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What Is Telemark Skiing?

by Mitch Weber

It has been called "the world's oldest new sport," and I suppose that's true. Telemark skiing (or "tele") has also been called "the most rhythmic and flowing way to descend a snow covered mountain," and I'm pretty sure that's true as well. One thing I do know with absolute certainty: tele skiing is all about the stoke, the sensation, that feeling of excited exhilaration that comes from getting into the groove of the tele turn.

Today there are many aspects to this sport. For some, part of the stoke comes in the form of an endorphin high, that special feeling one gets after a hard workout. Other tele skiers seek out the kind of senses-sharpening adrenaline rush one gets from skiing really challenging terrain. For still others, telemark skiing gives access (paraphrasing John Muir) *to places to play, places where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul, to interact with wildlife, to feel the forces of gravity, the energy of a gathering storm.* A lot of tele skiers find a big part of the stoke to be in the friendships they develop with other members of the tribe, and for some a big attraction is the challenge of learning a new approach to skiing their local resort or terrain park. And then there are the philosophical, almost zen-like aspects to the sport...

While all of these things add to the fun of tele skiing, the *true stoke* is hard to describe. It can be an almost ethereal experience in those moments when everything comes together: form, function, time and space. Yet it is almost uncanny how something as intangible as this stoke can come to dominate a big part of so many of our lives. Yet that is, in fact, exactly why we do what we do.

History

Skiing itself had been around for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years when Norwegian Sondre Norheim, recognized today as the father of telemark skiing, popularized a new style of turn where one ski was advanced in front of the other and the heel was raised on the rear ski, with the skier in a very bent knee position. It was the late 1800s, and skiing was shifting from a mode of transportation to a form of recreation. Although no one can say for certain if it was Norheim who first invented the tele technique, he is widely credited with introducing the turn to the skiing world in jumping competitions. Norheim would land his jumps in the tele stance and finish with a stylish and

smooth telemark turn. Soon other skiers from Norheim's hometown of Morgedal, a village located in the rural county of Telemark in the southern part of Norway, adopted the new turn style.

Anne-Gry Blikom and Eivind Molde, authors of the book *Sondre Norheim: The Father of Modern Skiing* have written of the era:

For centuries skiing was something people did because they had to. In a country with long distances between the small, isolated communities and (with) hard snowy winters, skiing was important as a means of keeping in social contact with each other. And for the hunter and farmer, skis were a necessity.

Sondre Norheim played a crucial role, as skiing in the late 19th century changed from a utilitarian form of travel into a recreational pursuit, and a competitive sport. Sondre loved to have fun on the slopes and he experimented all the time with equipment and new skiing styles.



As Paul Parker writes in his seminal book and modern-day telemark primer *Free-Heel Skiing*, the new "telemark turn wasn't just a curiosity, but a viable technique for the equipment of the day, which consisted of free heels and wooden skis with no sidecut. In the telemark position one could wedge the forward ski slightly and have the effect of one long, sidecut ski." This was a breakthrough, for as we have learned today with modern sidecut skis (skis that are significantly wider at the tips and tails than through their center section), sidecut makes skis much easier to turn (more on this later). The telemark turn was also ideally suited for the moderately steep mountains and the soft, deep snow found in the Telemark region of Norway.

In 1868, Norheim and a group of skiers from Telemark travelled to the city of Christiania (now Oslo) to take part in the second annual Centralforeningen (Central Ski Association), a ski competition the object of which was to see who could ski most skilfully down a particular nearby slope in the city. At the time, nearly all skiers were straight running everything, and struggled to make any kind of turn. At the competition, Norheim and the other villagers shocked the city skiers, demonstrating skills that had never been seen before, including strong turns and precisely controlled stops. In addition to the graceful telemark turn, Norheim and the boys also used a rudimentary kind of parallel turn to a stop, swinging their skis around and edging hard in what today we call a "hockey stop." This parallel stopping technique later formed the basis for the Christiania, or "christy" turns that, along with the stem turn, evolved into the kind of parallel turns most commonly used by skiers today.

