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Final Draft

I pick up my foot and bounce it up and down a few times to check that my ski is secure. It stays on, but I remain doubtful. In the two YouTube videos I watched on “How to Telemark,” before heading up to the mountain, at no point did they cover “How to Put on your Telemark Skis.” The skill is not as intuitive as I had hoped. My friend’s dad has a simple rule, “You must be 10% smarter than whatever tool you’re trying to operate.” I had been effortlessly snapping on alpine skis since the age of four, but now, however, these teleskis had me beat.

While I felt reasonably confident about the security of my right ski, my left ski was proving to be far wilier. It was not so much that I was worried about my ski coming unattached from my foot and falling from the chairlift to hit some unsuspecting skier below, a small clip running from the ski to the boot would prevent that. My concern was that my boot would slip out of the ski binding and the clip would become the only thing holding the ski on, dangling from my foot 20-feet above the ground. Then I could spend the whole five-minute chair ride with my ineptitude on display, a shining beacon of inexperience suspended in the sky. Of course, by driving my knee up towards my chin and reaching down with my hands to grab my ski, I was sure I could avoid this sort of embarrassing spectacle. The ski in hand, my first crisis, at least would be averted. The second crisis would be getting off the lift. On alpine skis, I would have had no problem skiing off the lift on one ski, but I had no idea what my stability was like now that I was feeling all ‘wild and heel free’. Furthermore, what would the lift operator think? Would he or she laugh at me? Kick me off the mountain for my incompetence? I could fake it – glide off the lift as if I knew exactly what I was doing. The duration of time it would take me to put on the ski, however, would probably undermine the attempt. I had chosen to forego wearing my ‘Snow Bowl Ski Instructor’ jacket, hoping for some anonymity as I lurched down the slope, but in doing so I had also stripped myself of any credibility the jacket might have implied.

Thirty minutes later, after trying the bindings in just about every position possible, (which is relatively few because the bindings are actually a pretty simple piece of plastic) the telemark gods take mercy on me and magically slide the binding into place. Properly attached, both skis remain on my feet for the entire lift ride. At the top, I turn my tips into the fall line of the green slope. Beneath my feet I feel something I hadn’t since my days of pizza turns and matching ‘micro carvers’ class bibs – the squirrely wavering, wobbling of a new, unpracticed attachment. Now my mind concentrates, plans out each muscle action through every turn. There is no muscle memory to rely on. Skiing isn’t new to me, but telemarking very much is.

In 1868, at the age of 42, Norwegian farmer and carpenter, Sondre Norheim, debuted the telemark turn in the first national ski competition, held in Norway’s capital Christiania (now called Oslo). With a couple of friends, Sondre skied the whole way there from his home in the Telemark region of Norway. The trip took three days and covered 200 kilometers. It was here that Sondre demonstrated the telemark turn that had made him legendary in his village. Sondre was magnificent. Downhill leg extended out front, knee of the uphill leg bent, he sunk deep into his lunges. The cable bindings held his toe in place while his heel remained free to come up. With each turn, his legs slid smoothly together then back apart, the lead leg changing. He was graceful. His turns appeared almost effortless. Such control and style through the turns was unprecedented. Sondre’s performance captivated the audience.

As I take my first couple runs, there is nothing captivating about my clipped turns and barely bent knees, nothing graceful in my jerky movements. I can hardly remember which leg to extend and which leg to bend. So much for my YouTube lessons.

Sondre grew up skiing the backcountry of the rugged Norwegian mountains. I grew up skiing the in-bounds trails of the Colorado mountain resorts. A man of the mountains, Sondre designed a new birch root binding that formed a loop around his heel and held his toe in place. This gave him more control over the ski while also keeping his heel free so he could traverse flat or uphill ground. I grew up with my heels held down and the power to easily traverse up the mountain by lift.

In the back bowls of my Colorado mountain, I play a game with myself. Looking across the steep slope and the narrow valley to the other side, I search for a segment that I can stare at without my eyes catching any sign of human life. I like to search for uninterrupted nature. It’s a game I also play at sea, scanning the waves to ensure there is no sign of land or other boats. Just me, my boat, and nothing but the water; just me and the mountains. When I scuba dive, I twist to the side, up, back, and down marveling at the depth, the mass of the blues that extend in each direction. I am a fly suspended in a preservative gel. In the water, on the mountains, my body becomes tiny, insignificant, surrounded by something so much greater than myself. I am aware of my minuteness, the bounds of my body, but I also feel as if I am beyond my body. Held in those uninterrupted moments, it’s as if my tininess, juxtaposed to the vastness, distorts the reality of size and limits. But, the moment doesn’t hold. On the mountain, a skier cuts in view, bouncing rhythmically over the moguls. I shift my gaze to find a new empty spot, but the flash of ski jackets and metallic helmets now bob and slice in several places, hemming in my sight as I try to pretend there is nothing but the mountains and me.

