

SKI THE WHOLE MOUNTAIN >>>>>>>>

This season, leave your corduroy comfort zone behind and explore the mountain the way nature intended it.

By Chris Fellows



Every off-piste descent, like so many great adventure stories, pits a would-be hero against a band of ominous foes. Ungroomed expert terrain can be intimidating, but it's far from unconquerable. Chris Fellows, Director of the North American Ski Training Center in Squaw Valley, Calif., and a PSIA Demonstration Team member shows you how to shift the power struggle in your favor. Using tactics for scouting your best line, technical skills that will move your body and skis efficiently and mental cues to calm your nerves, you'll be set to beat the mountain at its own game.

THE STEEPS >

TACTICAL

A. Steeps equal speed. Speed can be scary. On precipitous slopes, the steep-skiing menace, a.k.a. gravity, takes hold of your skis and threatens to pull you down the hill at terminal velocity. You have two tactical options. The first is simply to resist gravity, using your turn shape and edges to slow yourself down. Your second option is to harness the speed; use it to your advantage on long, unobstructed runs where you need to chew up lots of vertical with as little effort as possible. The timing and tempo of your edge engage/release process are key technical components that will vary depending on which tactical approach you choose. Skiing steeps well requires a combination of turn shapes and sizes to direct your line and control your speed.

B. If you make shorter turns, be prepared for a quick, staccato-like tempo and a z-shaped path. In this sort of turn sequence, you'll skid your skis early in your turn and quickly edge them after you enter the fall line. Then, just as quickly, you'll release them to begin skidding again. Focus on continuous active steer-



ing of both legs under a stable upper body and functional pole planting. Keep in mind that on steeps, pressure can build to one and a half times your body weight. Because you're engaging and releasing your edges abruptly, if you're out of balance when this load hits, your chances of staying upright are slim. Ideal when agility is a must, short turns can be tiring on long runs.

C. Rounder, s-shaped turns let you draw out your edge engagement/release period. They require less last-minute skidding to dump speed, so on longer pitches, these turn sequences are less tiring. But they also keep your skis in the fall line longer, which invites speed. Long turns are great in deep snow, which helps to slow you down, and on wide-open terrain where you have ample time and space to let your skis edge and carve gradually out of the fall line.

MENTAL
Before a steep run, you may feel butterflies in your stomach, but those are actually manifestations of things going on in your head—mainly nervous thoughts. Pre-run rituals help get rid of your jitters before a steep descent. Many pro athletes run through a series of gestures before competition to calm their nerves. Clicking your poles, adjusting your goggles, letting out a big sigh or marching in place will help quiet your mind and put you in the zone.



TECHNICAL

Before you head off trail, perfect your edging movements on less threatening terrain with this drill. Find a slope with a moderate pitch and little traffic. **1.** With your skis perpendicular to the fall line, traverse the slope slowly. **2.** Roll your ankles and knees away from the hill to reduce your edge grip. The more you flatten your skis, the faster you'll drift down the hill. **3.** Roll your



ankles and knees back into the hill to engage your edges and stop drifting. Vary the timing, duration and intensity of your edging movements on a variety of pitches. Progressively reduce the angle of your traverse, so your skis come more parallel to the fall line. **YOUR GOAL** To get consistent sensations that yield reliable results you can trust when you finally tackle the unpredictable steeps.

equipment alert

The right pressure in your car's tires means better handling, better gas economy and less tire wear. The right edge tune on your skis means better holding power, movement efficiency and mental confidence. Try a .75-degree base bevel and a 3-degree side bevel for optimum edge-hold on hard pack.



THE TREES >

TACTICAL

With their enchanting songs and elegant glades of white, snow-covered glades—like sirens—draw you in and quickly lull you into submission. Distracted, you can easily lose your focus and risk getting tangled in their limbs or, worse, crashing into one. Breaking their spell is tricky: The best way is simply to avert your gaze. Focus on the clear

white spaces that create your path, not on the imposing trunks that obstruct it. Don't just rhino your way into the thicket: Scope it out first and make a reasonable game plan. If you can see an exit point, aim for it throughout your run. But be ready to make split-second mental and technical adjustments when needed. Unlike inconsistencies in the snow or hidden obstacles, trees are visible from a distance, so you can map out your entire line with exact

equipment alert

Skiers have had their arms yanked, wrenched and twisted as their poles catch passing tree limbs. Avoid this by removing your pole straps as you enter a forested area. Several pole manufactures have designed detachable pole straps that release when yanked on.

reference points. Keep your speed 60 to 75 percent of your maximum, and use a blend of smearing and carving to adjust your tempo while constantly scouting

and adjusting your line. Initiate each direction change above the tree around which you plan to turn, and keep a healthy distance from its trunk.

