

by Shelley Wood

The most memorable thing about my first day of skate-skiing is not the day itself, but rather the morning after. The day itself is sunshine muscling through the clouds and gleaming on the early-season snow. Trees dumbfounded by the first weight of winter on their branches. Smiling, pink-cheeked people swooshing through the hushed and frosty hills.

But I'm making that up in retrospect. In reality, most of what I remember is the aftermath: the arches of my feet cramped and sore, my arms and shoulders leaden, the entire insides of my legs so tight I thought I must have taken up pole-dancing in my sleep, or at least spent the night doing ThighMaster infomercials.

Skate-skiing, if you don't already know it, is the Bikram yoga of cross-country skiing; it's hotter, harder and hipper than the original "classic" technique. I won't lie to you: when I refer to my first day of skate-skiing—all 45 gasping, flailing minutes of it—I mean my first day of the season. I've been a skate-skier for eight years and every year the morning after the first day feels just >>>



GET OUT OF THOSE GROOVES AND SKATE

Remember when cross-country skiing meant woollen knickerbockers and a shuffling glide? Now the trails are a blur of lycra as skiers hop out of the old classic tracks and into the hot, hip sport of skate-skiing

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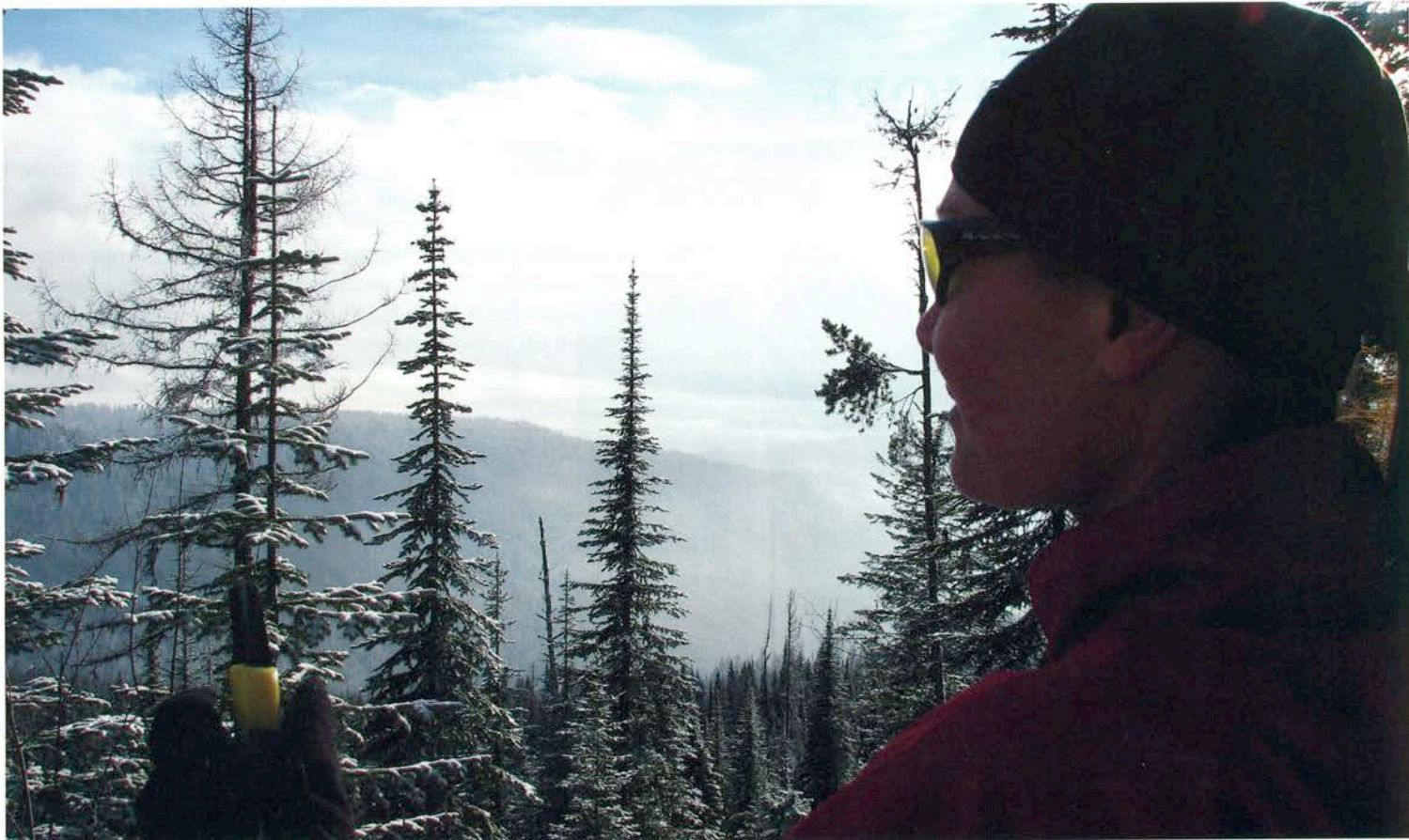
like this: painful, no matter how fit or strong I thought I was going in.

