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TIPS for TESTING SKIS: TEST DRIVE OFFERS PERFORMANCE EDGE

By TONY D. CRESPI, TECHNICAL EDITOR

Interested in new skis? Are you worried about spending \$1,000 for a pair of skis and bindings which afterward might not feel ideal? You should be worried. One ski is not the same as the next.

"I found that you can read and talk about different equipment, but what you hear and what may fit can vary. You need to try different skis!" notes Ski Pro Bud Randall.

"It's amazing how skis vary," emphasizes Randall.

"I'm often surprised," reflects Randall. "Last year one of the skis I tested blew me away. I never expected I'd like it so much."

It's best to test before you buy.

Do you need a strategy? To start, narrow your choices to a maximum of three - and ideally two - brands. Because there are many fine skis on the market, too many choices can become overwhelming. Then, test different types of skis and in different lengths.

"You can listen to people talk but you're investing a lot of money in a new ski," adds Mount Snow's General Manager and PSIA Examiner Erik Barnes. "I suggest you go to a place that has some qualified people to help sift through the options. Talk to someone who actually has skied the product."

"I was really surprised," says one veteran recreational skier I met testing skis. "Years ago I never even thought of testing. Then I spent lots of money but the skis just seemed too stiff. I was very dissatisfied: I was stuck!"

To be truthful, this is not the first person to buy without a test ride and then groan. Many skiers have found their purchases less than perfect. Sometimes it is the model, sometimes the length. With shaped skis, relatively small differences in length can impact performance. Moreover, pre-mounted bindings with special plates change performance. In fact, side cut, flex, dampening, and core construction all vary from ski to ski. Side cut, for instance, the curve which runs from tip to tail on both sides of the ski, effects turning ability, but varies from ski to ski. Years ago, technology was such that skis could generally be constructed for preferences leading to shorter or longer turns. Today, in contrast, by blending different engineering principles skis can accommodate a wide performance band.

Are you skeptical? People should think twice before buying a ski off the shelf. Because of technology, different skis do

perform differently. Sometimes - dare I say it - the differences between skis can feel almost dramatic.

Pro Guide to Ski Testing

1. Provide the Shop with Accurate Information. Start your search by helping the shop personnel know your current length and model of ski, as well as the kinds of turns and terrain you most frequently enjoy. Do you enjoy short, medium, or long radius turns? Do you like cruisers or bumps? Be honest. Be accurate.

This is important in calculating the best ski to demo.

2. Start the Test Day on Your Own Ski. Starting with your own ski provides a base for solid comparison. Remember that any new ski will outperform a poorly tuned ski. So, if possible, maximize your ski's performance with a solid tune. That way you can better judge the old and new ski. Further, test at least two to three different skis in order to clearly define your preferences.

3. Maintain a Record. Prepare index cards. The following categories can help: ease of turning, stability, edge grip and fun factor.

4. Use the Same Terrain for Each Test. "We used two trails," explains Randall, who tested approximately 25 skis with me on one of two days a few years ago. "We used one trail with a firm base, to test grip, and we used one to cruise and really open up. I had a ball too. We had nice conditions, and we could really get into it on some scratchy stuff. And we were like two big kids with new motorcycles."

Maintaining a consistent testing run provides for a more reasonable comparison. Choose terrain on which you are very comfortable, but which offers some variability. Test each ski on the same terrain, in the same conditions. Test on the same day to maximize your ability to compare differing sensations.

5 Find a test partner. It's great fun testing with a buddy. I know I love testing with Bud Randall, and I find it a helpful way to gauge my own reactions. In fact, we both test the same skis at the same time, taking turns sharing first impressions.

6. Maintain a Consistent Pace and Rhythm. Start each run by going slowly to feel the essence of the

ski. When speed gets to high they all generally start to behave alike. So, go slow and drive them through different arcs. Also, vary turns. Really run the ski through a test. The ski that feels the best is most likely the ski for you.

Set a speed range for each run and include setting a turning rhythm.

7. Take Multiple Test Runs. Two runs are ideal. The first run you learn the ski. The second run you really test the ski.

Do not vary in your test and plan to retest favorites later.

8. Vary Snow Conditions. Test different skis in different conditions.

"I like testing in crud, and on firm snow. Try skis on different snow," explains Randall. "I like to test grip and I like to test all the different elements of snow conditions."

9. This is Worth Repeating: Choose a Test Partner. "You can compare notes and it makes you think," reflects Randall. "We played off each other. We compared notes. Then you can try skis again and determine if you missed something. And friends sometimes will help you push it. We took high speed cruising runs and some when we laid back."

10. Test Your Choice Ski in Two Lengths. The same ski can vary markedly in two different lengths. I know. My ski at the time was a Volkl 6 Star, it skied differently in different lengths. Ultimately, I chose a 168. Understand, it seemed like a different ski in other lengths. And, while I was surprised to purchase a 168 - rather than my typical 175 length - I loved the ski.

Conclusion. Test your final choices before making a purchase. Sometimes we pick the skis, sometimes the skis pick us. A test ride always helps me, it may help you too.

Be Aware - Ski with Care - and Test Before You Buy

Tony D. Crespi has served as both a Development Team Coach and Ski School Supervisor. A frequent contributor to regional and national publications throughout snow country, his column is published throughout the season.

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