

Mogul Mania

At a radical ski school in Aspen, a former Apple exec trains corporate types for the toughest slopes.

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Sometimes a sport is transformed by a revolution in equipment design. It happened in tennis with oversize rackets, and in golf with titanium drivers. Over the past decade, it's also occurred in alpine skiing, with the advent of shaped, or side-cut, skis, which have an hourglass shape that makes turning much easier.

Skis used to be straight and long. In their typical macho fashion, ski bums would joke over who could control the longest pair. But such locker-room humor diminished with the arrival of shaped skis, because they were much shorter than their predecessors. If you skied 195-centimeter skis 10 years ago, chances are you're on 170's today.

Now, there's a ski instructor in Aspen, Joe Nevin, a former CIO at Apple Computer who took early retirement, preaching that everyone should ditch their 170's and train on a pair of ski boards as a way to tackle the hardest slopes. At just 98 centimeters, ski boards look uncomfortably short and stubby; veteran skiers feel ridiculous when they step into a pair for the first time. But, radical as it sounds, Nevin's gospel is catching on, including with CEOs.

Through his ski school, called Bumps for Boomers, Nevin has won over skiers such as Jeff Adler, president and co-CEO of Starwood Vacation Ownership, the parent company of the Sheraton and Westin vacation interval ownership companies. Adler is typical of the corporate chiefs who vacation or live part-time in Aspen. "I could always get down the bumps," he says, "but I never went looking for them." With ski boards, he says, Adler saw a chance to ski mogul runs under control.

"I'd been skiing 15 years or so, and Joe's program was exactly what I was trying to do," says Adler, 51. "I went out on the worst day with Joe. It was snowing hard, there was lots of powder, and we spent all day on black bump runs. But it gave me the confidence to do it as well as the technique."

An avid skier myself, I ventured to Aspen and enrolled in Nevin's school last winter to see what all the fuss was about. When I clicked into a pair of ski boards that first morning, it looked like I had sprouted clown feet. Nevin watched me with a look of bemusement, an expression he's no doubt used a hundred times by now since opening his ski school in December 2003.

He promised that by mid-afternoon, after a few hours on the snow with him, I'd be using these baby skis to take on the most fearsome mogul runs I'd ever faced. "And you'll be comfortable and in control," said Nevin, 58, a nonstop talker. "My goal is to transform terminally intermediate-level, groomed-run, baby-boomer skiers like you into confident mogul and powder skiers in a matter of hours."

As promises go, it sounded more than a little grandiose. Why on earth would I put on ski boards and head out onto bumps and moguls, the most difficult area of any mountain? Nevin, of course, had an answer to that. "Eighty percent of skiers only ski on 20 percent of a mountain";the

part that is groomed," he said. "I'm trying to give you the confidence and skills so that you become part of the 20 percent of skiers who ski on that uncrowded 80 percent of the hill." It was simple math, and I couldn't argue with it. Every mountain I have ever skied roughly matches those numbers. The groomed runs can be jammed with skiers, while a few feet away mogul runs with vastly more space and challenge lie empty because they're more difficult to ski, or at least are perceived that way.

Nevin came to the part about the short skis. "The people I'm preaching to tend to avoid moguls and powder because they struggle on ungroomed terrain," he said. "The reason we use ski boards is that they're slower on the bumps and permit control. A traditional-length ski spends roughly three times more time in the fall line than a ski board. You speed up, you get anxious and your form falls apart."

And the "boomers" part of Bumps for Boomers? "It's an untapped market as far as skiers are concerned," he says, adding that people in their 40's, 50's and 60's are contending with slowing reflexes, declining strength and potentially aching knees. In the world of skiing, where the talk is typically of youth, speed and daring (with liberal use of the term "dude"), getting middle-aged people comfortable in rough terrain is nothing short of revolutionary.

Bumps for Boomers is clearly appealing to CEOs who spend part of every winter on skis in Aspen, people like John Beinecke, a director of Antaeus Enterprises, a private investment company in New York. "Nevin's whole concept is easy to understand, and that's always critical," says Beinecke, who took the course last winter. "It taught me how to approach moguls in a more precise and correct fashion. I'm less intimidated and I was much more comfortable when I moved back to larger skis."

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~Precision Drift'

When Nevin and I took the gondola up Aspen Mountain, we looked down on mogul runs that were predictably empty. He talked theory for the duration of the ride, but when we unloaded, we clicked into ski boards and were on the slopes immediately. I tried to get a sense of balance on the uncomfortably short skis, moving slowly on a gentle slope. "This is where you need to find your stance," he said. "You can't lean too far back on ski boards, because you'll fall down. They give you instant feedback"€!quot;music to a CEO's ears.

We skied a couple of gentle runs and then began to practice what Nevin calls a "precision drift." You "un-weight" your skis by keeping your weight evenly distributed on both feet. Then you go with the flow of gravity, drifting down to a designated spot where you want to initiate your next turn. It was this technique that would take us from routine, groomed slopes to double-black diamonds within hours. In the middle of a sentence, Nevin took a right turn. I followed and suddenly we were starting down Midnight, an intermediate bump run.

The Bumps for Boomers program builds confidence rapidly. I didn't have time to reflect on my achievements; Nevin was too busy keeping me moving. All the while, he encouraged me with the intensity of a college coach: "Make a slow-motion turn on the top of the bump now! Then drift or slide down the backside to the top of the next bump!"

I was getting the idea, in my head at least. My legs seemed to miss every other beat. But I was beginning to feel better speed control as I made painstaking rounded turns. We stopped for lunch, a blur of more theory and hastily downed chili. Then we moved onto the Face of Bell, an expert bump run, where I had taken some spectacular tumbles over the years. But now I was feeling the rhythm that had always eluded me.

Naturally, that's when Nevin insisted we up the ante and head down Shoulder of Bell. This double-black bump run through well-spaced trees is one of the gnarliest, most challenging runs on the entire mountain. Imagine Volkswagen Beetle-sized moguls, at an angle so steep that you feel like you could pitch head over heels. But from mogul to mogul, I found myself floating as if I were skiing in slow motion. I wasn't going to win any race.

But I was pretty balanced and I felt like I was learning to dance down the mountain with real control. I was also having fun, major fun. It was nearly 4 o'clock by the time we descended to Spar Gulch to head down. "Look up," Nevin said, leaning on a pole and grinning at the wall of moguls above us. "We've been out for six hours and you did that."

I had indeed. Without breaking a sweat. And on skis that would be the laughing stock of any locker room. If only adapting to such radical change were this easy in the business world.

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