

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Aspen program aims to keep over-50s
skiing for life

BY LOUISE HUDSON, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD



The class snakes down the blue bumps - Bob Mattice (front), followed by Simon Hudson, Dennis Levine and last Art Reiss . Louise Hudson, Freelance) (For Travel section story by Louise Hudson) **Photograph by:** Louise Hudson, for the Calgary Herald

With its reputation as the chicest ski resort in the United States, no one could blame me for getting angst-ridden about packing before going to Aspen this year.

Having been forewarned that The Little Nell was the watering hole for the fur coat brigade, I debated throwing in a fuzzy number of my own from the '80s, when pelts weren't political. But I resisted, packing instead my usual

mix of colourful tops, black pants and sensible boots. After all, who did I want to be - a poseur or a skier?

The answer was simple, since I was booked into Bumps for Boomers, a unique course using short skis. It is the brainchild of former Apple executive Joe Nevin, who is re-energizing oldies like me about ungroomed skiing. The National Ski Areas Association has predicted a 2.5 per cent decline in ski hill visits every season up to 2021, due to boomers dropping out. Nevin's intention is to buck this trend.

As soon as I saw the informative B4B website, that age-old aphorism about not being able to teach old dogs new tricks came to mind. Some 37 years of muscle memory seemed a huge hurdle to overcome at age 50. But Nevin's claim to understand the needs of the boomer skier was compelling and I decided to investigate his pledge to "Ski for Life."

The four-day clinic started on 98-centimetre short boards made by Line. Unaccustomed to such a small platform, I had to drop my usual barriers to learning, opening my mind to every tip on the first wintry whiteout day. As forewarned, I was reduced to a novice, my boards vibrating horribly as I strove to gain the subtle centre of balance. First descent was torture on my ankles but, miraculously, by the second run, brain and body re-established stability.

After a brief skills assessment, I was teamed with my husband, Simon, and three Americans - Dennis Levine, 62, his wife, Elke, 52, from Utah and their Californian ski buddy, Art Reiss, 62, in Aspen so that they could do the clinic together and all progress apace.

Everyone was a boomer, including instructor Bob Mattice, whose 58th birthday we celebrated during the course.

"You can't take a 30-year-old instructor and expect them to know what it's like to be 50, 60, 70 or even 80," said Nevin. "One of our skiers is in his 80s, he's come back three years running with B4B and I told him if he comes when he's 85, he'll get it for free."

By the first lunch, I was branching out from the groomers, even launching into patches of piste-side powder out of curiosity. With my skiing techniques deconstructed, I had to put all my trust in Mattice. "We have a really high success rate and it's actually easier to take a stronger skier further more quickly," he reassured me. I was hanging on his every word, focusing fully on which body part went where and when. This concentration paid off because I felt leaps in improvement as we started hitting bumpier terrain. The philosophy behind the short skis is that they are a "truth serum," revealing every microscopic error. Their small sweet spot precludes old habits and compels perfect technique - or you cartwheel.

Second-day confidence was reflected by the clear sunny weather, rewarding us with expansive panoramas of Aspen's acreage. After first-day difficulties, I felt unfamiliar muscles speaking up but, having read twice through my homework (seven pages of tips and diagrams), I felt ready to conquer the short boards. By day's end, I didn't want to give them up and seriously doubted my ability on regular skis.

The essence of what I learned could have been taught on longer skis. But using the short boards made me feel it much more and adopt it quicker.

I have had many lessons over the years, but the four-day format, starting on boards and then progressing to 142-cm skis for the last two days, really made the message sink in. My mantra became "tall, tip and turn" as I swirled down the bumps on flat skis. Mattice encouraged us all to ski

sedately with no drastic movements.

By Day 4, I was able to glide gracefully into each bumps field, on the leisurely lookout for my first target: the snowy summit of a mogul. I would then turn with almost zero momentum by pole-planting way down the hill in front of me, with my upper body swivelled downslope and my hips in line with my perpendicular feet, merely tipping my skis into the fall-line by effortlessly extending my uphill leg. I could then complete a small-radius turn on flat skis (rather than my usual high-edge angle), at the same time actively eyeing up my next bump. In between turns, I would slide on as flat skis as possible across the trough until I felt totally balanced for my next slow, gravity-harnessing turn. No more bunny jokes and no more breathless, thigh-throbbing, high-speed, back-seat bumping.

One of the best things I learned to counteract double-diamond despair was Nevin's "green, blue, black line" strategy. With maps and on-hill demos, he and Mattice showed that turbulent trough skiing is the black line; skiing the sides of moguls is the blue line; and mogul summit skiing is the green line. By dialing up this topographical tactic, I could now reinvent even the steepest double D as a green or a blue run just by a change in perception. "You can be the CEO of your own skiing," Nevin said.

Mattice's teaching method juxtaposed levity with intense seriousness, instruction with action, and comradeship with authority. Having gained our trust, he coaxed us into daring double diamonds on both the wobbly short boards and then longer skis. "We mix up the levels of difficulty so that after you've got down the more difficult runs, you really notice your improvement when we go back to blues."

Mattice, who also works for the Aspen/Snowmass Ski and Snowboard School, joins B4B whenever Nevin needs extra instructors. "The program

has been snowballing over the last eight years," Nevin said. The former Apple exec used his computer background to build an impressive 300-page website for B4B. "I believe in giving out information, so you can go to my website and read about all my techniques, fitness instruction, demographics, weekly tips all for free."

Apres-ski is as essential in Aspen as a good night's sleep is for skiing, so I had to achieve a fine balance each evening when faced with all the alluring options to deplete my energy levels and empty my wallet. Affordable options do coexist among the Schiaparelli shopping and Il Mulino munching. Aspen's consignment boutiques and locals pubs are top-notch. Even the rarefied restaurants such as Elevation and Zocalito's have cheap bar menus.

Relatively unimpaired by gastronomic guzzling, my epiphany came when we skied the glades. Instead of frantic fumbling and survival skiing, I was able to float gracefully in slow motion among the arbours, playing with the snow rather than attacking it. Everyone in the group showed huge improvements in technique and confidence. Despite being new to bumps, Elke Levine was sailing down double blacks by Day 3. "I want to come back again next year and do another course," she said. Husband Dennis, who's a kids' ski instructor in Utah, was jubilant about his progress: "I wanted to become more of a complete skier - and I have," he said.

I never regretted my fur-free wardrobe choices for Aspen. Although it can be ritzy, I was in the company of dedicated skiers. And I was so engrossed in my ski performance by day that I could have been sitting next to local celebs Catherine Zeta-Jones, Goldie Hawn or Michelle Pfeiffer on the chairlift and not even have noticed them.

Maybe now that we know that Bumps for Boomers works, even high-profile

ski dropouts like Oprah Winfrey might return to the slopes.

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