

SPORTS

Dashing through the snow

Just Out straps them on for a ski adventure

BY MELISSA SAYLER

There is a moment of truth at the top of the mountain every time I get dumped from the comforting drone and faraway thoughts of the chairlift. Coming down the ramp, we are funneled to a 15-foot-wide chute that leads us to the delta of ski runs. The wind rages with so much force in the chute that it pushes us backward even though we're pointed downhill.

The bottleneck of people are squealing and hollering in stunned delight and defiance to Mother Nature's will. I look back up the hill into the yellow, glowing floodlight, and it looks like the gates of hell have opened and every snowflake, tree branch, skier and snowboarder is being sucked backward into it.

But my only choice is to follow Alexis Anderson, the boarder I rode up with from Ski Out. I've been trailing her most of the afternoon. She is a regular at Mount Hood Meadows and is my only other beacon down to the familiarity of the base area besides the surreal, sporadic lights high in the whited-out sky.

"Can this be my last run?" I think every time I come out of the chute, hoping to keep up with Anderson before she disappears like a spirit into the dancing haze of snow.

But something strange happens every time the wind catches my back and whips me over the crest of the first hill—as if my mass and substance are mere afterthoughts, as if I have



Members of Ski Out test their fortitude in the gloom at Mount Hood Meadows

ning to disband after several years of engaging in weekend trips. The remaining members thought they might fall into the custody of the Adventure Group, but Reich decided to keep Ski Out going as its own entity.

This year he is making it even easier to convince people to join by taking advantage of Mount Hood Meadows' 11 a.m.-7 p.m. shift—leaving Portland at a leisurely 9:30 a.m., allowing for an extra hour or two of sleep. Gone are the days of having to pull on your long johns at 6 a.m. to get to the slopes by 8, or having to wait until noon to get the discounted half-day ticket.

But even though much has changed with Ski Out and the sport itself, some things never change. After six hours in the weather we endured on this day I feel a great sense of accomplishment. Between my frozen nose, burning thighs and aching fingertips there is great satisfaction.

As I step into the lodge and unzip myself from the confines of my soggy layers, for a fleeting moment I feel positively butch for surviving the wind and snow. The radiating fire, shot of whiskey and warm, decadent chocolate cake send blood burning back into my cheeks and toes. I revel in the newfound verve running through me and the reminder of why skiing and snowboarding intoxicate people so much.

As Ski Out member Joe Wedman puts it: "Oregon can be quite confining during the dead of winter with the constant rain. I enjoy being up on the mountain where it's usually dry. I love the snow on the trees and views as far as you can see. It's a lot of fun to be outdoors with other gay people, and skiing is the perfect winter excuse!"

Wedman also keys into the most important lesson I learned this day. It had escaped me during so many years of skiing by myself in New Mexico, Colorado and Montana, which is part of the reason I gave up on it. It's never so much fun as when it's shared with other people. ☐