Perhaps then, it might seem surprising that backcountry skiing, with its uninhabited openness, is new to me. My desire for untouched powder and pristine nature has typically lost out to my aversion to dark, early mornings and cold appendages. With some extra motivation from my J-term adventure writing class, the adventure and challenge of exploring the backcountry, however, has finally proven too tempting, which is why I am spending this January braving the frigid Vermont weather. Equipped with telemark skis and climbing skins (a synthetic material that goes on the bottom of your skis and grips the snow) I will be able to climb up the mountains and move freely over new terrain. My first obstacle, however, is learning how to telemark. Before I start going up the mountain, I need to make sure I can get back down. Preferably in one piece. And without a helicopter airlift.

For my second attempt at telemark, I procure both a friend, to careen down the mountain with me, and an instructor.

“You should be able to put your weight on your uphill ski and lift up your downhill ski,” our instructor tells us, demonstrating with a strange move that looks like a tree pose on skis. I try to copy him, but find I can no longer remember how to lift my leg. The muscles are not responding. My alpine skis feel like an extension of my body, but these teleskis are a foreign entity, a robotic-limb pre-physical therapy.

My friend, Kiwi, and I take several runs, zig-zagging, spinning, and falling our way down the slope. Sondre would be ashamed. After our fifth run, however, I turn to Kiwi and say, “I think we’re ready.” He nods in agreement.

I selected Kiwi as my mission partner for a reason. He is every bit as strange as his self-chosen name would imply and always up for anything. With legs as spindly as that of the kiwi bird and a personality as vibrant as the green of a kiwi fruit, he is a truly distinctive individual. His given name, Tyler, is jarringly incongruous with his unique character. Mention Kiwi to almost anyone on Middlebury College campus and you’ll get an exclamation of recognition, something that implies both admiration and “oh that guy is crazy.” Mention Tyler and you’ll get a blank stare. Frequently, he’ll twist his mouth to the side and widen his eyes real big to make silly faces at me, so that he looks much like an alarmed kiwi bird. Even his curly blonde hair resembles the thick tufts of kiwi bird feathers. Spend a day with Kiwi and you’ll get all the sweet, tart, sassiness of biting into a kiwi fruit. After Kiwi and I met on our hall freshman year, our friendship quickly devolved into something resembling the relationship between two six-year-old siblings. An experienced backpacker, he shares my love for the mountains, but just like me, has neither telemarked nor skinned before. Yet, when I proposed my plan, gesticulating wildly with my hands, “We spend the afternoon telemarking, then we drive up to Bolton for their Skimo race – it’s this race where you skin up and then ski down,” Kiwi was in.

By the time we leave, we’re already running late for the 6 pm race start time. Getting pulled over for speeding, about 15 minutes into our drive, does not help. When we finally reach the starting line, we are about 30 minutes past the race start. Racers are already on their second or third lap. Fumbling to attach my skins to my skis, I realize that I had once again overlooked learning the setup and had foregone checking over my equipment. My skins are too short for my skis. So I improvise. Using the Velcro bands that normally hold my two skis together during transport, I attach the skins. Kiwi and I plunge into the darkness of the course.

Our course is a nicely groomed trail thickly wooded on either side. The light from my headlamp projects a mere three feet in front of me. Beyond this light, I have no way of knowing if the trail continues straight up, if it turns, levels out, or if the incline increases. There is no sound but the crunch of snow, the whine of carbon fiber, and our heavy breathing. About a minute in, I realize I have over layered. I also tightened my boots too much and my calves have started to kill. Kiwi, on the other hand, is crushing it. With a backpack on about twice the size of mine, he charges forward undaunted by the incline I have already started to curse. My breath comes in large, ragged huffs. I peer into the darkness hoping for some sign of a brief respite from my pain. Then the hard-core, I-do-this-every-day, skinning-is-life, on-my-fourth-lap racers start to catch up. Dressed in synthetic body suits they power past with fluid movements. Most of them easily have 10 years on me.

I have to stop. To de-layer. To catch my breath. Kiwi patiently waits, offers me his water.

“I think I was hoping it would be easier,” I say to Kiwi. Sure, I had expected a physical challenge, but not one so completely draining. As someone who consistently runs about 30 miles a week, cross trains, and lifts regularly, I had felt confident I could handle the physical exertion. I pride myself on my stamina over long distance runs. Instead, men twice my age were blowing past while I took periodic breaks. I had become the literal definition of “cannot hang.” The bobbing lights of racers ahead of me only provided demoralizing glimpses of a hill that kept on going.

The Green Mountain Skimo race series consists of 8 races occurring after dark on Tuesday nights, a chance to get out into the Vermont winter after work. Skimo stands for ski mountaineering and references the fact that competitors must first climb uphill before skiing down. The races switch between a couple of courses ranging in length from 1.7-2 miles. Contestants have an hour to see how many laps they can complete. I personally was struggling to just finish one.

