

The Consolation of Skiing

As we push through the solstice of a world that is warming, catastrophically we rhythmically intone, and wars rage or simmer while our policy remains unclear and more than contestable, and perhaps our financial system is imploding in slow motion, a globalization of the subprime, i.e., our failure to live up to our ideal of world in which all the children are above average and as if capitalism ever offered much security, whatever the temptation of its promises, while nuclear and other weapons proliferate and toys are made by prison workers using poisoned paints, one often turns to private concerns, where there are addictions to feed, as the song goes, or less dramatically, where it is uncertain if the Dionysian or even the human can be lived out from within our iron cage, to say nothing about the questions of finding love, or holding it, and raising children and tending the ailing and honoring the dead and whether one has adequately fulfilled one's potential, as if even that mattered, far better to surrender to professional or other vanities while waiting for the end, an end in which meaning is either absent or monopolized by the righteous, and how to forgive oneself for past bad answers . . . amidst all of this and more, I know that many people are focused on a vital issue: how is Bert skiing? What kind of new (or at least new to him) skis did he get this year, and is the gear working out?

Well, truth be told, it's looking to be a pretty big year for my skiing, and the equipment is *great*. After years of making do (and getting beaten even more badly than usual in various races), and getting lots of gear for those voracious little ones, I've acquired some very cool stuff for myself. Which, since I don't work and we have snow, I am now enjoying. A lot.

At the end of last season, I got Todd Mahoney's hardly used FIS legal slalom skis, Rossignol 165 cm with a 12 m radius. For a race ski, it's pretty forgiving, and very predictable. It's easy to initiate turns, and pretty easy to stay on top of, but it still delivers some serious kick out of the turn. Todd is a better skier than I am, but more to the point, simply bigger, so I don't think the ski was launching him adequately -- but for me, setting the turn up better means I get more snap out of the ski than I was with my old (and bent) 158 race stock Salomons. The great thing about the Rossi snap, however, is it is really controllable, so I can usually use the energy in the next turn. I'm skiing noticeably

better. Of course, talk is cheap, and can I do it in gates? We'll know more once racing starts

You may well be thinking that one should not devote so much attention to “boards,” or, for that matter, any piece of sports equipment. But the great French racer Killy said, at the end of a legendary career, that one of the things he cherished most was his relationship with his gear. And why not? Our tools help us impose our will on an obdurate world, help to “get ‘er done.” But this is too primitive. We do not ski, or sail, or bike, because we want to get down the mountain, across the lake, over the road – we want to do these things in a certain way, with some style, placing our bodies in a particular relationship with the world that someday will have the last word, as our will fails. But not today. So gear matters – it helps us become ourselves, over against the world.

For our 15th anniversary my dear wife Amy got me a pair of Fischer backcountry Nordic skis -- waxless (but still good glide), steel edges, they go anywhere. I want to take them to Algonquin and mess around on the frozen lakes, listen for wolves and so forth, or at least the Adirondacks, but so far I've gone to the end of the village, and skied over the Knox Estate, a gilded age horse farm, now an equestrian state park. Gorgeous. And I can do that while Peter is in Montessori in the mornings, and have time for coffee after my workout and before I pick him up. Consequently, the skis live in the X-Terra. My plan is to ski XC in the mornings, and then train, ski with the kids, and/or race in the evenings. By March, I should be in killer shape, with great balance, too!

Speaking of the children, Thomas and Sophie are skiing beautifully. For me, skiing with them is sort of like watching swallows while driving, visually intoxicating and a little nerve wracking because I'm not paying much attention to where I'm going. (They ski so well that I rarely need to worry about them, at least on our rather modest home hill.) Thomas and Sophie are now training some with the race team, and so they are learning that falcons are faster than swallows. But they are having fun, and they need to learn from skiers better than, and just different from, me. And it is a beautiful thing to see, crowds of really excellent skiers who all weigh less than 115 lbs cascading down a hill, yelling to each other. Something to be proud of . . . Peter and I are just starting, though he is strong and balanced. But teaching Peter is plowing and sowing; skiing with

Thomas and Sophie is reaping.

After years of not having a very usable GS ski (see below), I've just acquired my friend Rico's "baby GS" skis, Dynastar Speed Course, 178 cm, with a 17 m radius turn. This is probably the most fun ski I've ever owned. Completely quiet, bomb proof grip, and very easy to turn, and easy transition from one turn to the next. The ski is very, very fast, and its natural turn is perfect for most hills, and just brings smiles. Rico sold it because he's buying the same ski, but with this year's graphics. He too has, shall we say, gear issues.

