

Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing

Ski Tips & Techniques

NOVEMBER 2010 - POWDER SKIING: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

There always seems to be a bad to the good, a ying to the yang, a Dirty Harry to a Mary Poppins. Ski design is no different. As better ski construction and ski design has offered improved performance and a shorter learning curve, many skiers have become lazy. Before my time as a heli ski guide, in the 70's and 80's, everyone had to ski on skinny, long and unforgiving skis. Although this made for a tough day for a lot of people and eliminated most people from heli skiing at all, for those skiers who practiced and worked on the fundamental powder techniques, success was there to be had.

Move forward 25 or 30 years and the modern powder ski has revolutionized powder skiing. Rocker skis (discussed in September's ski tip), width and flex have all been optimized to make powder skiing attainable for everyone.

That's great but, it has come with some cost. Namely, we all, yes guides include, have become lazy powder skiers.

This is often apparent with a "bank'em and crank'em" style. Just lean into the hill push on the ski and get ready to move to the next turn. Generally modern powder skis will allow us to do this and a lot of powder skiers function day in and day out with this technique.

There are, however, several shortcomings to this turn methodology. Primarily, it is tiring, limits skier progression and can lead to injuries. Skiers inevitably end up in the back seat, with screaming thighs and are forced to initiate every turn with "gorilla" style upper body movements. Moving into more demanding or technical terrain is difficult because it is impossible to control speed with this style.

Ultimately, with this technique, we have eliminated our ankles from the ski turn all together. Our turn shape is no longer a nice rounded C but has taken on the look of an L scribbled in crayon by a 4 year old.

Acquiring better speed control, turn shape and moving into more challenging terrain with less fatigue requires that we activate our ankles to roll our skis into each turn. Getting feet and ankle movements working will keep our centre of gravity and hips over our skis.

A drill I found on the internet designed by Mike Doyle (kudos where kudos are due) is simple, practical and effective.

Start with two broom handles. Place them shoulder width apart on a grass surface. Stand on the handles and roll your ankles from side to side. You can try this in your ski boots and you can use some incline to better emulate the feeling of edging on a slope. Good luck and see you in the mountains.

Tim McLean - Senior Lead Guide
CSIA Level 3, CSGA Level 3