching days, he goes through this process twice, which takes around five hours. Then he drives home. By his own calculations, Kurt has taken enough rocks from Lake Erie to load up almost 16 big-rig trucks.

I should note that the most important rocks he finds never make it into the bucket. These are “pocket rockets” that he keeps in his jeans. They’re all of average weight, and he’ll separate them into the rockets he’ll use as tournament warm-ups—as practice rocks for certain techniques—or, in the case of a few dozen each year, for contest throws. These chosen few are the rocks he thinks have a shot at a trophy or a world record.

A top thrower will tell you that to skip a superior rock is Promethean, like unleashing some wild energy that has lain dormant for millions of years. It is also—like a sunset or a birth or a shooting star—a lesson in the impermanence of nature’s beauty. The rock may skip for what feels like forever, but its ripples will fade, and it will sink into the fluvial void, likely never to be skipped again.

“There is so much poetry,” Ohmer said as the three of us sat the bar. “Because you find that stone, then you’ve thrown it in the river and it’s gone. You’ve pursued this endeavor until you have it all figured out. And then you hand it over to the world and see what comes of it.”

Sorting and stacking the haul (Caroline Tompkins)

Skipping at Freeport Beach, in North East, Pennsylvania (Caroline Tompkins)

Kurt's first appearance at Franklin changed his life. Skipping rocks competitively felt as profound as anything he had experienced before. It was primal and pure, he said, "a little slice of utopia." Everything else, including his marriage, could feel like a

distraction. He dived into physics, writing stone-skip theories on a scroll, Jack Kerouac–style, sketching models of gyroscopic inertia, vibratory components of rocks, or ripple patterns—"z waves," as he called them, that could propel them farther along on the water.

His hypotheses only got him so far, however, and Kurt placed second at Mackinac in 2001 behind Dave "Lefty" Kolar. He's the younger brother of John "The Sheriff" Kolar, a longtime skipper who I met during my U.S. trip. Kolar and his clique treated Mackinac as a lark, but Kurt was deadly serious, and he won the following year with a 21-hopper, beating the elder Kolar by a single skip. Organizers offered Kurt the nickname Slap-Happy, but he insisted on Mountain Man, owing to his love of the Appalachian wilderness. Every hotel on the island was packed with throwers, attendees, and organizers.

That same year, Kurt faced a Franklin showdown against Russ Byars, the blond-haired local he'd squeezed past a couple of years before. At 39, Russ was the anti-Kurt, a six-foot-one, 250-pound Marine Corps vet with a beer belly and a saucy grin. He was a gambler, with the languid posture of a guy on a Vegas weekend. To him, each throw was like an arm-pull on a slot machine: you never quite knew what you'd get.

Russ often had a drink in his hand, and he competed in Hawaiian shirts and tees emblazoned with phrases like I Beat Anorexia. Fellow skippers nicknamed him Rock Bottom. He claimed he'd never skipped

a rock before moving to Franklin in 1999—and he didn't share Kurt's love of scientific inquiry. "There has been a lot of physics on this, and I don't understand any of it," he once told an ESPN reporter. "Grip it and rip it, that's my motto."

But boy could he throw. Russ cranked out 20 skips like Babe Ruth belted homers: effortlessly and often, with a knack for throwing final-round humdingers. He called them "Jesus fishes," because they hopped along the surface as if carried by divine hands. In 2001, Russ qualified for the pro event at Franklin, and he placed second among the pros, while Kurt took his second title in a row. In 2002, Kurt was looking for his hat trick. But after five of six throws, both men were dead even. Kurt, taking a page from his opponent's book, decided to go all in. His stone had an "aggressive" shape, he told me—so he switched styles, gripping it with his middle rather than his index finger and squeezing it a little tighter. Then he planted his foot and launched a throw that traveled what looked like a mile down a pinched seam of calm water.

As we stood on the shoreline, we touched on Socrates, George Carlin, Albert Einstein,

Paulo Coelho, quantum physics, Taoism, the Sanskrit Mahabharata, and how the dogma of Christ's divinity was, according to Kurt, "where the Western mind went off the rails."

