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SKI REPORT

Smoothing Bumps for Boomers



Michael Brands for The New York Times
MOGULS GURU Joe Nevin with middle-age students on a lift in Aspen.

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IT was at the top of a trail called Hanging Tree that the fear set in. And at the crest of a steep, mogul-filled and tree-strewn trail, it's all about the fear, isn't it? This was near the top of [Aspen](#) Mountain last winter, and at moments like these — surveying a no-nonsense double-black-diamond run — the mind will race.

Here was my central thought: Who names a trail Hanging Tree? O.K., so that noose playfully dangling from a tree near the trail entrance might be a tip-off, but what exactly are they trying to tell me here?

For a large sector of the [skiing](#) public, the message is clear: Go away, you don't belong.

And people listen. It's not about one Aspen trail, it's about a disquieting reality at any major ski resort — 80 percent of the skiers use only 20 percent of the mountain. The blue-square groomers are packed, while the mogul and tree runs are empty. There are a few reasons for this, including the advent of terrain parks and halfpipes that have lured away a lot of young talent.

But there is a bigger factor. The baby boom generation, which created the American ski craze of the 1960s and '70s, has grown averse to risk. Resorts ought to rename every intermediate cruising trail in the country the 401(k). Because the more you have invested in a retirement account, the more likely that's the trail you'll be on.

Joe Nevin, a 61-year-old Aspen ski instructor, knows the story. He's heard it over and over on Aspen's lifts, talking with middle-age skiers.

"It's kind of the forgotten society of skiing," he said. "They look in the ski magazines, and the stories and pictures are about cliff jumping. They don't want to fly in the air. They don't want to end up in physical therapy. And if they see somebody in the moguls, it's always some 20-year-old banging through the course with his knees in his face. They know that's not for them, either.

"So they stay where they think they belong. People told me they would love to get off the groomers, but there's a

fear factor.”

There’s that word again. Baby boomers nationwide have bought snow-country second homes and want to be able to continue to ski on the tougher parts of the mountain with their children, or grandchildren. But for many, fear is keeping them away.

Five years ago, Mr. Nevin decided to do something with all the information he had acquired during those chair-lift rides. He devised a pioneering instruction program aimed at those born between 1946 and 1964 called Bumps for Boomers. In three days of lessons, Mr. Nevin erases the fear and, without demanding young, quick reflexes or extraordinary agility, teaches his students to confidently ski black-diamond, even double-black-diamond, mogul runs.

And it works. Mr. Nevin’s program, which costs \$840 for a three-day session, has turned hundreds of former boomer-groomers into mogul and glade skiers. It is now one of the most popular specialized instruction programs offered by the Aspen Skiing Company, with students flying in from around the country weekly from the middle of December through March. Reservations are required (970-989-2529; www.bumpsforboomers.com).

“It’s not a gimmick,” said Rose Ries, a 51-year-old psychiatrist from [Philadelphia](#) who has taken the Bumps for Boomers course. “I was the classic devoted skier who, nonetheless, had no chance in the moguls. Now, tree and mogul runs are the only place I go. I don’t even bother with groomers.”

Mr. Nevin’s program is one of several sprouting around the nation, like Mermer Blakeslee’s Power Learn programs at Windham Mountain in New York (www.windhammountain.com) and the Prime Time classes at Breckenridge in [Colorado](#) (www.breckenridge.snow.com), which is aimed at those 50 and older. At nearby [Vail](#) Mountain (www.vail.snow.com), there are masters camps geared to adults. The programs are finding a following because they offer hope to a vast generation searching for something to rejuvenate their skiing.

“There are a million kids’ instruction programs, but they’re not the only people we should be helping get better,” said Mr. Nevin, a former Silicon Valley executive and longtime weekend ski instructor who settled in Aspen several years ago.

THE key to Mr. Nevin’s moguls program is defying the basics of all modern ski techniques.



Michael Brands for The New York Times

NEW TRICKS Alan Bush watches his student Pete Louras, 57, at Aspen. New techniques are helping older skiers tackle harder runs.

