

Snowboarder finds bigger challenge out west

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It's often said things look better on paper — think it through logically and it will make for an easier transition.

Not true for snowboarding. You tightly strap both feet to a waxed (for optimal speed) fiberglass board.

While attached to this device you speed down a snow-covered mountain looking for jumps so you can attempt difficult combinations of flips and spins, all in sub-zero temperatures.

OK, so it doesn't look so good on paper. But it sure is a thrill. Getting the hang of it is exceedingly difficult. The day after my first attempt at the sport doesn't rate with my fondest memories.

But a few years later, I can't get enough of snowboarding. In our area we have a lot of choices on where to snowboard: Alpine Valley, Mount Brighton, Mount Holly and Boyne Highlands.

For the last few years I navigated those hills, all the while yearning for a more difficult challenge. A few weeks ago, I found it.

On a recent trip to visit with my close friends, Kelly and Jacki Skinner, who live in Colorado Springs, I took my board with plans to do some snowboarding. This excited me since chances to ski out west aren't common.

But what I encountered was like nothing I had ever seen before, or remotely experienced. Knowing only the hills of Michigan (which might top a few thousand feet), what Colorado offered was astonishing.

After spending some time in the Springs, Kelly, his brother Kurt, Tyler Mance and I made the hour drive to the base of Breckenridge.

We arrived at dark, so all I could make out initially was a looming, dark black shadow that extended up further than I could see.

The town — that was something else. Breckenridge was alive with shops, chalets, equipment vendors, everything you think of when you think of a ski town. People wandered about bundled in thick winter coats, some still wearing their boots from a long day of navigating tough terrain.

The night was spent in front of a fire talking about what lay ahead the next day. Tyler, a student at Central Michigan, and I were the most excited. We were accustomed to Michigan skiing. This Colorado experience seemed to us like a chance to conquer the world.

As we turned in for the night, I took one more peek out the window at that looming, dark shadow. I was filled with anticipation.

Morning came quickly. The chair lifts of Breckenridge opened at 8:30 a.m., so a quick bowl of cereal sufficed as breakfast. The process of putting all the gear on, with multiple layers of clothing, seemed to take forever.

The short drive from the condo to the mountain was a visual spectacle like no other, with trees as far as you could see and a mountain range that went on forever.

I hurriedly exited the car and just gaped at the mountain,

14,000 feet high, the peaks engulfed within thick cumulus clouds. All I could do was stare.

Until we got to the lifts, the next few minutes were a blur. I hardly remember purchasing a ticket or walking to the mountain's base, but the initial chairlift to the top remains, and will always remain, vivid.

A cold wind blew through my body, though it did not stop me from shedding my gloves and snapping some photos as we ascended to what would turn out to be the time of my life. I fumbled quickly to put my camera away and hustled to pull my gloves on as the end of the lift approached.

My heart raced. I shuffled off the lift and settled at the edge of the hill, the point of no return and your last chance to avoid the uncontrollable tug of gravity.

Kelly, Ty and Kurt, who were skiing, pulled up along side as I strapped my foot into my snowboard.

"Ready Gias?" asked Kelly.

And then he was off, swooshing down the hill. After one more deep breath I followed.

In the first run I just got the hang of navigating the 20-25 inches of fresh powder, while trying to keep an eye on Kelly's red jacket so I wouldn't get lost.

I made it down safely, and I was proud of myself for that, but I was exhausted. This was nothing like Michigan skiing. I told the rest of the group that it was great, but tough.

"Tough?" said Kurt, an expert skier. "That was only the intermediate hill. I'll take you to tough."

And off we went. I slowly progressed during the day to what now is the pinnacle moment of my snowboarding life.

Before breaking for lunch, the rest of the group agreed that I

was ready for Chair Six, which would lead to Peak Eight. The 15-minute chair ride emptied into the Horseshoe Bowl, a 12,141-foot double-black diamond run with lots of powder — and not a lot of oxygen.

I was winded.

After a deep breath and a quick prayer I shoved off. I made it, but the near vertical drop was the biggest rush of my life.

After a lunch break, it was back for Round Two. A light snow had begun to fall, which served to enhance the experiences of the day.

Never in our eight hours on the mountain did we snowboard/ski the same run. There was always a different avenue to explore.

The snow accumulated quickly and as it got heavier, there were countless times I became stuck in powder drifts that came up to hips.

As the sun began to set, it was time for us to exit. One last run, slower than the rest for me. I was trying desperately to not let it end, to take my time and just enjoy snowboarding in Colorado.

After one more look at the mountain, I plopped into the car, and by the time we buckled out, I was out. Fatigue had finally caught up to me; the adrenalin in the tank had expired.

Michigan skiers/snowboarders don't get the opportunity to experience something like Breckenridge very often. It's a memory I plan to recapture every year.

As my trip came to an end, leaving Colorado was terribly difficult. One thing is certain: Next year can't come fast enough.

Canton resident Nick Gismondi is a free-lance writer and a first-year student at Eastern Michigan University.



Snowboarders: Canton resident Nick Gismondi (above) participates in the winter sporting event at Breckenridge, Colo. In the photograph at left are snowboarders (left to right) Kurt Skinner, Gismondi, Kelly Skinner and Tyler Mance.

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