MENTAL

Perception is reality. If you perceive yourself on a collision course with a spruce, chances are that's where you'll find yourself. Train your brain to ax negative thoughts. Boost your confidence by onsiting your run, a technique rock climbers, ice climbers and ski racers use to memorize and replay the sequences and intricacies of their route before attacking the course.

TECHNICAL

A. Unlike the blank canvas of a wide-open trail, where your descent is open to improvisation, a cluster of trees is more like a paint-by-numbers, dictating where you can and cannot go. You have to turn on the trees' command, not your own. A good way to train is by partner skiing. Matching your partner's turn will adjust your focus as you begin to cue off his or her turn shape, pace, rhythm and pole use. You'll learn to turn where you must rather than where you'd like. To get comfortable adjusting your line, use drills that train your blending skills—progressively edging and flattening your skis throughout a turn. On a number of different slopes,



practice scoping your line. Pinpoint the tops of your turns, where you'll change from one set of edges to the other. That's where you'll need to redistribute



your weight to either tip your skis on edge to carve or flatten them for a controlled drift.

B, C. When you're confident following closely behind a partner on changing terrain, head for the trees, starting with a widely spaced, short cluster before progressing to tighter glades. In tight situations, an upright stance—with your skis directly under you, not out to the side will give you access to any turn type you desire. Keep your hands ahead of you and your shoulders level, and link consistent pole plants. Think of stacking your nose, knees and toes. If you're not vertically aligned as pressure develops, the ski will run away from you.



CRUD AND VARIABLE SNOW >

TACTICAL

A. Mean spirited and unrelenting, “crud snow” is a broad term that describes countless devious consistencies—harbor chop, mank, slush, mashed potatoes—all apt to trip you, spin you, fake you out, slap you down and rough you up. Snow’s ability to change form in the middle of a run—sometimes several times—is what is most concerning. Just when you think you have it figured out, it throws a change-up. Your best, and maybe your only, defense: The power turn—a medium (15- to 21-meter) radius turn that harnesses momentum and kinetic energy to blast through the ever-changing snow without sacrificing finesse and touch.

B. Timing and duration in crud is like handling a hot potato: By the time you feel its heat, it’s too late to avoid the burn. Treat the buildup of pressure on your skis like the hot potato game—get rid of it before it burns you. Imagine two parallel lines running on either side of the fall line. Your job is to redirect the energy from line to line at the point where pressure build-up is the greatest.

MENTAL

Contemplating an entire run from the outset can be not only intimidating but also mentally exhausting. While you want to be prepared, it’s important not to overload your head with too many thoughts and commands at one time. To



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sustain your mental focus throughout an entire run, pace your brain: Split each descent into three stages. **STAGE 1: FOCUS ON A BALANCED START.** Pack out a platform in the fall line so you can spot your line with-

out moving or sliding forward. Think only about your first two or three turns. Once you've set yourself up for success, push off with confidence and determination. **STAGE 2: FIND YOUR RHYTHM.** Shut out as many

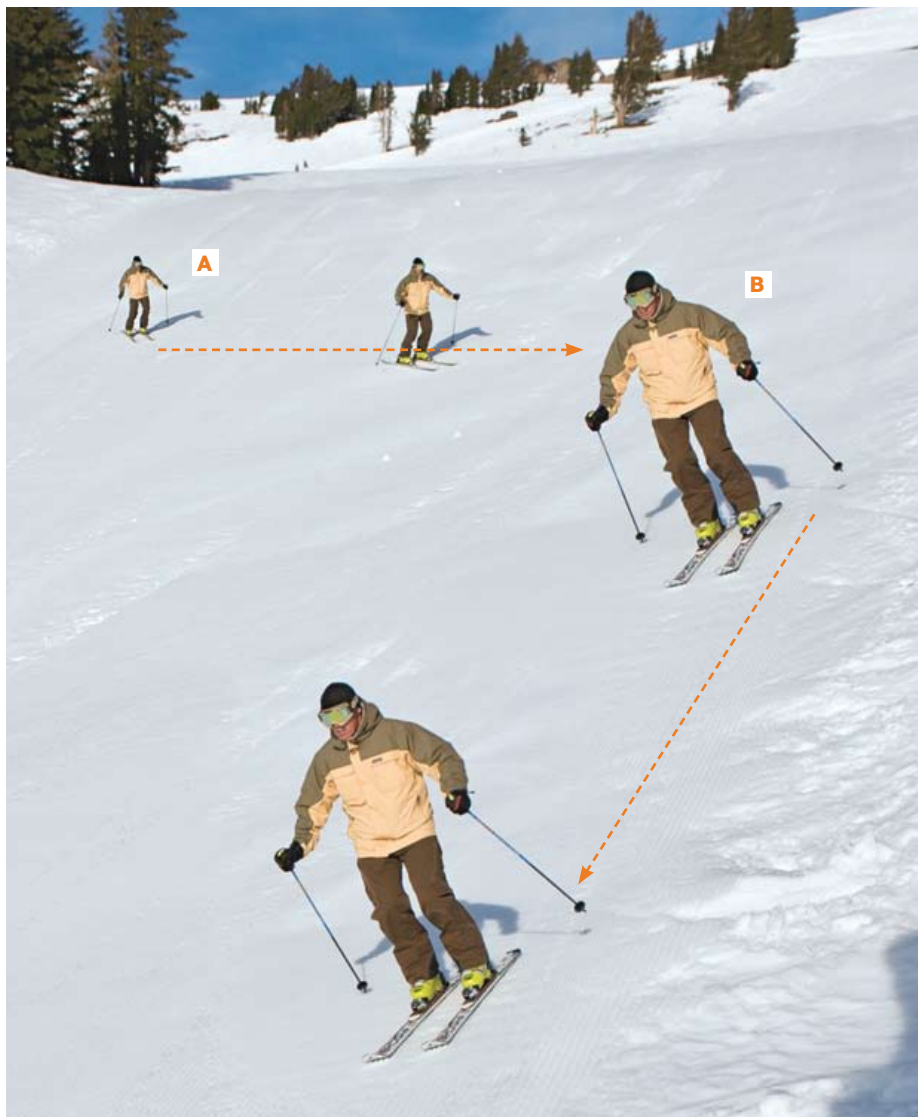
thoughts, sounds and other distractions as you can, and let yourself hear a beat or a song. Get your groove on by maintaining a comfortable rhythm to your turns that you can sustain through the main body of the run.

