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Easing into skate skiing

The cross-country discipline is popular, but challenging to learn



T.J. Nelson skate skis with a group of other skiers at Virginia Meissner Sno-park west of Bend on Wednesday. (Joe Kline/Bulletin photo)
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VIRGINIA MEISSNER SNO-PARK — Out of the tracks, and out of my comfort zone, I skated along the crowded groomed trail, skiing seemingly faster and harder than I ever had before.

The differences between classic cross-country skiing and skate cross-country skiing are so dramatic it is almost hard to believe they are the same sport.

A longtime classic skier, I was accustomed to staying in the set tracks and gliding along at a relatively easy pace. But trying skate skiing earlier this week at Meissner Sno-park, I was quickly reminded why the discipline — a more full-body, more-bang-for-your-buck workout than classic — is so popular in fitness-crazed Central Oregon.

Skate skiing is typically performed on a wide-open groomed trail and involves a V-step and glide motion, akin to ice skating. Classic skiing is usually done with the skis in set tracks and the skier employing an easier-to-grasp kick-and-glide motion.

I tried skate skiing about two years ago for the first time but had never really gotten into it. This winter, I made a plan to commit to skate skiing, buying some used gear and heading out to Meissner.

The sport of cross-country skiing changed dramatically in the 1980s with the emergence of the skate style, according to www.skiinghistory.org (<http://www.skiinghistory.org>). For more than 100 years cross-country competitors had raced with the classic diagonal stride, alternately kicking and gliding.

Bill Koch of the U.S. first observed the skate step at a Swedish ski marathon, then used it to win a 1982 World Cup competition.

The new technique was controversial, according to the website, but it transformed World Cup and Olympic cross-country skiing. Now there are as many medals awarded for freestyle, in which skating is permitted, as there are for classic, in which skating is prohibited.

Gradually over the years the style caught on in Central Oregon, where skate skiers enjoy groomed trails at the Mt. Bachelor Nordic Center and at Meissner.

Local shop owners seem to agree that classic skiing is still more popular, as it is easier to learn and skiers can go anywhere because a groomed trail is not necessary. There is no denying the popularity of skate skiing in these parts.

At Meissner on Monday, it seemed there were as many skate skiers as classic skiers. I weaved in and out of them, finding more solitude as I skied farther out on the trails.

I remembered some tips a couple of years ago from Dan Simoneau, a two-time Olympian in cross-country skiing and the nordic director for the Mt. Bachelor Sports Education Foundation in Bend.

He had showed me how to “stack” my body over each ski with each skate to the left and

to the right.

This helped me to get the feel of the skating motion and of moving my body weight back and forth over each ski. I tried to employ that technique before moving on to double-poling (pushing with both poles simultaneously).

Alpine skiers sometimes come to skate skiing naturally because they usually have experience skating on their alpine skis to get back to the chairlifts. I think this helped me somewhat, but I still felt awkward on the skate skis, at times struggling to maintain balance and seriously hurting as I skied up some of the steeper hills on the Meissner trails.

Techniques for skate skiing include V1 and V2, according to Simoneau. In V1, skiers plant their poles on every other skate — for example, just when skating on the right ski. In V2, they plant on every skate, right and left.

The V1 technique is best when skiing uphill, while V2 works to maintain balance on the flats.

Skiing downhill on skate skis is easier than on classic skis because the skate skis are stiffer and torsionally constructed, according to Simoneau. Skate ski boots are stiffer, too, allowing the skier to push off to the side on each ski while skating.

But skate skis have no edges on which to carve, so skiing downhill is still a significant adjustment for those who are used to alpine skiing. I took my time on the downhills, sort of stepping into turns and being careful not to gain too much speed.

The longer I skied, the more comfortable I became. After about two hours, I could certainly feel the full-body workout effects of skate skiing.

For beginners, learning the correct technique is crucial, so I plan to get some more instruction, starting with XC Oregon's Learn to Ski Day on Jan. 13 at Meissner.

—Reporter: 541-383-0318,

mmorical@bendbulletin.com

XC Oregon Learn to Ski Day

What: Opportunity for cross-country skiers of any level to get some tips to further their ability. It is preferred that skate skiers have had at least one day on their skis prior to this event. The entire event is free but donations to Meissner Nordic Ski Club are encouraged.

Where: Meet outside the lodge at Virginia Meissner Sno-park.

When: Jan. 13, 1 to 2:30 p.m. Mini-clinics start every 30 minutes. Plan to arrive a few minutes before preferred start time (1 p.m., 1:30 p.m., or 2 p.m.).

Information: meissnernordic.org (<http://meissnernordic.org>).