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MOUNTAIN CAT TRACKS DEMAND CAT LIKE SKILLS

By TONY CRESPI, SKIER NEWS' TECHNICAL EDITOR

Sometimes cat tracks, narrow connecting trails on mountains, feel monotonous. Other times they seem dangerous. Whether friendly and playful or narrow and intimidating, most mountains possess these connecting trails.

Vermont, where I largely ski, has many cat tracks. Whether at Mount Snow, Okemo or the long unforgiving cat tracks of Killington or those found at Snowbird, Utah, most skiers routinely negotiate these catwalks as they move about the mountain. Do not fret. Do not laugh. A few years past, testing skis with Olympian Pam Fletcher at Stratton Mountain, I rocketed along several cat tracks as we criss-crossed the mountain. Still, how does one best negotiate these byways? Slowly or with suicidal abandon? Interested? Stay tuned.

In truth, at one time or another, most skiers end up on some catwalk. The odds favor it. Fortunately, most tracks are not wild and wooly. Most cat tracks can be tamed.

Whether a burgeoning novice, a died in the wool intermediate, or a true black diamond expert, catwalks require a bit of care so they can be tamed properly. First, understand, not all catwalks will be as wide as you would like. It is part of the nature of the beast. Much as resorts would love you to think otherwise, mountains were simply not designed for skiers and cat tracks cannot always be cut terribly wide. Many are actually service roads for summer maintenance or summer hiking. In winter, they also provide a consistent pitch for on-mountain services like snowmobile use for the Ski Patrol or for evening horse-drawn sleigh rides to a mid-mountain dinner.

On skis, take heart, there are strategies to make you feel more comfortable negotiating cat tracks.

The mountain class is in session:

Technical Pointer #1
Move Like A Cat
One particularly useful approach for cat tracks is to practice a sideways, braking wedge. Sort of like a cat with one paw forward and another poised for attack.

You can have one ski braking forward momentum, in a wedge position essentially, while the other ski moves along down the cat path. Got it? This is a key movement and, a useful drill for refining edging, pressure control, and balance.

Interested? To start, first practice this on the side of a trail: A well-groomed, moderate, slope. After all, practice is key to advanced skill development. Moreover with practice you can refine this skill such that the cat tracks themselves will not seem nearly so ferocious.

Is this truly important? Yes! Many cat tracks are narrow. Some even steep. I know of at least one Western resort where virtually half the intermediate runs are comprised of catwalks. Some are very narrow, and most are sufficiently long that most folks I have skied with have become tired of simply using the one maneuver we just reviewed. I know it is a favorite, but even cats like variety in their diet.

Perhaps you have negotiated catwalks while connecting to some hidden chute or while fleeing from some veritable precipice. Cats love high places and catwalks often seem to appear overlooking the most intimidating of runs. At such times, like a cat stalking game, some folks claw their way along at barely a crawl.

Keep your vision up. Avoid the other big mountain cats and ski safely.

Technical Pointer #2

Turn Cat Tracks into a Turning Game

One secret for controlling speed on a catwalk is to turn often. Each time you twist or pivot your skis sideways, whether in an exquisite carve or using a wind-shield-wiper-type turn, you can slow momentum. Remember you will be most apt to pick up speed when shooting straight forward, so on a cat track you will want to maximize turning. The tough part is that lots of folks are not all that comfortable practicing short, tight, turns.

Try the following drill.
My wife Cheryl, a strong expert skier, still finds it helpful to practice the following turning drill to prepare

for catwalks. Usually, she executes this on the side of a trail, using a narrow track of space. Then when on a crowded cat track, she mirrors the same moves. She finds it a perfect way to negotiate cat tracks.

On the side of a friendly slope, pick a narrow corridor. A recently groomed track is the ideal width. Keeping a straight line, execute a turning contest with your skiing partner. See who can turn the most. See who can move with the slowest pace. See who can vary their turning rhythm and turning shape while maintaining a slow, controlled, rate of descent.

Over time, practice this contest on different slopes, on different pitches, and on different snow conditions. Variety can enhance your skills.

The Take Home: Practice Makes Puur-fect

Learning to negotiate catwalks involves both physical skills, technical skills, and a bit of psychological savvy. Remember, you need to learn to maximize your speed control. You need to refine your ability to turn and/or brake in a relatively narrow space, often while other skiers swoosh by, and you need to be visually aware of dips and drop-offs which may border these pathways. Just as different type of cats have different personalities, not all cat tracks are the same.

Here's the good news: While you may not possess the balance, or speed of a cat, you can learn from a cat. After all, most cats cope with steep narrow pathways quite well and you can too if you arm yourself with the right strategies and skills both physical and mental.

Be Aware, Ski With Care, and Watch out for the cats

Contributing Columnist Tony Crespi has served as both a Ski School Trainer and Development Team Coach. Contributor to publications throughout snow country, his instructional pointers are published throughout the season. Although he is enthusiastic about his Persian cat's antics, he personally prefers to confront narrow chutes rather than long cat tracks.

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