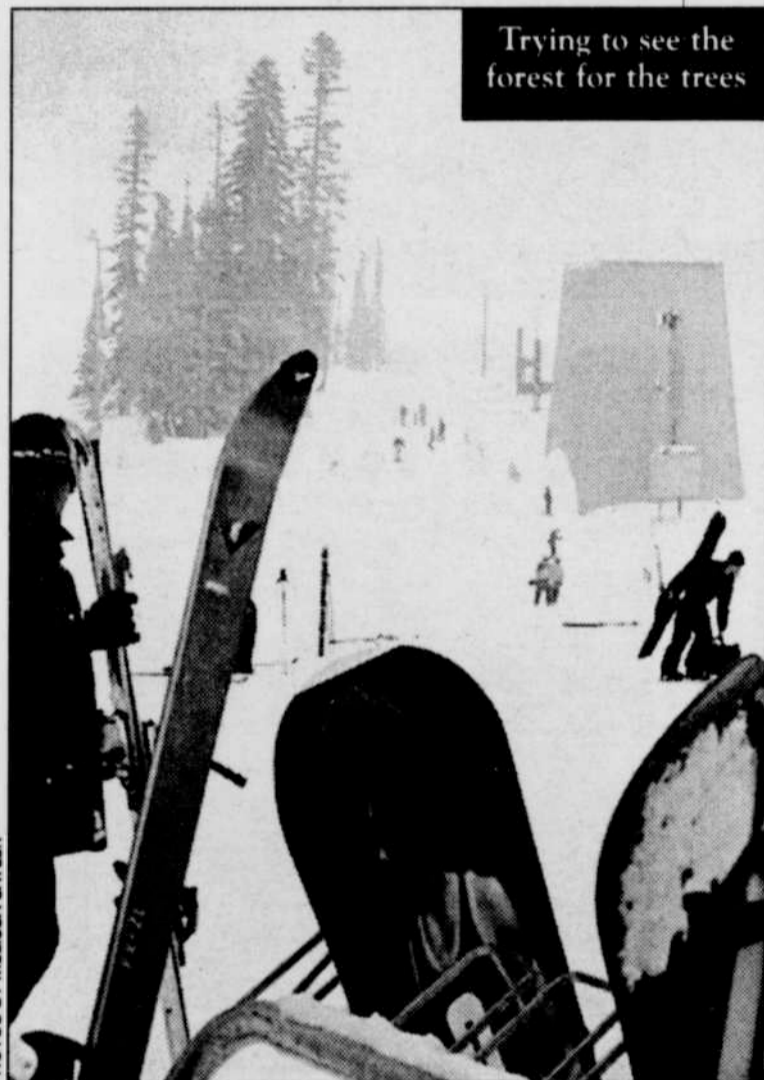
SKI OUT generally heads to Mount Hood at 9:30 a.m. every second Saturday and fourth Sunday. Meet in front of the Hollywood Fred Meyer Starbucks, 3030 N.E. Weidler St. Visit www.skiout.org for more information.

ALTITUDE—the gay and lesbian ski week at Whistler Resort near Vancouver, British Columbia—is Feb. 2 to 11. Visit www.outontheslopes.com for details on parties, lodging and skiing.

OUTBOARD—the gay snowboarding event at Copper Mountain, two hours west of Denver—is April 4 to 7. Visit www.outboard.org for more information.

MELISSA SAYLER is the Production Assistant and resident sports lezzie at Just Out.

Trying to see the forest for the trees



PHOTOS BY MELISSA SAYLER

always been capable of flying.

I realize I love it. I'm relaxed and with gracious, funny people.

And this is the first time in my 14 years of skiing in the Northwest corner of Oregon that the snow is as light and buttery as the Rocky Mountain powder I've skied in years past. Although the weather is some of the worst, this snow is absolutely some of the best—capable of making me feel like I'm floating.

After taking a two-year break from the sport, I am also skiing better than I ever have (thanks to my mom's new shaped skis—I had insisted on holding onto my long, ruler-straight skis until now). My turns are snappier and more controlled. I feel like I actually might be a good skier, although certainly not wild and courageous.

With every run, this sport I thought I had given up seems to be crashing its way back into my heart—stinging cold, biting wind and all.

I owe the pleasure of the experience not only to Anderson, my mom's skis and the somalike yellow spotlights

but to Burt Reich, "the benevolent dictator" who organizes Ski Out. And to the other 10 people who joined us as we set off in carpools from Portland this gray morning.

We are a group of men and women; snowboarders and skiers; advanced, beginner and intermediate; small and tall; blond, brown and mustached. Or, as two of my skiing partners quipped, "We are gay men riding long sticks and lesbians strapping on stiff boards."

Good humor abounds, and there doesn't seem to be any agendas, competitiveness, impatience or complaining. We are free to go where we like, by ourselves or with anyone else, as long as we make our rides home.

And for shy people like myself, whose top 10 list of most mortifying experiences includes thrusting myself to the mercy of strangers for a daylong activity I'm only mildly confident doing, it is a total relief to be surrounded by this sense of freedom and ease. As a matter of fact, I am having so much fun, I surprise myself by not scheming, even once, to hide in the trees and make snow angels for a few hours to pass the time—as I used to do when my parents packed me off with ski groups as a kid.

Reich has made it a priority to encourage this level of comfort since taking the helm of Ski Out two years ago. The group was begin-

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