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Report from the Front Lines : The Pendulum Swings the Other Way



Like many in our small but loveable trade, I've just returned from 3 cathartic days of demoing a passel of next year's skis, in my case at the Mammoth Mountain event. Despite a thus far dreadful winter, the hill could not have been in better shape for our purposes. Spirits were high and the vibe was joyous.

One of the many benefits of ski testing at Mammoth is the variety of snow surfaces instantly at hand. The center cut on the steep pitch of Cornice was compacted granite, while the face of Dave's sported a renewable wind crust. There were deep pockets of cream off lift 23 and long stretches of moguls beckoned from every facet of the front face. The only missing ingredient was two feet of freshies, which while welcome would surely have muddled the testing process.

Point being, the conditions were ideal for evaluating the full behavioral range that falls under the big umbrella of "all-mountain." For the last several seasons, the American ski market has pushed 98mm-width skis as the apotheosis of the all-mountain tool, and it remains true that this girth offers maximum flotation in a ski that can still be readily tilted to a high edge angle.

But that doesn't mean that 98mm (or 100mm, as is increasingly the norm) skis are the best in all conditions and if you don't already possess a high level of proficiency, wider skis will increase the probability that your skills aren't going to improve.

Allow me to illuminate my point with a vignette from Day Two of the Mammoth trade fair. I was lucky enough to take a couple of spins with Robin Barnes, who lists on her long resume management of the Portillo ski school. We skied—fast—from one side of the upper mountain to the other, down sustained steepes of loose crud, over gnarled wind scallops and through tight bumps. It was a total gas.

Robin was on a ski 76mm wide at the waist. I was on a 72mm. It's commonly assumed skis this narrow underfoot make poor all-purpose utensils. The conventional wisdom is dead wrong.

These skis didn't just survive these conditions; they excelled in each and every one of them, outperforming their broader brethren in every performance criterion. I can only think of one run in the 3

days I demoed that I enjoyed more, and it was on an even narrower ski (70mm).

One way to analyze quickly the relative merits of 100mm skis versus those with waists under 80mm is to pose the question: how well does each ski perform at the tasks that are supposedly the other's specialty? In other words, how well does a narrow ski do off-piste compared to how well a 100mm ski handles groomers?

The answer was clear. The new generation of 100mm skis, with few exceptions, were notably less maneuverable than their narrower cousins on the groomed conditions most Americans ski, while the slender sticks could do anything the fat boys could do off piste.

True, a skinny ski can't float like a fat one, but that doesn't mean it can't cut a path through the stuff. In the contest of trade-offs between the two families of skis, the narrow skis consistently bested the beefier ones.

One of the main reasons so many Americans are on skis with plump profiles is because they were encouraged to do so. They were advised by the media, their local specialty shop and their buddies on the hill that wider skis would be better for them. It turns out they're not, or at least that they're not for every occasion.

We in the ski business all "helped" to get American skiers on fat skis. Now it's up to us to coach them back onto skis that will help them develop skills in all terrain venues instead of merely disguising a lack of skills in deep powder.

Jackson

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