

# Ski mountaineering growing in popularity

By CHADD CRIPE  
Idaho Statesman

MCCALL, Idaho — Backcountry skiing is an integral part of Idaho's winter recreation scene.

Ski mountaineering is a new sport trying to create a foothold in the state. But essentially, they're the same activity with different tools.

"It's basically backcountry skiing, just with more speed," said Nick Francis, the outgoing president of the U.S. Ski Mountaineering Association.

The USSMA made its Idaho debut this past Friday and Saturday at Brundage Mountain Resort. The top performers in Friday's vertical race (1,700 feet of climbing in nearly 1.5 miles) and Saturday's individual race (about 13 miles and 5,800 feet of elevation change during five ascents and five descents) qualified to represent the U.S. at the world championships in Italy.

Sprinkled among the elite athletes were a handful of Idahoans eager to learn more about the sport.

"This is my first time, so I guess this was getting into ski mountaineering," said Dessie Weigel, a 22-year-old Whitman College student from Boise. "I got my heart rate into the red zone 5 minutes in, (I) felt like I was going to throw up about 8 minutes in and then by 10 minutes I was just tasting blood, and that pretty much sustained me for the 45 minutes."

By staging the Northwest Passage Ski Mountaineering Race at Brundage, the USSMA hopes to find more adventurous athletes like Weigel. Ski mountaineering has grown from "a handful to several hundred" racers in Utah and Colorado over the past five years, Francis said. Most Western states were represented in the Brundage races, and the Northeast has a strong pocket of racers, too.

"We've been trying to get into Idaho for a long time," said Francis, who is based in Salt Lake City and also races. "There's a lot of racers in Utah and Montana and Wyoming, and a lot of us ski here, so it just make sense to have a race here. We would love to see more Idaho racers, and a big part of that is just getting races here. It's much easier to get involved in the sport when there's a local race scene."

Said first-time racer Matt Ganz of McCall: "This kind of ski culture has been around as long as people have been skiing here."

Ski mountaineering involves skiing up and down mountains, usually on groomed runs, with transitions in between to change gear setups. For most uphill sections, racers attach skins to the bottom of their skis to provide better traction.



In this Dec. 16 photo, ski mountaineering racers make their way up the 45th Parallel run during the Northwest Passage Ski Mountaineering Vertical Race at Brundage Ski resort in McCall, Idaho. The vertical race featured a sprint to the top of the mountain that included 530 meters of elevation gain.



Aki mountaineering racers make their way up the 45th Parallel run at Brundage Ski resort in McCall, Idaho.

They remove the skins for the downhill portions. For some steep sections, racers put their skis on their backs and hike in their boots.

The sport and its equipment developed from troop movements through the Alps during the world wars, Francis said.

"We call them skins because historically they were animal skins," he said. "It's just a thick, rubber membrane with fibers that are directional so they glide going forward and catch and

hold when you step onto them and step up."

The skis are short and narrow compared to what most people use for downhill or backcountry travel. The racing minimums are 160 centimeters in length for men, 150 centimeters in length for women and 65 millimeters wide under foot, so that's what all the elite racers use to minimize weight. Racing in traditional backcountry skis would be like running in hiking boots, Francis said.

Brundage ski instructor Kori Richards usually skis on a setup that is 105 millimeters under foot, which works better in powder. She raced Saturday on borrowed "skinny" skis. She entered because several friends were visiting to compete, including Janelle Smiley of Jackson, Wyo. — the winner of the women's vertical and individual races.

"We came out the day before and took some runs, and they are hilarious," Richards said of mountaineering skis. "They ski all right on the groomers, but as soon as you get off-piste ... you just have to forget all the ski instructor technique."

Richards, who moved to McCall from Jackson to take part in a University of Idaho master's program, trained for the race by skinning around the Brundage property before the lifts opened to the public.

Brundage has skiers in the parking lot every morning when there's enough snow to ski but not enough for the resort to open. The uphill skiers keep coming during the season, skinning up early in the morning before the lifts start running.

"It seems like a really healthy sport," Richards said. "You get the aerobic workout, but then it's gentle on your body on the way down where something like hiking isn't. It is fun. You get exercise, and then you get the reward of skiing."

Ben Hipple of McCall skins up Brundage and the Little Ski Hill several times a year.

"It's real peaceful, and you get to see a real nice sunrise," he said. "It's more fun. You see a lot more scenery. And the powder is better."

Weigel, who has competed in Nordic skiing and is on the Whitman club cycling team, goes backcountry skiing in the Wallowa Mountains of Oregon. She has developed an appreciation for the climb.

"When I started backcountry skiing, I thought that skinning was that miserable part you have to do in order to ski some fun powder," she said. "And the first time I did it I was like, 'Wow, I love skinning.' I was smiling the whole way up my first time backcountry skiing, and I realized I wanted to go out and do it again as much

## SKI REPORT

**Spout Springs**  
Tollgate, Ore.  
**CLOSED FOR SEASON**

**Anthony Lakes**  
North Powder, Ore.  
**New snow: 4"**  
**Base depth: 46"**  
**Conditions: Clear and chilly. Bundle up.**

**Ski Bluewood**  
Dayton, Wash.  
**New snow: 6"**  
**Base depth: 50"**  
**Conditions: Cold and sunny. Machine packed corduroy, powder in trees.**

**Ski Fergi**  
Joseph, Ore.  
**New snow: None**  
**Base depth: 25"**  
**Conditions: Open weekends, windswept snow.**

**Mt. Hood Meadows**  
Government Camp, Ore.  
**New snow: 2"**  
**Base depth: 78"**  
**Conditions: Groom is wind-blown hardpack. Off piste is tracked powder with wind transport.**

for the skinning as for the skiing."