Did You Know?

Sondre Norheim, the inventor of the telemark turn, was also the first ski designer to experiment with sidecut built into his edgeless wooden skis? It worked, but it wasn't until some 90 years later that ski makers discovered an interesting fact: even more sidecut totally ruled.

As the story continues, the telemark turn stayed popular in the region of its birth, while in Christiania the skiers found parallel turns easier and more effective on the hard snow common to that area.

Then, near the turn of the century, an Austrian by the name of Mathias Zdarsky, invented the aforementioned "stem turn," the chief virtue of which was that it was easy to teach and to learn, as well as being an effective method to descend slowly and under control. The stem turn was made by forcing the ski tails outward, pushing against the outside ski and then allowing the skis to come back together near the end of the turn. The stem turn is often taught as part of the alpine skiing learning progression, even today.

As recreational skiing became more commercialized, and with the growth of ski resorts and their usually groomed, firm snow runs, it's not surprising that the telemark technique failed to catch on in the areas where skiing began to really take off as a sport in the 1900s, that is North American and continental Europe. Parallel techniques were (and still are) easier to learn and require less skill on hard snow, particularly given the limitations of the equipment of the day. By the 50s and 60s, the telemark turn was a forgotten technique.

Then, in the 1960s, a new trend emerged in North America, people started taking to the hills in droves as part of an overall interest in the environment and all things natural. Hiking and backpacking became very popular, and many of the participants in this sport looked for a way to extend the activity into winter. A sort of mini-boom in cross-country ski touring was soon underway. Today, telemark lore traces the revival of the tele turn back to a group of skiers in and around Crested Butte, Colorado. As the story goes, this group was interested in extending its skiing experience out of the resort and into the backcountry on cross-country skis. One of those Crested Butte locals, Rick Borkovic, later related his story to author Brad English for his 1984 book *Total Telemarking* :

Standing on the groomed slopes of the area, looking out at the backcountry, we longed to ski those untouched runs far from the crowded lifts. I felt this desire could be fulfilled through cross-country skiing and in 1971 I began to seriously explore the backcountry potential of Nordic equipment. We soon found that conventional downhill techniques were generally unsuited to the racing skis we first used, or the conditions we encountered. The snowplow didn't work very well for us in deep powder, and the parallel turn seemed too unstable on freeheel bindings and flexible boots. We eventually worked out the basics of the telemark, guided by an old picture I had seen of Stein Eriksen's father demonstrating the turn, and went from there on our own. The rest, as they say, is history...



TOTAL TELEMARKING

WRITTEN & EDITED BY BRAD ENGLISH

Whether this was the actual birth of the revival of telemark, no one will ever really know for sure. *North American Telemark Association* founder Dickie Hall once told me that he and a group of north eastern U.S. skiers were already making telemark turns in the early 70s when a couple of tele skiers from Colorado visited their local mountains in Vermont. It's unclear where Dickie and his group got the idea for the turn, but my own story may illustrate how the tele revival might have likely occurred as a logical extension of the increased interest in cross-country ski touring.

How I Started Telemark Skiing

In the 1980s, after many years of enjoying occasional cross-country trips in the mostly flat terrain around Yosemite's Glacier Point area, I moved my young family to a mountain community in southern California known as Pine Mountain. The terrain was much hillier than I was used to skiing, and the need for beefier gear became apparent. Soon I had cable bindings mounted on my waxless, fishscale base cross country skis and was struggling to make some kind of crude wedge turns. One weekend I went on an overnight ski trip to the top of San Emigdio mountain with a new friend and neighbour, Ed Veith. It was a perfect trip in almost every way. We built a snowcave and took a moonlight tour out to a spot overlooking our little mountain-town home. It was a magical moment. The snow was sparkling

in the moonlight and the lights of the little village below were twinkling in the cold mountain air. I went to sleep that night as happy and content as I have ever been.

