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Eugene Parks & Recreation Department

SKIING

Questions and Answers About Cross-Country Skiing

by Talbot Bielefeldt

Cross country skiing is a growing sport with many new participants. This article answers some common questions asked by beginning skiers. The author is a certified ski instructor, and Technical Director of the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department's cross country skiing program.

Q: Look at all those skis! How do you choose?

There's a system. First, decide the types of skiing you want to do—racing, track touring, off-trail touring, mountaineering, whatever. Second, find out the models of skis and boots appropriate for your type of skiing. Third, buy the boots and bindings. (Boots are not the most expensive part of the package, but they allow the fewest compromises. Spend what you have to for boots that fit well and provide adequate support. Make sure the bindings go with the boot sole.) Fourth, buy skis. If you need to cut corners on price, do it here. Last, buy poles, and any accessories, such as car racks, that you may need.

Q: But how do you choose between all the different waxless bases, the different boot/binding systems? They keep changing.

They do. We're in a period of rapid development in nordic ski gear. It's not just cosmetic change—the equipment is really becoming more effective and easier to use. Go to a well-established ski store where the staff can fill you in on recent changes in equipment design that might affect your skiing.

Q: Is it possible to have an "all around" ski outfit?

That depends on how big around your "all around" is. The most popular and versatile skis are the edgeless touring models that will serve for everything from recreational racing to light backpacking. However, serious racers will need true lightweight racing gear, and mountaineers will want edged skis and stiff boots. XC is more than a single sport, and skiers who want to participate in all its aspects will own or rent more than one set of equipment.

Q: I'm just starting. Should I buy skis very short?

No. Although short skis are easier to turn on the downhill, you need a certain amount of ski under you to support your weight when gliding over flat or rolling terrain. It does make sense for beginners to start out on wider and softer-flexing skis. A quick rule for sizing nordic gear is: skis as long as the wrist of an upraised arm; poles coming just to the armpit. Your ski store staff can help you get a more precise fit for your weight and height.

Q: Don't your feet get cold and wet in those shoes?

They can, if you're not moving around much. Skiers who plan to stand in the snow a lot—campers, parents helping small children—will be more comfortable in heavier, leather XC boots, as opposed to lightweight fabric shoes. Insulated overboots are an effective means of keeping your feet warm and dry.

Q: Will metal edges help me turn?

Not necessarily. Skis with deep sidecut, soft flex, and low camber will generally be easier to turn than parallel-sided, stiff, high-cambered models. Metal edges will make a big difference only on hard snow. The most important piece of equipment in downhill

control is actually the boots. A stiff boot sole will control even very stubborn skis.

Q: The stiffer the better?

Not necessarily, unless you plan to specialize in skiing steep slopes where turning the skis is all-important. Very stiff boots are uncomfortable for striding across gentle terrain. In picking skis and boots, you need to find the compromise appropriate for your mix of skiing activities. That's why the first step in choosing equipment is to get an idea of what kind of skiing you want to do. Reading, renting and talking with other skiers can help you decide the course you want to follow.

Q: I bought "waxless" skis. Will I ever have to put anything on the bases?

Probably. "Waxless" skis are those that have some kind of pattern or material on the base that takes the place of the sticky XC waxes in providing traction while climbing. However, as with downhill skis, nordic bases may need to be treated periodically with a sealer to keep wet snow from sticking to the plastic. This is a quick and inexpensive procedure, about as much trouble as waterproofing a pair of hiking boots.

Q: What about XC waxing? Is it hard to learn?

No, but choosing and applying the correct wax are skills that must be practiced. Occasional and first-time skiers are usually happier on waxless skis. Waxable skis, waxed properly, have superior glide, and offer a real advantage in stable skiing conditions such as cold snow and groomed tracks. Even experts commonly use waxless skis in changeable snow conditions.

Q: Do I need to have special clothing for XC?

You dress for nordic skiing the way you dress for any other cold-weather outdoor sport: layers of

wool or synthetic insulation, covered with windproof/waterproof shells. If you are a hiker, downhill skier, hunter or other outdoor sports participant, you may have most of the clothing already. Special ski clothing does make a significant difference, however. It is light, stretchy, sheds snow, and allows you to ski longer in greater comfort.

Q: Do I need lessons to take up cross-country?

You can walk around on the skis on level ground—using the skis more or less as snowshoes—without lessons. However, to learn to glide efficiently across the flat, and to control your skis on the downhill, you will want to have some training. Skiing is an ancient sport, and its techniques have been developed through trial and error over many years. Most skiers prefer to take advantage of this background, rather than re-inventing the sport on their own.

Q: Can you really turn those skinny skis?

Yes. An accomplished nordic skier can do most of the turns common to alpine skiing, plus some others made possible by the flexible boots and bindings. As in any sport, technique is at least as important as hardware. Even experienced downhillers may want to begin XC with an introductory lesson to get the feel of the new equipment.

Q: I'm interested in nordic skiing, but I don't know where to go, and don't have anyone to ski with.

There are a number of active clubs and ski schools that offer opportunities for learning to ski and for meeting other skiers. In addition, ski stores usually stock a wide selection of books, maps and guides that can help you select equipment and places to ski. Happy hunting!

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CROSS-COUNTRY CHECKLIST

This is an outline of the clothing and equipment needed for the safe enjoyment of ski touring in the Oregon Cascades. Day skiers will of course not need all the camping and mountaineering items, and touring party members can pool their safety equipment. No general checklist can anticipate all skiing situations, and the demands of racing, rescue, or challenging ski routes may require additional clothing and equipment not listed here.

SKI EQUIPMENT

- cross-country skis
- ski boots
- poles
- XC wax (waxable skis)
- base wax

SAFETY

- first aid kit
- repair kit, including:
 - cord
 - tape
 - wire
 - epoxy
 - binding screws
 - binding bale
 - pliers
 - screwdriver
 - pole basket
 - ski tip
- matches
- pocket knife
- map
- compass
- shelter tarp
- rescue shovel
- foam pad
- candle

SKI MOUNTAINEERING

- ski retention straps
- avalanche beacons
- ice axe
- rope
- crampons
- climbing hardware

CLOTHING

- knickers or ski suit
- knicker socks
- long underwear
- gaiters
- wind/rain pants
- turtleneck shirt
- light sweater(s)
- pile jacket
- wind/rain parka
- gloves
- overmitts
- stocking cap

PERSONAL GEAR

- day pack
- sunglasses
- sunscreen
- canteen
- high energy food
- whistle
- flashlight

WINTER CAMPING

- internal frame pack
- tent
- sleeping bag
- overbag
- foam pad
- stove
- fuel