“The problem is that everyone has been told that carving is the ultimate goal,” Mr. Nevin said, referring to the act of turning a ski on its edge and letting the shape and flexibility of the ski carve an arc in the snow. “It’s great for groomed runs, but carving is the absolute wrong technique as soon as you get into moguls. Carving produces speed, which produces anxiety, which leads to bad form, especially bad balance.”

And you know another term for bad balance? Falling down. To get skiers to focus on their feet and their balance, Mr. Nevin replaces new students’ skis during the first two days with ski boards, mini-skis about three feet long. Mr. Nevin then tells his students not to carve in the moguls but instead to slide, drift, even skid — the heresy! — from spot to spot.

Students are taught not to turn in the troughs between moguls as many expert skiers do, but on the soft, snowy tops of moguls. He teaches them to rely on the flat part of the ski to slow down, check speed and stay balanced.

“It’s perfectly O.K. to drift sideways down the hill because people will feel the improved control they have on a flat ski,” Mr. Nevin said. “Unlike most mogul skiing technique, this is also not hard on your knees. And it doesn’t take the kind of quick reflexes you see when people are quickly charging through the bumps. It’s the opposite of that.”

With this approach, skiing in bumpy terrain no longer becomes a struggle of big muscle movements — over-rotated shoulders, aggressive knee flex and a jarring descent — but a finesse thing executed with subtle pressuring in the feet and ankles.

Not that Mr. Nevin preaches such skills. His system is the “Seinfeld” of ski instruction: “Seinfeld” was the TV show about nothing, and Mr. Nevin is constantly telling his students, “Do nothing.”

“When people get to the top of a mogul, I tell them to do nothing because they will relax and make a calm, unhurried turn at about 70 percent of their normal effort,” Mr. Nevin said. “To them, since they are usually tense and trying too hard, it feels like they’re doing nothing. It’s an understated thing, but important.”

You could say the same about Mr. Nevin's program. Its simplicity is its sophistication.

Perhaps to prove that his techniques are suitable for any age, Mr. Nevin only employs middle-age coaches, who work in groups no larger than four. The connection is obvious. The program also attracts a lot of couples.

"Typically, the husband calls, and after a lot hemming and hawing, says, 'I'm an expert skier but my wife isn't, so can we take the program together?'" Mr. Nevin said with a snicker. "I tell him not to worry. And heading into the third day here, it's not unusual for the wife to be doing better than the husband.

"Women will more readily change and go with the flow. It's harder for the men to give up control. The fact is, sometimes you're more in control if you don't try to stay in control.

"But the men get it eventually."

Harvey Federman, 71, enrolled in Bumps for Boomers with his 59-year-old wife, Carol.

"We both got better, and it's going to extend how long we can keep skiing," said Mr. Federman, who lives near [Boston](#). "I have so many friends who have just given up skiing because they're afraid to get hurt. We are more brittle and the trees are intimidating, but you can learn to slow down. You ski better, and it's fun, too."

Mr. Federman said he was recently skiing with his 46-year-old son when they came upon a massive mogul field.

"My son is a great skier, and he blazed down the trail, but after about 20 turns he had to stop," Mr. Federman said. "Using the technique Joe Nevin taught me, I just kept making my controlled turns and I went right past him until I stopped at the bottom.

"My son just looked at me and said, 'Wow.'"

WHICH brings me back to the top of Hanging Tree. Before taking Mr. Nevin's program, I skied moguls, but certainly without the precision of my youth. Every recent season, especially after knee surgery a few years back, I looked forward to gigantic, bumpy fields a little less.

But three days with Mr. Nevin left me staring down Hanging Tree, which links to other even steeper runs through the trees. During moments like these, you do wonder what you've gotten yourself into.

Still, I knew what to do. I stared at a soft, comfortable spot to turn, drifted to it — did nothing, as I had been taught — and with a little pivot, I was off to the next relaxed turn. It was the start of a carefree, unforced dance through the moguls and trees.

At the bottom, my surgically repaired knee was fine. I had left any fear at the top of the trail, which now seemed a long way back as I glanced up over my shoulder. If I had an injury, it was chapped lips from grinning so much.

Hanging Tree?

I had a new central thought: Hey, don't they have any hard trails on this mountain?

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