For ten years, Jerdone "Jerry" McGhee's 38 skips along Texas's Blanco River had stood as the Guinness World Record for "most consecutive skips of a stone on water." Judges that day in Franklin decided that Kurt's clutch throw had skipped 40 times. "To land that stone was like threading a needle," he told me. "It was a sweet shot."

From then on, Kurt and Russ were stone skipping's Federer and Nadal. Between 2001 and 2007, one of them won every Franklin—Russ's four to Kurt's three. But Russ dominated Mackinac, taking home the fudge in '04, '05, and '07, besting Kurt's solitary victory in 2002. "I was the guy when I first started," Kurt told me. "Then Russ figured me out."

On July 19, 2007, Russ skipped a stone 51 times at Franklin, destroying Kurt's world record. TV crews invited him to Paris and China, and he competed against a robot on Discovery's slo-mo science show *Time Warp*. He launched a website and marketed a line of merchandise that included Russ Byars–branded writing pens. Kurt

was furious. Self-promotion was a rejection of stone skipping's spiritual purpose. Besides, he was the science whiz: *he* should have faced that robot.

When the director of an indie movie invited Russ to consult on its stone-skipping scenes, Kurt felt left out. He convinced the director to let him on set, but argued in front of the crew. The director didn't want a stone-skipping consultant after that.

At loose ends, Kurt and Russ headed to a nearby river and threw rocks. They swapped stories, of Kurt's reclusive lifestyle and Russ's military service. "I was like, you know what? Russ is basically like me. He's a big kid," Kurt recalls. "He's also somebody who really has had a rough go of it in his own way. And he's just finding the thing that he is kind of proud of.

"I went into that movie kind of hot under the collar," Kurt added. "I came out with real respect."


Skipping stones at Presque Isle State Park, in Erie, Pennsylvania

(Caroline Tompkins)

Russ's 15 minutes of fame presented Kurt with an inconvenient truth: The general public didn't care who won which tournament or where. It was all about the *record*. He had never been more convinced that stone skipping offered "undeveloped natural purity, a refuge against the consumerist, plutocratic, kleptocratic, fucking destroy-and-build-up-everything mentality." To earn a platform to say so, he'd have to get the record back.

First he got ripped, speed-hiking uphill every day, then going hard on a single strength exercise—either push-ups elevated on soup cans or pull-ups using a bicycle handlebar drilled into a ceiling beam. He also calculated that, contrary to the 20-degree attack angle that physicists deemed optimal for skipping, he could hold a rock high and spear it into the water at 50 miles per hour at an angle closer to 30 degrees and still rip it hard enough to beat gyroscopic inertia.

Russ continued to run away with contests, winning Mackinac in '08, '09, '10, and '12, and Franklin in '08 and '10. But by 2013, Kurt had dialed his body-fat percentage way down and was ready for a comeback. "I felt like I could punch a hole through a brick wall," he told me.

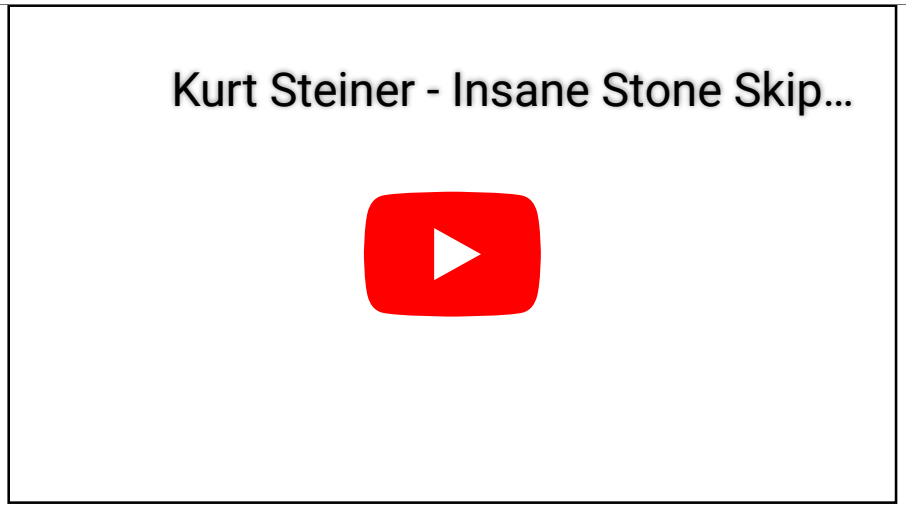
On September 6, 2013, while Paula filmed from a bridge overhead, Kurt flung a stone from a bank of the Allegheny Reservoir, near Kane, that hit the water, took off, and didn't sink below the surface for seven seconds. It certainly *looked* like a record. Kurt sent Paula's footage to

