



THE SKI REPORT; A New Way for the Over-50 Crowd to Keep Its Edge

By BILL PENNINGTON JAN. 15, 2004

Joe Nevin, a former Silicon Valley executive turned Aspen, Colo., ski instructor, has a question: did you ever notice that 80 percent of skiers ski only 20 percent of the mountain?

That 20 percent is the groomed, intermediate and relatively safe part of the trail system. It is where most weekend skiers, especially those with older knees and important Monday morning appointments they cannot miss after an unintended back flip in the moguls, tend to congregate.

The over-50 crowd has become the forgotten society of skiing. It helped create the American ski boom of the 1970's, but so much in the ski world is now focused on heading for the backcountry or executing a back-scratcher aerial in a mogul field. These skiers are left to traverse the groomed 20 percent of the trails.

But Nevin, age 57, has another question: who says you can't teach an old dog a new trick?

Nevin has devised a novel instruction program for the Aspen Skiing Company called Bumps for Boomers. Its slogan: learn to enjoy skiing the whole mountain. After all, you paid for it.

In one day, Nevin said, his techniques can teach the average skier born between 1946 and 1964 to be comfortable, confident and content in black-diamond mogul trails or off-piste powder. "Most end up spending all of the next day on that part of the mountain," Nevin said.

Like many good ski-industry ideas, Nevin's program had its genesis in conversations on the lift. A longtime weekend ski instructor now retired and settled in Aspen, Nevin kept hearing the same story from skiers in their 50's.

"They said their reflexes were slowing down, they didn't want to get hurt, so they stuck to the same groomed runs," Nevin said. "The real problem was anxiety. Moguls or powder put them out of their comfort zone."

The fact is, when you've been skiing for a few decades, who looks forward to falling down five times in a 100-yard stretch of bumps? It's funny when you're 20 years old and entertaining your friends with highlight-reel crashes where one pole ends up bent and your goggles have catapulted into the woods. Over time, there seems to be a correlation between how much you have contributed to a 401(k) and how little you find that scene amusing anymore.

"The real problem is that the ski industry has been on a push to promote carving as everybody's ultimate goal," 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.

This is the perfect technique on groomed runs, a pleasure of efficiency.

"But if you're going off the groomed runs, carving is the absolute wrong technique for most people," Nevin said. "Carving produces speed, which produces anxiety, which produces bad form."

Nevin's approach is to slow everything down by focusing on the flat part of the ski, not the carving edge. Using ski boards, which are 90-centimeter miniskis, he teaches his students that making turns with a flatter ski promotes balance, and most critically, speed control.

Nevin also advocates using what he calls a precision or intentional drift, using nothing more than the force of gravity to go from turn to turn. At times, he tutors his students to start a turn and his next exhorted instruction is to "do nothing."

"It is perfectly O.K. to slide sideways, and when people kinetically feel the improved control on a flat ski, the light bulb goes off," Nevin said.

Nevin is not the only instructor ever to preach mogul-skiing techniques centered on the moment when people lose that sense of pace and equilibrium. But he has skillfully focused on an audience desperate for this kind of skiing sermon.

"Someone will turn 50 every seven seconds between now and 2014," Nevin said. "Why should the ski industry be trying to attract only younger skiers? What about keeping all the 50-year-olds we've already got?"

"We have kids' instruction programs, but we have no senior instruction programs. From 18 to 80, for the most part, it's one size fits all."

Rich Burkley, managing director of Aspen ski schools, has been convinced. He says Bumps for Boomers, one of several pioneering instruction programs at Aspen, has had steady bookings all season.

"Joe has hit on our biggest demographic, but it works because the guy teaching it is in the demographic," Burkley said. "He lives it."

Bumps for Boomers (970) 989-2529 offers a two-day clinic for two to four people for \$649 a person and a six-hour private lesson for \$539.

"Boomers will live longer and they should ski longer," Nevin said. "It's so much fun. We're just spreading the fun over the whole mountain."

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