

## Interview with Al Gosling

Paintball, at last, has come to the attention of Extreme. We're not quite sure how it happened. The guys at Extreme aren't quite sure how it happened but we were privileged, to say the least, to be invited down to London to meet with the man himself, Al Gosling, the founder and CEO of the Extreme Group.

Interview by Gillie Hatton

Photos provided by Extreme

Al started Extreme eleven years ago from a barn in Essex as a small TV distribution business called Extreme International. He didn't go to university and had a number of different jobs before travelling for a year. He came back to the UK and at age 24, knew he wanted to set something up.

"We believed that extreme sports would grow," he says, "and we were right. We were passionate about the sports, that was the key thing. Extreme sports eleven years ago were small, all of the brands around it were small and still growing and we just saw the opportunity to work with TV space. We started by selling TV programmes all over the world. We had lots of different series on snowboarding to surfing to mountain biking, all those types of things. We did that for four and half years before we thought, you know what, we could launch a TV channel."

At the end of 1998, they had enough programmes to go on a TV channel. They went out and talked to lots of people to try and make it happen. Lots of 'NO's later, they eventually met an American Dutch cable company based in Holland run by a guy called Mark Schnider who was wanting to launch a whole load of new TV channels. Al sat down with him and agreed a joint venture, launching the TV channel in May 1999 out of Holland. So Holland was country number one, and Al ran that for three years taking it from one to 38 countries. The Extreme Sports Channel is now in 62 countries, in 12 languages and 50 million homes. Interestingly enough, the UK was country number 19 and Al sees that moment as a key point in Extreme's history.

"The launch of the TV channel on Sky in Oct 2001, after six years of building my business, was a defining moment," he says. "There were 3000 people at the party in the middle of London. Then once that got going, I brought in a new managing director for the TV channel and thought what are we going to do now?"

What he did was to take the Extreme brand and grow the business out across a number of areas. They've just launched a chain of hotels around the world starting with the opening of a 130 bed hotel in Cape Town with a climbing wall on the side of the hotel although fortunately there are stairs and elevators available to get to your room for the less adventurous. They've also launched Extreme Element promoting gift vouchers focussed around extreme sports and not a spa day or hot air balloon ride in sight, they're quick to emphasise. There's also Extreme Cred, a debit card which fits right into the whole cool lifestyle community that Extreme stands for.

Extreme sports are still growing at a phenomenal rate. "The amazing thing is the kids come into these sports between the ages of 7 and 12 and new people are discovering them all the time," Al says. "People are getting older but there's a love of the sport that stays. I love these sports now as much as I did when I was 15."

He is passionate about a number of sports but skiing is his big passion, deep powder skiing and heli-skiing which is pretty amazing. "I feel very lucky," he says. "I never wake up on a Monday morning and think, damn I've got to go to work, I've never had that feeling in eleven years."

If you want a job at Extreme, send in your CV but be imaginative and aim to impress as they are inundated with CVs and it is not uncommon for CVs to arrive on surfboards and snowboards, which is all very cool.

Moving the conversation towards paintball, which is after all the reason we're there, it's obvious that Al and Extreme have had no problem seeing paintball as an extreme sport but the sticking point has always been how to get it on TV. In a phone call several years ago at a time when we were first promoting the Paintball Association and PBUK, I asked Al if there was an issue with the 'gun' element of our sport. He answered, as he does now, that it's not that at all. He's just been waiting for something to land on his desk that he can see will be entertaining enough to put on the channel. And it hasn't happened so far.

What has happened now is that Extreme can see the potential in paintball and are willing to throw their weight behind it as they have done with other extreme sports.

"For me, what any sport needs to think is that we need to make a series of programmes where there is a massive entertainment factor," he says, "and the bigger that entertainment factor, the more likelihood you'll get it on the TV channels. Believe it or not, at the end of the 1970's Formula One was dead and Bernie Ecclestone for three years gave Formula One away to TV channels all over the world. He created a theatre around it and now is able to command billions of dollars for TV rights. I've seen a number of formats for paintball and at some point, you'll hit onto a TV format that really works but it hasn't been done yet.

"Paintball is great to play but when you get into watching it, it's difficult to see. The standard game of paintball is not engaging enough for TV. Forget the sport, it's about making entertaining TV."

Extreme are looking for stuff all the time and everything has potential to get on the screen.

[Extreme Mayhem](#) as a concept is designed to help Extreme drive paintball forward and is the brainchild of Duncan Farber and Lis Hunt, involving the sites at rental level to bring people into the game.

"Extreme Mayhem was an accident to be brutally honest," Al says. "We saw that this area of the sport is something that we really want to drive in to.

Duncan said there is an opportunity to drive [Paintball](#) as a sport forward if we do this, this and this. They came to me and told me the situation. Am I a

mad keen paintballer? No, but from my perspective if we can take the brand and help a sport, that's a great thing to be doing. If that brings people into the sport and helps it to get bigger, that's a good thing."

Something that impresses us is that Extreme are determined to avoid the politics and pitfalls that have hampered paintball for so many years.

Al can remember when snowboarding started and he was approached by two different organisations wanting his help and TV coverage. His attitude was simple and he was not held to ransom by either of the two parties. "I helped two different series, one run by skiers and one run by snowboarders, get on TV. Staying out of politics is really important," he says. "Ultimately we're keen and interested to drive paintball forward."

The core brand values of Al's Extreme brand are vision, passion, irreverence and freedom. "We're a lifestyle brand," he says. "People tap into these sports because they're individual, they're very free, there's a certain way of thinking, whether it's the music, the clothing or the sports themselves, they're very cool."

And paintball can be a part of all this, if we can manage to keep the politics out and the passion in. That'll be the real trick.

## About the Author

Gillie Hatton, Feature Editor for PBUK Magazine, has years of direct involvement in the paintball industry, from running recreational paintball sites to supporting the Sup Air tournament scene. Gillie has been directly involved in developing and supporting the PA League in the UK.

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