

Skiing the South Sister

by Talbot Bielefeldt

Cross country skiing is a Hydra-like beast: As soon as you have mastered one species of the sport, you find yourself challenged by a new variety. This makes for life-time recreation. Also it makes for confusion on the part of beginners who want an overview of cross country, or nordic, skiing. A good vantage point from which to study the sport in Oregon is the 10,358' South Sister, near Mt. Bachelor Ski Area west of Bend. Anyone who climbs to the top of this mountain in winter will practice or witness every kind of nordic skiing along the way.

The trip begins at the state parking area by Dutchman Flat near the ski area entrance. The ski area itself is as far as many skiers will want to go. The machine-packed tracks at the Mt. Bachelor Nordic Center represent one end of the skiing spectrum. Racers and exercise skiers like the packed surface because it allows them to skate along smoothly at maximum speed. The area also is popular with novices and with families, since the tracks make it easy to learn technique, and ensure that all the little ones will find their way back to the lodge.

Another specialized part of cross country takes place on the resort's downhill slopes, where nordic skiers ride the chairlifts and descend the alpine runs on skinny cross country skis and flexible boots. Nordic downhill has become so popular in the last decade that most ski companies now manufacture hybrid metal-edged cross country skis that look and work like thin downhill boards.

Day Touring

For most skiers in Oregon, cross country still means just that—travelling cross country, away from developed resorts. Dutchman Flat, and the rolling forested terrain above, are the habitat of the day tourist. Day touring is the winter equivalent of hiking. Ski routes often follow trails, but the tracks are not groomed. Tourers can explore the country to the limits of their technique. With this freedom comes a responsibility for being self sufficient, since tourers have forsaken the security of packed trails, ski patrols, and heated lodges. Instead of the Lycra suits and skinny skis of the

racers at the Nordic Center, tourers will wear sweaters and nylon or wool knickers, with parkas and extra clothing carried along. They also will pack food, water, first aid and repair kits and a map and compass.

The route to South Sister climbs above timberline, and traverses open slopes of windblown snow. The mountains—the Three Sisters, Broken Top and Bachelor Butte—are close and clear. Prudent skiers are attentive to avalanche hazard in this zone, and watchful for changing weather that could make retreat difficult on the exposed slopes.

Day tourers will have time to explore the high country for a few days before heading down. South Sister climbers camp at Green Lakes, below the southeast ridge of the mountain. Experienced tourers pitch their tents in the shelter of the wind-bent pines that hug the shore of the lake.

Above are steep, glaciated lava slopes. Skiing this terrain involves a combination of climbing and ski touring experience. Most ski ascents are done in the spring, when the days are long, the weather is mild and the snow has been packed down to a firm base. Exchanging ski poles for ice axes and packing skis on their backs, ski mountaineers kick steps up the ridge between the glaciers and cliffs, hoping to make the summit by the time the sun softens the snow.

High at the Top

The top of South Sister is a broad volcanic crater with a lake cupped in the center. Standing on skis at the southern rim of the bowl, gathering courage for the steep descent, a skier takes in the entire skiing habitat at a glance: the chairlifts on Mt. Bachelor; the groomed tracks below; the forest with its touring trails; the meadows above the timberline; and the rugged mountain beneath the ski tips.

What does it take to be at home in all these environments? Just the time and desire to do a lot of skiing, plus the curiosity to learn new skills. Equipment is part of it—every version of the sport has its own special gear. The truly fanatical skier will own a large assortment of skis and boots. The fact is, however, that proficient skiers can do most kinds of cross country skiing on most kinds of nordic skis. The varieties of cross country are created not by equipment, but by imagination.



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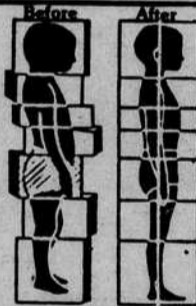
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If this applies to you, or if you are simply curious to know more about yourself physically and emotionally, Rolfing is for you.

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