The next morning we awoke to blue-bird skies and a foot of fresh snow. We were still thoroughly stoked from the night before and enjoying the spectacular morning. Lounging in the sun after a little ski around the mountain-top, Ed and I were talking about what a great time we were having and wondering how things could possibly be any better. In truth, we both knew that there was just one little problem, and that was the difficult ski down with heavy packs that lie ahead. "You know Ed, this is about as good as life gets right now," I said while looking down at my skis, "there's just one thing though, it sure would be nice to be able to turn these darn things."

Ed answered, "it sure would, you know last winter in Colorado I saw some guys doing a different kind of turn on skinny skis, I think they call it the Telemark. One ski is out in front of the other, sort of like this," and with that Ed dropped into a reasonable facsimile of the tele stance. "I'll tell you what, I'm going to try to make one turn down to that tree over there," Ed pointed down the hill, indicating a large ponderosa pine. I answered, "okay, I'll watch...try not to get hurt, it's a long way down to the trailhead."

With that Ed shoved off and made a single, swooping tele turn to a stop. I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed, "you did it!" I yelled down to him as he stood there grinning ear to ear. "Ed, wait there, I'm going to try to make the same turn down to you, right in your track." And I did. I pulled up next to him and we high-fived each other. Our lives would never be the same. Just like that, we were hooked on the telemark turn.

So who knows? Maybe the tele revival began in Crested Butte according to Rick Borkovic 's account...or maybe it began out of necessity in more than one place simultaneously as cross-country ski tourers began pushing the boundaries of their sport... whatever, the telemark turn was rediscovered in North America in the early 1970s and quickly began to catch on as a backcountry technique. Just as Sondre Norheim and his crew in Morgedahl had found the tele turn ideally suited for making turns with long, straight skis and floppy boots in soft deep snow, a century later the tele turn was revived as a solution by skiers facing similar terrain and equipment challenges.

By the 1980s the telemark revival that began in the United States a decade earlier, had spread to central Europe and back to the region of its birth, Norway and Sweden.

Important Recent Developments In Tele Gear History

As the years went by, tele continued to grow in popularity. Telemark boots, while still made primarily of leather, became taller and stiffer. Tele technique progressed as a result. In the early days tele skiers were forced to leap up out of the snow between turns and complete a significant portion of the turn while in the air, landing and hoping for the best... in fact this technique was often referred to by the ignominious term "hop and hope.". As an alternative many tele skiers would make the turn in sequential fashion, in a sort of variation on Zdarsky's step turn. Although often effective, neither technique was especially elegant. Equipment was holding the sport back. By the late 80s and early 90s big, stiff, plastic-cuffed leather boots were in wide use, but tele skis were still skinny and not very torsionally rigid. Many telemarkers turned to alpine skis as an alternative, but alpine ski design was, at the time, largely driven by racing, meaning that the skis were almost all very stiff along their length from tip to tail (longitudinally)... in those days this was how ski designers made skis that resisted twist (torsional rigidity). Savvy tele skiers would shun skinny tele skis and seek out wider alpine skis with a reasonably soft flex, as this made it easier to pressure and bend the rear ski in the tele turn. Unfortunately all too often these soft flexing skis would turn out to be lousy performers on anything but the softest snow due to poor torsional rigidity.

1992 will forever be remembered as a major turning point in the modern era of telemark skiing. It was in this year that an equipment development changed the sport forever, we didn't know it then but the turn itself was about to become a lot more fun and move beyond merely being a useful tool to get from point A to point B.

This was the year that Black Diamond, in partnership with Italian boot maker Scarpa, introduced the first all-plastic telemark boot. Suddenly, we had taken a big leap forward from a technological standpoint, and the future seemed limitless.

I'll never forget opening boxes containing our new Terminator boots at my ski-partner Len's house, he pulled out one of his boots first, held it up and said, "behold, the greatest invention since the wheel." And that was exactly how it felt.

