

The Telemark
Rediscovered on Big Mountain
By Ron Ridenour

Author's Note: This story was written in the late 1980s. People written about have grown older, most have retired—some have died. The historical content is true to the best effort and if any key players were omitted, it was not intentional. Many followed in the footsteps or rather, the ski tracks carved by these guys. The fun, graceful, extremely addicting telemark turn was reintroduced and has evolved. Obscurity will never again hide its magic.

Nordic skiing's classic telemark turn, ignored for nearly 70 years, was rediscovered by a handful of back-country powder skiing enthusiasts from Whitefish, Montana on the slopes of the Big Mountain during the winter of 1970.

Although telemark enthusiasts in Colorado like to consider their area central to the tele revolution, Montana skiers reintroduced the turn with no outside initiative other than one of the skiers having seen the turn performed by an old man and a paragraph or two of brief explanation in an old ski manual.

Earliest reports of skiing were drawn on rock walls found on an island in northern Norway. Skis have been found in Scandinavian countries that are thought to be 4500 years old. Norwegian laws dating back to 1274 restricted hunting on skis because it was considered "too easy" to stalk elk and caribou in deep snow and herds were diminishing. Military use of skiing occurred during the Norwegian Civil War between 1140 and 1210.

The telemark turn was devised in the community of Telemark, Norway in the 1800's. Skiers extended one ski in front of the other which allowed a controlled turn with free-heel equipment. Enthusiasts in Christiania, which came to be known as Oslo, started strapping the heels of their boots to their skis as well as their toes and developed a technique which allowed their skis to turn and skid sideways together. Proponents of both schools have squabbled from the onset about the merits of their preferred styles. The telemark was relegated to the nordic tradition because of its back-country touring applications while the christiana became the basis for parallel style, lift serviced Alpine skiing.

Skiing was introduced to America by early immigrants from Europe and John Thompson was one of the first. He was born in Telemark, Norway in 1836 and moved with his family to the United States at the age of ten. After heading west to the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California, Thompson became known for his skiing skills while carrying mail through snow covered mountains between Placerville and Carson Valley.

Interest in skiing continued to expand with increased attention directed to the recreational segment rather than the functional winter transportation factor. The National Ski Association of America was established in 1904 following a ski competition at Ishpening, Michigan.

Equipment continued to evolve. Laminated skis and metal fixed heel bindings arrived around 1930. A farm near Woodstock, Vermont made history in 1934 by offering the first rope tow in the United States. As ski lifts and especially, groomed slopes became common, the parallel technique started dominating the downhill skiing scene. Ski manufacturers found their primary market in alpine equipment and nordic skiing nearly disappeared along with its graceful turn.

Toni Hinderman, Bob Conat and Tom Eisinger grew up in Whitefish, Montana, thrashing the slopes of Big Mountain on alpine style fat boards. Hinderman and Conat did some time in Vietnam after high school. Conat returned to Whitefish and worked as a ski patrolman on the Big Mountain. Hinderman journeyed to Colorado where he got a job with a ski school at Steamboat Springs. He said cross-country touring was just getting popular but Hinderman said, nobody at Steamboat was very interested except for a back-country camping enthusiast he met named Ed Roy.

Hinderman and Roy left Colorado and returned to Whitefish in 1969. They went to work with Toni's father, Karl, who ran the ski school on Big Mountain. The younger Hinderman became instrumental in the introduction of nordic classes and with the assistance of another Big Mountain employee, Cliff Persons, fashioned the first cross country trail system on Big Mountain during their off hours. Gene Evans headed up the ski patrol and Hinderman talked Evans into teaching a few employees something about nordic technique. Conat, Roy and Eisinger worked patrol so Hinderman, Conat, Roy and Eisinger started pushing around on touring gear.

They were immediately interested in finding a method for controlled downhill turns. Roy said he had skied with an old Tenth Mountain Division skier in Colorado who would occasionally unhook the heel clamps on his downhill cable binding setup and jump into telemark turns but he had never tried the technique himself.

They went to Toni's father, Karl, who was the first ski instructor with the Army's 41st Division Ski Patrol and had served in Europe during World War II with the Tenth Division's Mountain Training Group. Karl dug out an old skiing manual that briefly discussed the turn called the telemark.

Roy, Hinderman, Conat, Eisinger and their friend Don Montgomery spent a winter messing around with the turn but they didn't figure it out the first few times they tried it. It was Conat they said, who went out one day and came back with a "revelation" that wasn't explained in the book. Bob had discovered spreading his feet a little further apart, letting the tip of the rear ski contact the inside of the boot on the front ski in order for the tip of the rear ski to be guided by the front boot and ski.

The dance-like, graceful telemark turn was reborn in the hills above Whitefish.

Availability of equipment was extremely limited. Hinderman said they started with "regular old touring boots and wooden skies." He said they fell a lot but not when they were "doing it right." They found the equipment and technique offered a great way to ski the steep and deep in the back-country.

Eisinger said a bunch of the guys traveled south to Grand Targhee and Jackson Hole skiing most of the resorts along the way. He said they didn't find anybody else "turning on pins anywhere" and that no matter where they went, people told them they "were crazy."

Skiers from both alpine and cross-country persuasions started playing with the telemark and as demand for telemarking gear amplified, manufacturers responded. Fabiano began importing a stiff soled leather boot from Italy and Madsus came out with their Berkebeiner, a wooden ski with lignestone edges that, according to Hinderman, was "just beautiful." He said it had a real even flex and skied like a giant slalom ski.

Virtually every major ski equipment manufacturer started providing more technical telemarking equipment. Skis now are single cambered, have scintered bases, cracked edges and have sidecut like downhill equipment. Boots have gotten higher and much

stiffer torsionally, resembling alpine gear more than the floppy shoes these early telemarkers were cranking turns with in 1970.

Today, linked telemark turns can be seen in any area one chooses to ski.

Most of the guys that refueled the telemark in Whitefish still ski. These days, a lot of them wield fat boards more than tele gear. Evans and Persons pound nails together, Eisinger and Montgomery work trains on the highline. Hinderman journeyed to Alaska where he skied extensively, some while mapping the state for the government. Ed Roy moved back east to Vermont and took over an uncle's cabinet shop. He said eastern skiing is "dreadful compared to the Rockies." Bob Conat, the guy who Roy said "was a natural," died in an experimental aircraft accident in Billings, Montana in 1979. He was flying a bi-wing Easy Riser and towing a banner advertising a show for the Mission Mountain Wood Band. He had just turned 30.

Hinderman said he's always felt his friends were the "beginning of the return" of the telemark turn. He said that when he started hearing about people telemarking in other areas, he felt they had been "messing around with it" quite a bit earlier.

He added, however, that an occasional student in his Nordic class would mention an odd and beautifully executed turn seen performed by an old guy saying he learned it in the war. Roy had seen the turn performed so it was not fully obscure. Without question however, these powder hound pinheads from Whitefish unraveled a mystery. They figured out a technique that had been lost for a long time and re-introduced skiing's original telemark turn to Montana and possibly, to America.