Most people I know pick things up faster than I do and skate-skiing is no exception. If you ice-skate or rollerblade, the movement on skate-skis is intuitive; if you've done any classic cross-country skiing in the parallel, groomed tracks, some of the necessary strength, balance and leg-to-leg transfer comes in handy. My husband, who has never taken a single skate-skiing lesson, is—to my intense irritation—a natural. I can only assume this comes from having more or less emerged from the womb on downhill skis and mastering, as a newborn, the technique of poling and gliding across the flats to get to the chairlift.

The key difference between classic and skate-skiing is the alignment and motion of the skis. For classic, you glide straight forward, first one ski than the other, relying on the sticky wax or scales on the base of your skis to get up any hills. Classic skiers can break fresh tracks in powder, but most will opt to ski only on the groomed runs, their skis confined to the shoulder-width grooves created in the snow for classic skiing.

A groomed trail—hardpacked and wide—is also key for skate-skiing, although you should steer clear of the grooves. For skate-skiing, the skis are only waxed for speed, the motion is a long, angled glide, and getting up the slightest hill requires good technique and determination. When I classic ski, I admit, I'll happily shuffle when I'm feeling lazy; other times I really hoof it. But with skate-skiing, if you don't keep moving at a certain pace you simply don't move at all.

Over the past 15 years, skate-skiing's popularity has swept across Canada and is in many ways responsible for reinvigorating the whole sport of cross-country skiing. Some Nordic skiers will alternate between skating and classic cross-country because of the crossover benefits of



SKATE SKIS ARE SHORTER, MORE NARROW AND LESS FLEXIBLE THAN CLASSIC SKIS, THE BOOTS ARE TALLER AND MORE RIGID. CLOTHING? AIM FOR FLASHY AND TIGHT



CROSS-COUNTRY TRAILS ARE MARKED LIKE DOWNHILL TRAILS: GREEN CIRCLES FOR EASY, BLUE SQUARES FOR MODERATE AND BLACK DIAMONDS FOR DIFFICULT—MEANING THAT AT SOME POINT ON THE TRAIL YOU WILL BE SLOGGING UP SOMETHING STEEP OR HURLING DOWN IT

strength and endurance. But for most people, skate-skiing is harder work, at a faster pace, than classic: in the middle of winter, there are few other outdoor sports that are as physically taxing and invigorating as skate-skiing.

That said, if you can master the technique, skate-skiing can seem effortless and is by no means a sport just for the very young or hyper-fit. Older, plumper skiers—with better skills—regularly pass me on the trails, skis floating across the hardpacked snow like they're buttering toast. On the other hand, if you really want to push yourself, skate-skiing offers cardio-junkies the possibility of sheer heart-thumping speed. Despite my enduring ineptitude, I count myself in this group and will always choose skate-skiing over classic cross-country if the conditions are right.

