

It's high tech. . . .



... for a smooth downhill

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HAVEN'T SKIED SINCE COLLEGE? Come to think of it haven't done much since college but work.

Sound familiar? Life's far too short to give up something as much fun as skiing. Remember the feeling you got in your stomach when you and your buddies would race to the lodge, holding a tight tuck and letting the skis run as fast as they possibly could. Or the long, long arcing turn you made . . . the one that never seemed to end.

Then after the day had ended, you'd sit and laugh, swapping stories with a group. Remember?

Here's some tips that you'll find helpful, if you plan on getting into, back into, or just staying in touch with downhill skiing.

THE SKI BOOTS:

By far, without a doubt, the most important ski-oriented purchase you make is the boots. Period.

Look at it this way. As long as the skis are the right length, you can get by. The new bindings you purchased, as long as they're set and installed properly by a certified technician, have already met strict design standards and release more properly than your 10-year-old bind-ings.

Polcs? Pick a color.

Your boots have to do three seemingly simple things in order to ensure your happiness. First, they have to be comfortable enough to wear for six-eight hours a day. Second, they have to keep you warm. And third, they have to perform up to your skiing ability.

As simple as these three things sound, they can be very tough to attain. Cut yourself short on any one of these three things, especially fit and warmth, and you can easily ruin a \$1,000 ski vacation.

So what do you look for and what question do you ask when buying a new pair of boots?

(1) Make sure the shop has the knowledge and tools available on-site to customize the boot to your foot. With a little bit of extra foam, a hand grinder and squirt of glue, a professional ski boot fitter can work miracles around your feet.

(2) The shop should also be equipped to make custom insoles, or footbeds, for your boots. This after-market feature, while increasing the performance characteristics of the boot, can really be the exclamation point on fit and comfort.

(3) Take your time! Just don't throw on a pair of boots and say "Cool, I'll take 'em." Put two different brands on your feet, say a Nordica and a Salomon, and walk around the store for 10 minutes or so. Definitely move around. Not a lot of people ski in the seated position anymore.

(4) Make sure the shop has a lot of different models and brands to choose from. Pick an arbitrary figure on how much you want to spend and try on boots at, above and below that figure. The higher the cost, usually, the more comfort and features you get.

(5) If you don't already have them, purchase a nice pair of ski socks to use when trying on boots.

(6) Finally, buy the boot that fits the best. If it's the most expensive one, fine . . . save money on the skis. Also keep custom footbeds in mind. They run around \$50 with the purchase of boots.

According to Bob Thomas, manager of Birmingham's Don Thomas Sports, Nordica's Synch boot "offers the ease of a rear entry boot with the support and performance characteristics of a front entry boot." The combination of the only two boot styles has come to be known as mid-entry boots.

Programmable boots, like the Salomon 83 and 93 series, are pretty neat looking as well as functional. One buckle gets you in, several adjustments fit you up, and one buckle gets you out. Then when you put the boot back

on, the "memo" returns to all the custom fit features to where you had the set before.

THE SKIS AND BINDINGS:

Although the ski may be the most expensive piece of equipment you purchase, they should also be the easiest to pick out.

If you're getting back into new skis after a five-10-year layoff, steer clear of the two extremes in skis — entry level and racing. Entry level skis will be too sluggish and won't perform up to your ability once you get your ski legs back. Racing skis, while they may look cool, are too stiff and will make it tough to progress back into the sport.

This leaves us with the largest classification of skis . . . the performance class. These skis are similar in shape to a racing ski, yet are softer and much easier to turn.

A couple of the more popular ones, which you can consider as "can't miss" skis, have been with their company's for some time now, and have remained relatively unchanged.

The K2 5500 and the Rossignol are probably the safest skis to buy in that they will perform as well for the athletic intermediate skier as they will for the expert class skier. So if you're getting back into the sport as an intermediate skier, you need to buy only one ski over the next five to seven years and not have to worry about progressing out of it.

Since ski core design is pretty much either one of two things, wood or foam (with a dash of Kevlar, a bit of ceramic here and a graphite rod there), most companies have now incorporated a ski into their line that people can touch and feel to actually see the difference.

They're called cap skis. Instead of laminating a bunch of different materials together, the one-piece top is becoming a very popular way to construct skis.

"The cap pressurizes the edge of the ski quicker," said Thomas. "Energy transfer can be lost when you put a number of materials together."

Dan Reck, manager of the Bloomfield Hills Bavarian Village Ski Store, agrees.

"Cap skis seem to initiate a turn easier and take less energy to turn," he said. "That means more energy for a whole day's skiing."

THE BINDERS:

Chances are, the brand of the binding you first owned is the brand you will again purchase the next time you buy bindings. Brand name loyalty in the ski industry is at its highest with bindings.

The most critical link between having some exciting fun and potential knee-wrenching disaster, the binding must be purchased now or, in the case of used bindings (which isn't a great idea) should at least be function tested by a shop that specializes in skiing. This is not something you want some minimum wage kid messing around with.

Think of it as insurance for assurance of reliability.

Trying not to get too technical, the latest innovation in binding technology comes with an item tested with success on the World Cup skiing circuit. Known as a DerbyFlex, the binding is actually raised higher up on the ski between which the DerbyFlex is mounted, giving the skier more leverage on the ski. It heightens the turn response and dampens the vibration.

Salomon is one of the first companies to incorporate this feature into bindings available to the general public. Called the Driver, the built-in feature is available in their top-of-the-line bindings.

Once you're ready for the slopes, there's the hotline. Don Thomas has a ski hotline — 626-2626 — that offer up-to-date reports on what's happening with ski conditions and events in southeastern Michigan as well as up north and out west.



photos by ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

At the Detroit Ski Show, Mary Beth Nicoll (top photo, right) modeled some of Salomon's ski equipment including its programmable boots that remember your fit, while Tom Adams (bottom photo) marketed Nordica's products including its Synch mid-entry boot. For Lisa Trautman (top photo, left), the emphasis was on bindings and the latest development, DerbyFlex.