Today, I'm sure it's hard for many who weren't around then to understand the significance of the first Terminator boots to the development of telemark as a sport, those of us who were still recall struggling along in expensive leather boots that went from "broken in" to "broken down" in barely more than a handful of days of use. Beyond increased durability was the fact that we now had boots that were modern and ahead of the technique curve. The future was indeed ours.



Ryan Boyer, Mammoth Mountain, 2004

Just as this was happening in the world of tele boots, a big change was coming to skis as well. Cap construction and designs with much more sidecut were beginning to hit the alpine ski market. The cap ski design --where the sidewalls and top are one with a continuous monocoque wrap-- began life as a cheaper and more simple way to build recreational skis. Then manufacturers found that the new construction method also increased durability, strength, and most importantly, made it easier to build in more resistance to ski twist (torsional rigidity), a key to making powerful skis that hold a strong edge. This was a huge development for telemark skiers too. As mentioned earlier, in the past when ski designers made their skis more torsionally rigid they would also become more stiff overall. In tele skiing, very stiff skis make it difficult to get enough pressure on the rear ski in the telemark turn to bend the ski into the snow. With cap construction and modern materials, skis could now easily be manufactured with the relatively softer longitudinal flex so beneficial for pressuring the rear ski properly in the tele turn, without sacrificing the torsional rigidity needed for hard snow performance.

Then came the beginning of what is now known as "the sidecut revolution." In ski design, the term "sidecut" refers to the difference in ski width at the ends of the ski, as compared to the width at the ski's most narrow point at its waist. As late as the mid-90s, most skis for alpine and telemark had, by today's standards, very little sidecut. And except for a small percentage of early adopters, most tele skiers were also using skis that were quite narrow overall. The *Tua Montet* was a popular telemark ski model in the early to mid-90s, and with dimensions of 86mms at its tip and 64mms at its waist, it's a good example of a typical of its time skinny ski, with very little sidecut (22mms). In the alpine world, ski designers were beginning to experiment with super-sidecut skis, or what were then called "parabolics." These skis had wide tips and tails and very narrow waists. An example of this was the *Elan SCX*, the first mass marketed parabolic. I mounted with freeheel bindings for tele skiing as a sort

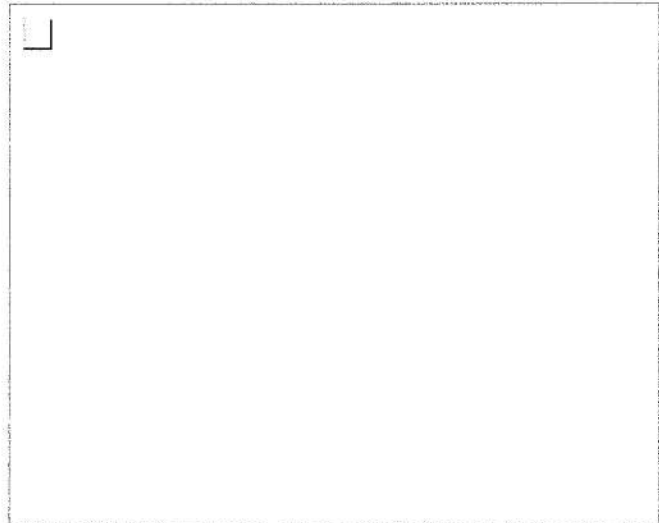
of experiment. Mine had a 115mm tip and a 64mm waist, a whopping 51mm sidecut.

These extreme sidecut skis had some drawbacks, and as the sidecut revolution progressed less radical cuts became the norm. Today most models, alpine and tele alike, have sidecuts in the 30 to 40mm range. But skis like the SCX had revealed a huge, game-improvement advantage: they made carved turns (as opposed to skidded turns) much, much easier. Before the sidecut revolution, only a small percentage of the best skiers had the skills to bend the stiff skis of the time into the kind of arc needed to consistently carve their turns. In most conditions, with more sidecut, skiers could now just roll their knees in the direction of the turn, pressure the tips of their skis a bit, and depend on a smoothly carved turn being the result.