John Gaston, a 29-year-old from Aspen, Colo., switched from downhill skiing to ski mountaineering about five years ago, just as the sport began its rise in Colorado. He wasn't into cross-country skiing or endurance sports before that.

He was surprised by how quickly he became hooked. He won Friday's vertical race in 23 minutes, 32.92 seconds to earn his third straight trip to worlds.

"(Ski mountaineering) has been around Europe for a long time, and Americans are catching on," he said. "It's just a fun way to get out in the mountains in the winter, another mode of transport. And for those who maybe aren't as patient — standing in lift lines gets old after a while — this is a pretty fun alternative."



Ski mountaineering racers make their way up the 45th Parallel run at Brundage Ski resort in McCall, Idaho.

## COMMENTARY

### What could be more fun than snow caves?

By PAT WRAY  
Corvallis Gazette-Times

It's been a big snow year, great for skiing, snowshoeing and sledding ... and snow camping. It's kind of fun rolling out a sleeping bag on the bare ground beneath a big spruce tree with snow all around, but if you want the full snow camping experience, plus all the protection that goes with it, you should dig a snow cave.

Snow caves can be lifesavers, as thousands of people have learned in dangerous conditions. But they also provide an enjoyable and educational way to spend a night in absolute quiet and more warmth than you would think. And trying snow caves a time or two will make you confident in your ability to survive an unplanned night in the mountains.

First, the equipment. You'll want a short-handled shovel, warm, waterproof clothing, a closed-cell sleeping pad, a sleeping bag with a waterproof bivy sack, headlamp, a candle and a lighter. The sleeping bag is optional but without it you'll stay just on the wrong side of warm.

You don't need to dig your cave far

away from a road but you'll want to avoid places where avalanches or slides might occur or other people might travel.

Your ideal spot will be on the downwind side of a small hill where snow has collected in a deep drift. It should be fairly solid; powdery snow will be hard to dig and will not dependably maintain its shape once

dug. If necessary, you can pack it down with snow shoes.

Start by digging into the hill, then make a turn and dig upward to enlarge your sleeping quarters. The turn will keep wind from entering your cave and the upward cant will allow cold air to flow down and away from you. Do your digging in a minimum of clothing, with just a waterproof layer. After the cave is dug you can change into your dry, warm clothing to enter your bed.

As you dig out the sleeping chamber you'll want to shove the snow down toward the opening with your feet, where your partner can pull it out and discard it away from the hole. Trying to dig a snow cave by yourself is difficult and sleeping in one alone is not recommended. Cave-ins

are possible and much easier to escape with two people.

Enlarge the sleeping chamber just enough to hold you and your partner(s). Then dig a trench between you to lead the coldest air down and away from you. The trench doesn't have to be deep but if you neglect it the coldest air will pool all around you.

Next smooth the walls and ceiling of the sleeping area; rough spots provide a pathway for condensation to collect into drops and fall on you, generally in your ear.

Make a flat spot for your candle. The candle will get you close to 60 degrees but you should put it out when you go to sleep. Also, use a branch or ski pole to put a ventilation hole through the side of your cave. You can keep it plugged with a snowball on the inside unless the air inside becomes stale.

Now you are ready to move in. Bring the shovel in with you — just in case. Relax and enjoy the quiet and the dark. You may never have experienced quiet and dark like you will in a snow cave. Claustrophobia can be an issue, but it's not like you and your partner will be alone. With luck you'll be able to watch ice worms travel across the ceiling of your cave all night.

Seriously. Ice worms. Little black things. Sometimes you can hear them sing.

Pat Wray is outdoors columnist for the Gazette-Times in Corvallis.

### New bill brings outdoor industry into GDP

Portland (AP) — Oregon's outdoor industry is an economic powerhouse, with 496 businesses, 141,000 jobs and \$12.8 billion in consumer spending.

Surprisingly, all that economic activity here and in other states doesn't get factored into the country's Gross Domestic Product, the ultimate gauge for the size of an economy and how it's performing.

Outdoor industry leaders say their sector's exclusion from GDP calculations gives them short shrift in influencing government policies for public lands and other recreation issues.

But that should change with the final passage this month of the Recreation's Economic Contributions Act by Congress, which was signed into law by President Obama.

The bill was supported by local industry leaders, and was a priority for the Outdoor Industry Association, a leading trade group.

"Sound data points will help put the outdoor

industry on par with other sectors of the economy," says Kirsten Blackburn, corporate communications and advocacy manager at Keen footwear in Portland.

It also helps drive sustainability, she says. For Keen, that means "protecting the areas where their consumers live and play, through both conservation advocacy efforts and responsible supply chain management," including product-related sustainability initiatives.

The bill directs federal agencies to provide economic metrics and other statistics to assess and analyze the outdoor recreation economy and its effect on the overall U.S. economy. The bill applies to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit of the U.S. Department of Commerce that sets the GDP, as well as the U.S. Department of Labor and other agencies.

GDP represents the monetary value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period.