The only skis I've had of comparable top speed, my now old but still very serviceable Fischer GS skis, with a +21 m turn, do not turn at all until one is going quite fast, and really cannot be managed among other people, and hate being forced to do anything besides +21 m turns at racing speeds. I got these from my formidable former student Jim Thoman, who was second among amateur skiers in NYS last year, and who won his age group at Nationals. I'm very proud of his accomplishments because I used to ride bikes with him, so really, I think I deserve the credit. Anyway, he also has gear issues, and changes his skis out every year . . . so he sold me these skis at a reasonable price. I believe they were made out of a titanium leaf spring from a Formula One racing truck. However these skis are constructed, changing edges requires total commitment. If you get back, or worse, fall inside, the ski hooks up and then has a mind of its own -- usually the inside ski goes straight at an angle oblique to the body's travel, resulting in a painful split and then being upended, sometimes an actual back flip at some speed in excess of thirty miles an hour. I have had a number of epic, helmet-thumping wipe outs. A friend who heard one such thump from the lift across the slope heart-warmingly remarked that "I thought you were dead." Another time, I hooked a GS gate. Maybe that was the same time. It's kind of blurry. Anyway, it was ugly. Only ski I've ever been sort of afraid of -- skiing them is like a war. Well, that's silly. But my point is, if you ski perfectly, and very strongly, you can go very fast, at least at the bottom of the hill, when the ski is bending enough to perform. If you ski only well, and without commitment, it feels like you have fence posts strapped to your legs, but you can probably ride it out. If you make a real mistake, however, you will be punished. And if you ski really fast, which after all is the entire point of that ski, you are disturbingly likely to make a real

mistake (at least I am). Anyway, I still own the skis, and for a nominal sum (shipping plus beer) they can be yours . . . they even have S920 race bindings, which I believe are not sold to the public and are registered with the bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms as a kind of weapon. Thoman kept the inner spring, so they probably are only worth 14 DIN or something . . . let's just say they've very rarely released, epic falls or no. Scary skis, and they deserve to stay in jail.

While the Fischers are fun to talk about, the Dynastars are fun to ski. They are stable without being hard to turn. They can be handled in crowds. I've even run kids' slalom courses on them, albeit with a bit of skidding. Because they are so stable and easy to turn, they're easy to put insane edge angles on, and I can turn really well, much better than I did on the Fischers. And since we never set true 21 m race courses, I think I'll do much better in the beer races this year . . . and they are my fun, everyday skis, too. This may be the perfect free ski for the reasonably advanced skier, at least if you do not have to ski moguls, or teach all day and therefore ski really slowly. But if you just want to ski a few hours hard, these are wonderful. Most "all mountain" skis are simply too soft. For reasons unclear, however, this is a difficult ski to find -- Dynastar only makes a few hundred for the Americas. There are a few comparable skis (Fischer has one, the K2 Moto is not too different) but the entire segment is kind of rare.

So that's the state of play this winter. Lots of XC skiing to stay in shape, and to keep me in touch with the deer, and if all goes well, Amy will ski some with me. Lots of skiing pretty fast with the children and the folks in the race community . . . Lots of getting Peter onto snow. And maybe Amy can even be coaxed out onto something with more pitch than our old floors. We will see how racing goes. I did have high hopes – I was getting in great shape, but books, faculties, family, and way too much work, to say nothing of age and anxiety, and all told, it was a horrible fall. So I'm only in so-so shape. And like I said, talk's cheap. But it doesn't matter that much -- there is *nothing* like cold beer and hot chicken wings in a dark warm bar after skiing gates for a few hours in the windy cold, with snow coming on.

Here's a modernist legend: when the great anthropologist Marc Katz learned that Germany was again marching off to war, he resigned his professorship at Heidelberg and

retired to the Arlberg, the cradle of skiing. After the war, Hemingway came to visit, and wrote movingly of snow and pines. So don't apologize for your skiing.

This less than true, of course. When he learned that France was again going to war, Marcel Mauss went insane, but not to the Alps. Or so reports Levi-Strauss. Hemingway did write movingly of snow and pines and the Arlberg, but before World War II. And he committed suicide outside another ski legend, Sun Valley. I don't know if Hemingway was still skiing at the end, but I suspect not. Or perhaps skiing wasn't enough -- it is, after all, an amusement, not a religion.

But on a good day, with children happy and the wind in your face, skiing may help you forgive the world and keep whatever faith you try to hold. So the next time you are brooding on how hard you work, or how many difficulties even relatively comfortable middle class life has, or how deeply troubled the world is (and I'm sure you do, and it has, and it is), give me a call. If we can find snow, we'll ski like banshees.