While perhaps not as big of a breakthrough for tele skiers as for alpine parallel skiers (as mentioned earlier, the tele technique itself could be viewed as providing the driver with one long ski, and with a variable amount of sidecut), skis with increased sidecut did make it much easier to get the skis to carve in a tele turn, especially the rear ski. The combination of softer flexing but torsionally rigid cap skis, sidecut designs and big, beefy plastic boots, held together with improved freeheel binding designs, suddenly made it much easier to get the hang of tele skiing. The learning curve steepened dramatically.

As the gear improved, telemark technique also became more refined, taking full advantage of the power the new gear afforded. The telemark stance became tighter, less spread out. In nearly all conditions it was also no longer necessary to athletically unweight to the point of hopping up off the snow and making a major portion of the tele turn in the air. The result was that tele skiing became less strenuous. Improved control also gave freeheel skiers the confidence to take their tele turn into the most challenging terrain.

By 2000, the stage was set for an explosion of interest in telemark skiing, and a new generation of freeheel skiers was about to discover the stoke for themselves.



Press play to view park video clip

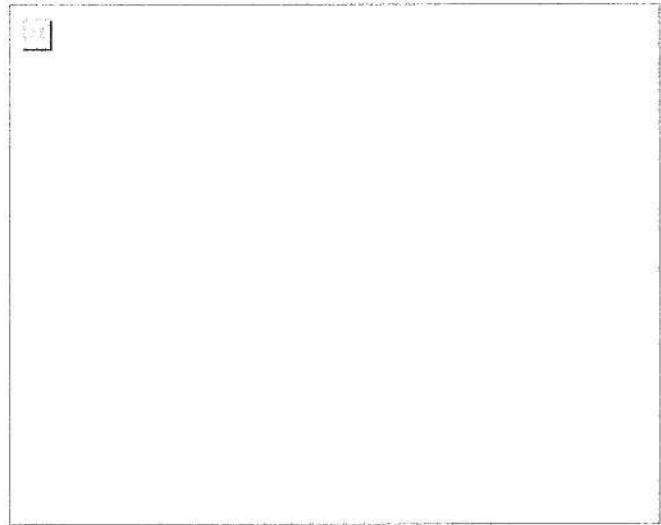
Telemark Skiing Today

According to the industry trade group Snowsports Industries America (SIA), telemark has, in recent years, been growing much faster than either snowboarding or alpine skiing. SIA reported a shocking 75% rise in telemark gear sales from 2003 to 2004 and other evidence of the sport's increasing popularity abounds. Telemark has hit the mainstream in a big way: Nike-ACG sponsored telemark athletes Sara Clemenson and Ben Dolenc had starring segments in two back-to-back Warren Miller films, and Miller's film, *Higher Ground* featured Dolenc and freeheel park riding specialist Max Mancini. The days of tele skiers making it into mainstream ski movies only as comic relief are, thankfully, long gone.

In addition to the important gear advances noted above, undoubtedly a very large part of this surge in popularity of the sport is due to telemark skiing's increased visibility. In the early years of the sport's resurgence, most tele skiing took

place in the relative anonymity of the backcountry. Telemarkers would typically go lift-served skiing mostly to hone their skills, the better they became the less they would ski at the resorts. A lot of the best tele skiers tended to stay away from the resorts almost entirely. The backcountry ethic/dogma of tele skiing was so strong that when they would run into one another at a ski area it was common for tele skiers to sheepishly claim "I'm just here for the practice."

Outsiders often viewed tele skiing as strange and difficult.



Press play to view backcountry video clip

In retrospect it's easy now to see what happened. Alpine skiers and snowboarders weren't exposed much to the sport, and when they were it was usually negatively. If they saw them at all from the lifts, boarders and alpine skiers would usually see telemarkers struggling mightily on moderate terrain, hands waving around in the air, searching for balance.