STAGE 3: FINISH STRONG. When the end of the run comes into your line of sight, visualize an airport runway as you approach the landing zone, pull back on the throttle and bring it in, steady and slow.

TECHNICAL

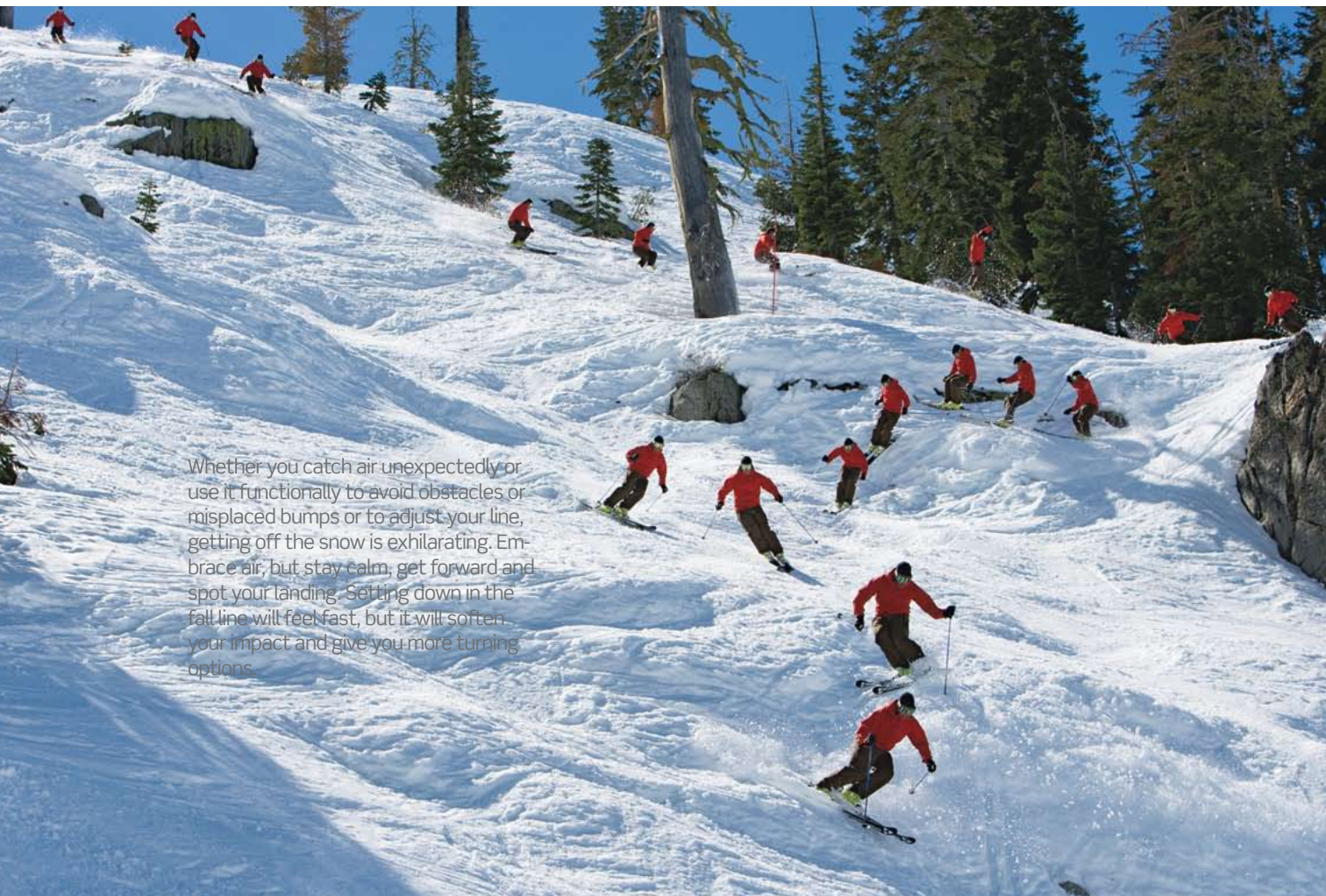
A. During a power turn, your skis will spend more time in the fall line than you might be used to or comfortable with, and your speed will increase. To stay calm in these situations, you need to get comfortable surrendering your edges through the middle of your turn, even as speed continues to build. This period gives you time to bend and direct your skis while maintaining a solid stance that won't get thrown around when you encounter rough snow. Aligning your center of mass over high edges will set your lower body's suspension system in action. Do this early in the turn, so you're ready to suck up any inconsistencies in conditions or terrain.