physicists in Pennsylvania and Australia and an aeronautics expert in Dubai. Responses were slow.

The following August, Russ was setting up his own camera to film a demonstration with Max Steiner—no relation to Kurt—and Max's father, Eric, a Mackinac stalwart. The 22-year-old was good. And when Russ checked his footage, he discovered that Max had skipped one of his rocks 65 times. They called Guinness, which approved the record.

"I was furious about this upstart who won one tournament a month ago and thinks he can come into my backyard and step on a record I spent six months beating myself to death to get," Kurt told me. "I wasn't going to have it."

A fortnight later, the result of Kurt's September 2013 throw came back. It was a new record, and it wasn't even close. According to the scientists, Kurt had skipped his rock at least 88 times. "Everybody's trying to break the two-hour mark in the marathon," Chip Susol told me. "What Kurt did was basically show up and run it in an hour and a half." People around the world marveled. It was an "unbreakable" achievement, Japanese *mizu kiri* champion Keisuke Hashimoto told me, "a product of miracles." Author Tom Whipple called it Kurt's Sistine Chapel: "He's given this gift to the world, this stone that floats along the lake."



Suddenly, folks wanted to hear what Mountain Man had to say. But the record had drained him, physically and economically: each contest-quality stone had cost around $10 to find, he reckoned, and he'd won less than a thousand dollars of prize money in over a decade.

Paula hoped the record might quell an obsession that was contributing to the destruction of their marriage. But when she asked Kurt to cut back, she sounded to him like the pharmacist in Erie years before—only this time the medication was actually helping him.

At the same time, his great rivalry faded. Russ suffered nerve flare-ups and polymyalgia rheumatica, an inflammatory condition that causes pain and stiffness. In 2014, Russ's mother died. Then he got cancer, and by 2017, his T-shirts hung off him like bedsheets. That year Russ won his final Mackinac with a 31-skip Jesus fish. Soon after, Kurt

visited him in Franklin. “We finally had that grand realization. It was a real kinship,”
Kurt told me.

“This wasn’t about us,” he continued. “This was bigger shit. We fought hard enough, we beat each other up enough, that we didn’t have anything to prove to each other anymore. And now we were just friends.”

A few weeks later, Russ died. It “hurt Kurt a lot,” Paul Fero, Kurt’s friend, told me. “Kurt has told me flat out that he would have never done what he did, throwing the 88, without Russell. Russell was a counterbalance, something to shoot for. They kept each other going. They both kept each other striving for more.”

Kurt and Paula split in 2017. As Kurt and I drove to the cabin, he wiped away tears when he described that period. “I like to solve puzzles,” he said. “My marriage was the biggest puzzle of all.”

“Everything good was there, for a couple of fucked-up people,” he said. “But she ultimately couldn’t cope with my particularities of being fucked up—and it was mutual.” Then he added, “I couldn’t be that somebody who was deserving of some kind of normalcy and love, I couldn’t be that. I tried. But I couldn’t get it the way she needed without damaging myself further.”

We turned off the highway at Sinnemahoning Creek and onto a snow-covered dirt path that led into forest. Thirty minutes later, we arrived.

Kurt Steiner's cabin is his masterpiece. Since 1997, he's been adding to it, fixing it up, using other folks' junk or whatever he can buy with the few bucks he has left at the end of the month. There is no central heating or shower, and he still craps in a bucket under the basement floorboards. But he loves it to death, he said, and enjoys it "as much, perhaps, as I enjoy stone skipping. There's a very strong pull in me to want to work on this place."