Then a funny thing happened in the later 90s, as the gear became more dialed and technique more refined, telemark skiers began to shake off the dogma and pursue the sport for the sake of the turn itself. For the stoke. And lift served skiing is all about getting lots and lots of turns. A few younger freeheel skiers even started heading to the ski areas to take advantage of the terrain parks, while an increasing number of aggressive big-mountain tele-ers began to take their act out to the steepest, gnarliest resort terrain they could find, and pound hard all day long. They did not go unnoticed.

Ten to fifteen years ago a tele skier riding a chairlift had to be prepared to field all sorts of goofy questions about their gear. I have no idea how many times someone asked me about my "cross-country skis," but it was a lot. My lift mates would ask, "isn't it really hard to turn with your heel loose like that?" Or they would say "I would like to try telemark, but it looks too hard."

Today those kinds of comments are very rare.

Now, when talking about telemark skiing, on a lift, a gondola or at the bar over a beer, we hear the most aggressive big mountain snowboarders and alpine skiers on the hill saying things like "any time Ryan Boyer (a well-known local tele skier) is on the mountain he's likely to not just be the best telemark skier out there, but the best skier on the hill period." And today there are Ryan Boyers at every resort, all over the world. When snow sports enthusiasts see these masters of the sport at a ski area, in the backcountry, in the terrain parks, at tele extreme freeskiing events and park competitions, or on film, they are inspired to try telemark.

In addition, modern freeheel skiers are an ambassadorial bunch, often sharing their stoke with friends, relatives, even fellow web surfers, as we see so often on our Talk Forum.



Tor Stetson-Lee competing at the 9th Annual U.S. Extreme Freeskiing Telemark Championships last year. Click the image to learn a little more about Tor's interesting and inspiring story.

Telemark skiing has stepped out of the shadows and is burgeoning in the backcountry and at the resorts. And although modern freeheel skiing now has many components and the participants come to the sport for a myriad of reasons, quite simply it's the stoke, the exhilaration that comes from getting into the groove of the turn, that keeps us coming back for more ...and more... and more.

How To get Started

You've found this site, so that's a very good start!

