

A downhill trend

Nordic skiing hits new heights

By Paul Danzer
Of the Emerald

You're breathless. Before you lies a vast field of untamed powder. You stand in anticipation of the fun to come and in appreciation of the beauty below you.

You catch your breath which escaped on the trek up the mountainside. And then you're off. You have the whole hill to yourself. There are no rope tows, no chairlifts, no long lines to wait in. Just you and the untracked slope.

Sound too good to be true? It's not. It is a fantasy lived out by more and more skiers every year. It's nordic downhill skiing.

Two types of skiers have changed course in recent years toward nordic downhill skiing — cross country skiers in search of a new challenge, and alpine downhillers who are tired of the contemporary downhill ski scene.

As this blend of individuals would indicate, nordic downhill skiing is basically, a combination of the two sports, which also involves mountain climbing. In other words, "cross-country skiers will climb a peak just to ski down," according to Keith Nelson of the outdoor program at Oregon.

One of those is Dick Hassett, manager of Anderson's Sporting Goods in the EMU. "I was just a cross country skier out looking for something a bit more challenging," said Hassett of his introduction to nordic downhill. "You get to a point where you can't avoid the hills anymore."

Thus, nordic downhill provided Hassett, who began cross country skiing five years ago, "a good excuse to do a little bit of climbing in the winter," when he started participating in the sport two winters ago.

"The thrill of skiing untracked powder snow without 30 to 40 people behind you," is one of the more attractive aspects of nordic downhill for Nelson, who is a converted alpine downhill enthusiast.

"It got to the point where I didn't want to keep up with the

trends," Nelson said, noting the expense of participating in regular alpine downhill skiing today. "I was tired of the scene, but I didn't want to give up the medium. Now I much more enjoy the nordic downhill type of skiing."

Hassett also likes the freedom that the sport offers. "It's a good chance to climb, you can pick your own slope, and there are no lift lines. It is more of an individual or small group activity (than alpine downhill). It is also more of a wilderness activity."

There is, however, a certain amount of responsibility which goes along with nordic downhill. As Nelson points out, there are not any snow cats to come pull you off of the mountain if something goes wrong.

"Part of the attraction of the sport is that you have to take care of yourself," said Nelson. "With alpine skiing you lose a lot of the adventure. Everything is so controlled."

'Cross country skiers will climb a peak just to ski down'

The one thing that is uncontrolled about alpine downhill is the prices of the hobby and the equipment. That is a major reason for the growth of nordic downhill, which can be done for a comparatively reasonable price, with no lift tickets and lower costs of equipment.

According to Hassett, companies are starting to produce more skis made specifically for nordic downhill. "The equipment is getting better, and more expensive," said Hassett. "It's not as expensive as alpine, but it's getting there."

Hassett said that a pair of skis made for nordic downhill

will cost between \$150 and \$200. The type of boots needed for nordic downhill, known as "telemark" which is the kind of turn nordic downhill skiers make, will cost around \$125 per pair. The cost of bindings, however, is only around \$15, according to Hassett.

Nordic downhill does require a more specialized type of ski than regular cross country skiing. According to Nelson, nordic skis are slimmed down versions of alpine downhill skis — just skinnier and lighter.

Although making sure you are properly clothed is important, Hassett said it doesn't have to be an expensive proposition to appropriately attire yourself. "You can get inexpensive wool clothes at various surplus stores for real cheap," he said.

The real hotbed for nordic downhill right now is Colorado, according to Hassett. There is a regular circuit in the state which nordic downhill racers travel every winter, and that is where the best equipment is being developed and made available. There are, however, a growing number of telemark races in the northwest each year, according to Hassett, who said that a significant number are now held at various places on Mt. Hood.

In addition to Mt. Hood, some of the favorite areas in Oregon for nordic downhill include the Mt. Jefferson wilderness area, the Three Sisters area, the Rosary Lakes area off the Willamette Pass, the Steens Mountains in Eastern Oregon and Mt. Bachelor, according to Hassett.

"Bachelor Butte is one of the finest back country areas around," said Nelson. "It offers a variety of slopes, all within five to eight miles of the parking lot."

With country like that at Lane County's back door, it is easy to see why more and more skiers are turning to nordic downhill to live out their athletic fantasies. And it is easy to understand why Hassett thinks the sport is "a really great way to enjoy winter in Oregon."

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