B. On gentle, non-threatening terrain, practice making box turns, in which you'll draw out the middle of your turn to generate momentum and energy as you let your flat skis ride straight down the fall line for at least 15 feet, or a minimum of three ski lengths. Be patient, and resist the urge to scrub speed. This gives you plenty of time to bend and redirect your skis. Begin by making sharp lines, in the shape of a box, then progressively round the corners off until your turns are continuous and round.



equipment alert

Hydrocarbon waxes come in three temperature variations: cold, midrange and warm. Choose a wax that's right for the day's conditions to cut down ski drag and help in your glide between turns. A nicely waxed ski will help you glide on flatter sections or where the skis get sucked deep. Reducing your skis' friction will tip one more element of skiing crud snow in your favor.



Whether you catch air unexpectedly or use it functionally to avoid obstacles or misplaced bumps or to adjust your line, getting off the snow is exhilarating. Embrace air, but stay calm, get forward and spot your landing. Settling down in the fall line will feel fast, but it will soften your impact and give you more turning options.

THE GAUNTLET >

TACTICAL

Skiing off of the groomed runs

is like running a gauntlet. Be prepared to get ganged up on by changing snow conditions, alternating pitches, double fall lines and unexpected obstacles all at once. Don't be intimidated. Use those features to your advantage. In here, it's all a matter of perspective: What looks at first like an intimidating maze will reveal itself to be a fun terrain garden. Ride up sidewalls and berms. Seek faster, colder snow that will

release the suction under the base of your skis or wet, soggy snow that slows you down. Look for rolls and bumps off which you can get air and readjust your line.

BOTTOM LINE: GO PLAY.

MENTAL

Laser-sharp focus and crunch-time composure

are not the exclusive property of professional athletes. When skiing the gauntlet, clear your mind of negative internal dialogue and don't fear failure or unanticipated outcomes. Move across the snow as lightly and as efficiently as possible.

equipment alert

Polarized goggles filter out distortions, and a good pair will provide 100-percent UV protection, anti-fog coating and a good venting system. Also consider how much peripheral vision they give you. Some limit it so much that you have to turn your head constantly to see things on either side of

TECHNICAL

With the skills you developed for steeps, trees and changing snow, you've got a handful of standard-issue tools for the terrain garden. But here are a few more that'll make your time in here even more fun while keeping you safe.

A. A downstem is a delay tactic, of sorts. Push the tail of your downhill ski out

slightly to create an immediate but brief skid. Use it like a brake check at anytime, in any place when you need an extra second to scout out a roll, check your balance or set yourself up for a turn.



A

B. To maintain a consistent speed, you must constantly anticipate pitch changes before you reach them and then adjust your turns to slow down or speed up. As you're skiing, imagine that you're standing in the middle of a clock, with 6 o'clock straight ahead and 12 o'clock behind you. On a moderate pitch, you can rotate your legs so your knees pan from 7 to 5. As it gets steeper, pan between 8 and 4 or 9 and 3. The farther your legs rotate away from 6 o'clock, the more you'll slow down.



C, D. In uneven terrain, you want to keep your skis on the snow lest you launch into orbit. Use this progression to develop the muscle memory that'll keep you grounded. **FIRST**, while standing on flat terrain, lift your downhill ski six or eight inches off the snow. Flex and extend your ankle to mimic the motion of a dolphin as it breaks the water's surface, arches and then dives back in. **NEXT**, do it as you traverse a gentle slope, first with one ski, then the other. Play with small bumps or rolls, allowing both skis to get air and then diving your skis, tips first, back onto the snow.