What I lack in skill, I make up for in perseverance. On this twinkling, first skate-ski day I'm determined to skate for at least an hour, work on my balance and glide, keep my old foe—frustration—at bay. The Nordic trails at Sun Peaks Resort are among the first cross-country ski areas in the Thompson area to open for the season and as I click into my bindings, I can see the fresh, tell-tale, herring bone patterns of skate-skiers who have beat me onto the trails. Instantly, I'm intimidated by visions of lycra-clad hamstrings blithely swishing past me.

We start out on a green run: as with downhill skiing, cross-country trails are marked using the same system: green circles for easy, flat or rolling trials; blue squares for >>>

MID-WINTER, FEW OTHER OUTDOOR SPORTS ARE AS PHYSICALLY TAXING AND INVIGORATING AS SKATE-SKIING, WITH THE ADDED BONUS OF GETTING YOU OUT IN THE SUN

moderate, slightly steeper stuff; and black diamonds for difficult—meaning that at some point on the trail, if not for the entire distance, you will be slogging up something steep or hurtling down it. Nothing to sneeze at when your heel is free to lift from the ski and the skis themselves do not have the same rigid edges to help you turn or come swiftly to a halt.

Hills are my nemesis. Proper skate-ski technique on a hill requires you to “offset” your pole position and shorten your glide so that the movement becomes a kind of quick rhythmic sway that, done correctly, waltzes you to the top of the incline. Easier said than done. As I approach the first bump on the terrain I’m passed by a rosy septuagenarian, scarcely puffing, who clad in head-to-toe spandex sails effortlessly over the rise.

I, of course, fall. First I fall on the uphill. Completely unable at this early stage in the season to recall the proper offsetting technique, I accidentally plant my pole between my skis, narrowly avoid impalement and end up slithering back down the hill. Later, on the long, fast descent on Holy Cow, that starts at the top of the Morrissey Express chairlift, I gain some serious speed and topple sideways, not totally unintentionally. I figure no one can say you’re out of control if you voluntarily decide to crash before you have no other options.

By the end of my albeit brief, early season ski, I’m bruised and already anticipating tomorrow’s pain. But I’ve had some moments of sunshine and I’m almost getting the hang of this once again—it feels familiar, comforting and I can almost, almost, remember how it goes. Every now and then I feel like I’m flying; I approach grace. Sure, my heart is in my ears and my throat feels like I lunched on sandpaper, but the winter is long—I’ll improve. And maybe, just maybe, this sport will carry me through to spring. **TL**

TIPS

- It is almost impossible to skate using classic or other skis, and borrowed equipment may not be appropriate for your weight and height. If you’re trying skate-skiing for the first time, consider renting from a shop that will fit you out properly.
- Many ski shops offer demo days at the major ski hills. Find out dates and try out some decent gear from the folks who will kit you out for maximum enjoyment in the hopes you’ll be hooked.
- Watching the pros and searching the Internet for tips won’t teach you how to skate-ski. Before you develop a lot of bad habits, sign up for a lesson.
- The keyword when dressing for any type of cross-country skiing is “layers.” For skate-skiing especially, don’t underestimate how much you’ll sweat and dress appropriately.
- Drink-up: we tend to feel less thirsty in sub-zero temperatures but don’t forget to hydrate when you get back to the chalet.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Cross-country skiing used to mean bamboo poles, wooden skis, boots like bowling shoes with an extra inch of sole at the front, woollen knickerbockers, scratchy sweaters and little lace-up gaiters to keep the snow out of the shoes.

These days, the equipment and clothing for both classic- and skate-skiing looks every bit as flashy as downhill gear. For skate-skiing, the poles are longer than classic, the skis are shorter, more narrow and less flexible, the boots are taller and more rigid.



IF YOU GO...

People accustomed to downhill ski hills may be surprised by the relative lack of overt supervision and patrolling at cross-country areas. Don’t take advantage; all the same rules apply. You are still required to purchase a pass—although it will be considerably less expensive. You must ski in control at all times, be aware of other skiers, and respect any signage telling you where you can and cannot go. Places to go: Sun Peaks, Harper Mountain and Stake Lake.