We spent four days there. The cabin is surrounded by mechanical flotsam—skeins of chicken wire, engines, old tools. Nothing is decorated, and some of the walls have yet to be insulated. The ground floor is divided into two halves, marked by a blanket draped across a doorway. On one side are the 250 or so square feet where Kurt lives. The space holds a bed, a kitchenette, a couple of chairs, a desk and a dresser for his computers, a couple of bookshelves (full), and plastic tubs of papers and writing (overflowing). The other half is filled with five-gallon water jugs, workout gear, tools, food supplies, building materials, and everything in between.

Sleeping on a roll with my head beside a gas heater, I began to decrypt the cabin's contents. Each aspect embodies precision in chaos, "a recognition that when things are arranged a certain way, with a certain use of angles and curves, it echoes something of my soul," Kurt told me. "Even here there's a fairly conscious, loose interpretation of feng shui—a structure that, if you spend time in it, imprints itself on you."

We spoke most intimately at the cabin: this is where Kurt is most himself, rather than Mountain Man. He writes poetry and works on the Toyota. He eats very little and relies on seasonal fruits and vegetables. He can squat 100 times in six minutes and knock out 55 sixty-pound curls in the same amount of time. He can run up the valley with surprising speed.

Kurt won Mackinac tournaments in 2020 and 2021, but the sport is changing. In 2018, ESPN approached Eric and Max Steiner about televising a contest. Last year a camera crew came to Franklin, later airing Dave Ohmer's victory on ESPN 8, between other sports marginalia like Putt-Putt and marble runs. Eric Steiner is keen to expand skipping, perhaps even monetize it. "I think it's just a fun sport," he told me. "With ESPN picking it up, it's really brought it to a bigger audience."

“I will spend most of the next six months in super-isolation—no power, no heat, no water, no phone…,” Kurt wrote, describing his recovery phase, “getting high, maybe drunk … watching video, reading, writing, taking hikes … and crapping everyday in a bucket in the basement.”

Kurt would like skipping to be less commercial, of course—he still believes it can save the world. “This culture is pushing people to be all the same, and incurious,” he said. “To me, all that’s against humanity. I really believe I’m in a fight for the soul of humanity. And you can call me crazy, but you need crazy people.”

To stay the course, Kurt has one more wild ambition: to become the world record holder in both skimming *and* skipping. That would mean beating Dougie Isaacs, which is possible: Kurt has already thrown a rock to within 26 feet of Isaacs’s record. One thing holding him back is his financial situation and the cost of gas. Another is his body. Soon

after I left Pennsylvania, Kurt had surgery on his busted shoulder, and he fears his 2022 season may already be over.

It's not his only challenge, though. One day Kurt would love to coach a female skipper and make his sport more inclusive. Fast-pitch softball techniques could easily be adapted to skipping, he told me—especially at Mackinac, where raw power counts for way less.

But finding somebody with whom he could skip into his twilight years is a tougher test. "I've had to accept that there are things about myself I'm never gonna get right," he said. Sometimes he dreams he's dating a woman with brittle, walnut-like teeth that crumble when he tries to kiss her. "Maybe the most responsible thing for me to do…," he said, tailing off. "I have to accept that I'm gonna be alone."

"I don't want to say I am never happy, or that I don't know what that is," he told me. "Stone skipping does reward me, in the way it makes me forget, in the way it gives me hope, in the way it brings me to people I like. The mystery never gets tired, never gets solved. Skipping stones makes me happy, because there are hints of happiness writ large. That happiness is not dead."

On our final day at the cabin, Kurt was fumbling with a dog-eared box of special rocks. Some were signed by fellow skippers. Others were handmade or fixed with tiny motion sensors, the products of decades-old experiments. "Should I go for a record in skimming?" he asked me.

“Should I make another insane stone-skip video? Or should I take care of my house, which is crumbling down around me?”

Outside, the winter snow melted in a bright blue sky. We grabbed our jackets, hopped in the Toyota, and headed for the creek. It was time to throw.

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