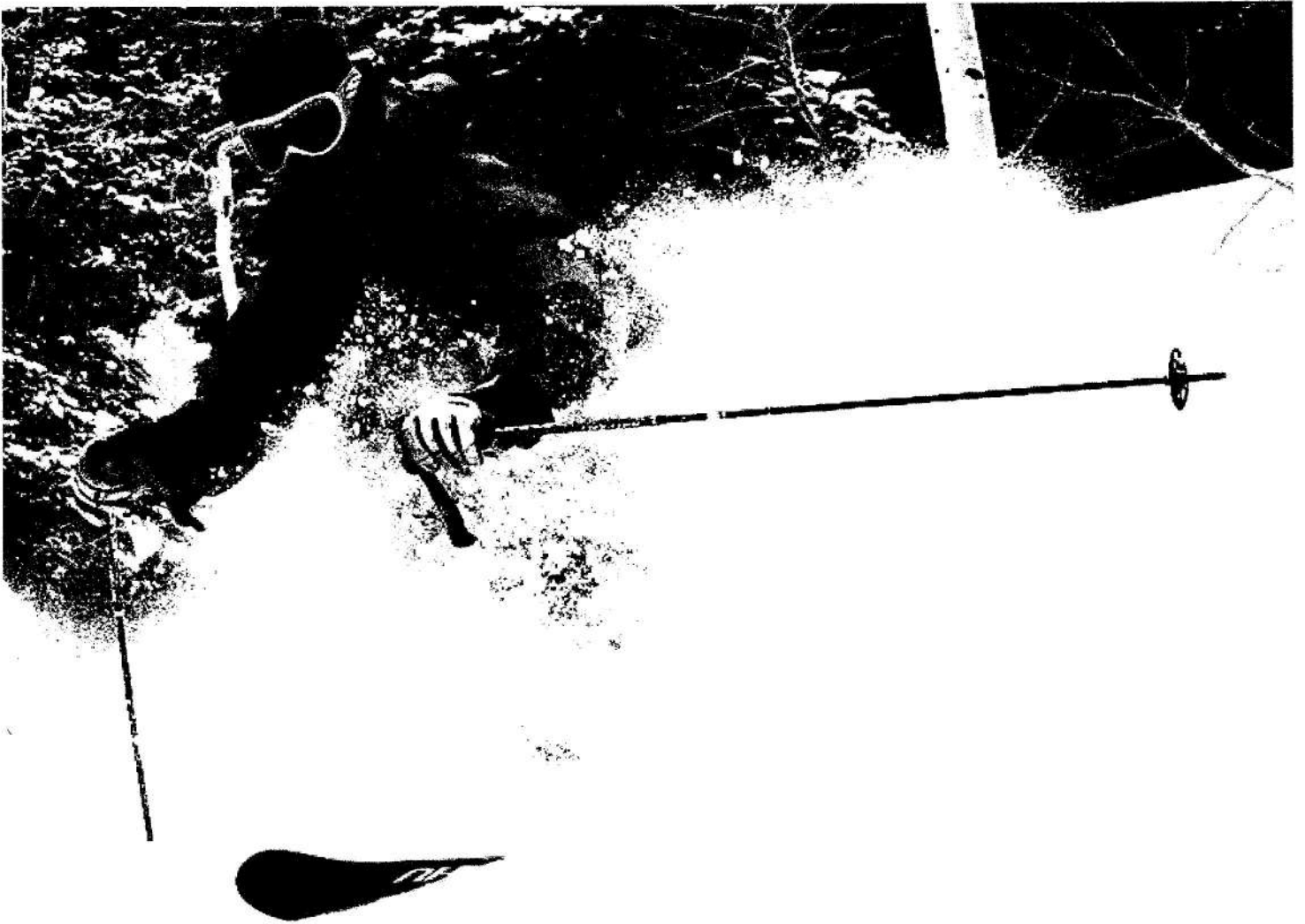
It all begins on the [Cover page](#) of Telemarktips.com--The Online Telemark and Backcountry Skiing Magazine. Add it your favorites, and check in regularly. Nearly every day we have new content. [TeleVision](#) videos to get you psyched for skiing, and the latest [Telemark News](#) to keep you informed.

We've got downloadable [video lessons](#) by Level 3 PSIA Telemark Instructor Tom Peterson, and [tips](#) from some of our crew, including the inimitable Dano-cruz. Technical help --everything from how to bake your own thermoformable boot liners to waxing your skis-- as well as the most detailed and down to earth gear reviews in the business are accessed from our [Dr. Telemark](#) page. And of course we've got lots and lots of [photos](#), a regular updated "Centerfold," and the coolest [desktop wallpaper](#) you'll ever find on the web.

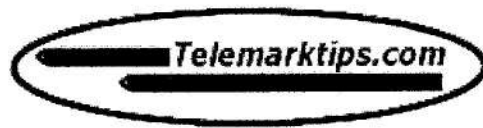
And much more... including our incredibly dynamic [Telemark Talk Forum](#). Got a question? Register and run it by our thousands of active members. It's a fun place to visit and hang out between ski sessions. Forum participants from all over the world even regularly get together to ski and have fun. Check it out!

Visit our [sponsors](#), drop them an email or give them a call. At every one of them you'll find someone on the other end more than willing to help you get started in this great sport.

Most importantly, just borrow or rent some tele gear, find a friend to give you some tips, take a lesson, attend a [festival clinic or demo day](#), or just head on out to a bunny slope somewhere. I guarantee you'll have a blast and be back for more. Just be forewarned though, that first turn has been known to change lives forever. It certainly did mine.



Above: The author....fully stoked..... Photo by John Lee, February, 2005



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