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, we are at the top. I immediately feel silly for all my stops, for wimping out. Kiwi and I strip off our skins and prepare for our descent. Without the skins, the snow suddenly feels slick. My tele lunges, which had begun to deepen during our earlier practice session, have become shallow, tentative. We are alone. All the other racers seem to have passed us by. The night is still and quiet as our skis grind against the ice patches. The wind works its way past my few remaining layers as we whizz down the hill, the incline working with me rather than hindering me. With my breathing steady, my heart rate back to resting, I calmly reflect on my weak performance. I could have done the course faster, pushed on when I thought I needed to stop, after all it really was not that long. Maybe I would come up again, try again. I could almost understand why some people trek up to Bolton every Tuesday to push their body to the brink, trying for the most laps, the best time. Almost.

After my fast-paced introduction to skinning, I decide a break from the uphill is in order and turn my attention back to the downhill, to telemarking. I return back to the Snow Bowl, where I teach alpine ski lessons, but now I am the student. This time I have a revolving door of instructors. Once my first instructor, a ski patroller, deserts me to respond to an injury call, my ski instructor jacket draws other instructors, even ones I have not met, eager to assist me in my quest to telemark.

The first, Ted, hops on the chair with me and offers his advice, “You’re looking good, but your lead leg changes aren’t happening quite in the right place of your turn.” With his hands he demonstrates the fluid motion – back, together, apart – his hands wind their way through the air as they make their turns, sliding back and forth past each other.

Ted is replaced by another instructor, a woman with white hair streaked with grey whose eyes light up as she talks about telemark, “It’s like dancing,” she tells me. The leg switches are carefully choreographed – left, right, left, right – the lunge drives the turn, too much power, a caught edge, and you’ll over rotate into a full pirouette.

Skiing is an old, old sport. It’s possible that skiing came to Altay, China, as early as 8000 BC in the form of 8-foot long skis and a single pole the skier used for balance, speed control, and turning. The oldest pair of skis ever discovered was found in a peat bog near Lake Sindor in Russia and dates back to 6300 BC. Rock paintings in Russia and Scandinavia confirm that people were skiing in these regions by 3000 BC. Then there is the daring and legendary rescue of the 2-year-old prince, Haakon Haakonson, who was skied to safety over the Dovre Mountains by two Norwegian military skiers during a Civil War. Since 1932 a long-distance cross-country ski race, called the Birkebeiner has been held annually and follows the same route to commemorate the rescue. In the 1600s, Norwegian skiers used one long, tar-coated board to glide and a second, shorter, fur-bottomed board for propulsion. In 1716, the Great Northern War between the Russians, Swedish, and Norwegians was primarily fought on skis. Skis were a practical tool, a mode of transportation in a mountainous land snow covered for months. By Sondre’s time, skiers were still just using one pole, but the skis were of equal length. Sondre found the skis of his time – long, straight, and difficult to turn – insufficient for his aggressive style of skiing. To enhance his turns, Sondre made new skis that were narrower in the middle and wider at the tip and tail. The skis of the day only included a toe binding and so Sondre added a heel loop for stability. This was the early template of the modern ski. No longer just a practical tool of transportation, skiing became a sport.

The 1900s brought ski resorts and groomed runs, so that telemarking gave way to the simpler parallel techniques of alpine skiing. It was not until the 1970s that the telemark revival started in the United States, as a way to get back to nature and reach the tree lines and steep chutes beyond the limits of ski resorts. The steep price of lift tickets ($19) also motivated skiers to trek up the mountain themselves. Telemark skis, with their free heels, were ideal for this type of uphill travel. They were also lighter than the heavier weight alpine touring equipment, which allowed skiers to free their heel while climbing up and then bind their heel down, for skiing down the mountain alpine style. Telemark skis offered this versatility for exploring the backcountry without the added weight. Now alpine touring gear has evolved to be lightweight, but there are many skiers who still prefer telemark skis due to the artistry of the telemark turn. Paired with climbing skins, which attach to the bottom of your ski and grip the snow, the skier can go uphill, leaving behind lift lines and ski resort crowds.

Furthermore, backcountry skiing is a sustainable option for enjoying the outdoors because it does not require all of the clear cutting and machinery of a ski resort. Increasingly, organizations like the Rochester Area Sports Trail Alliance (RASTA), here in Vermont, are partnering with the Forest Service to sustainably cut trails by utilizing the Forest Service’s team of scientists and experts. This minimizes damage to the environment while opening up the backcountry to skiers with a range of backcountry experience. By making the backcountry accessible, organizations like RASTA hope to share their love of skiing and inspire the next generation to get outdoors.

This ability to escape into the backcountry was my original draw to telemark skis and climbing skins. Consequently, before J-term was over I was determined to make it to the backcountry. With a group of three other Middlebury students, who I had previously only met in passing, but who were all experienced backcountry skiers, I headed up to the Teardrop Trail on Mount Mansfield in Stowe, Vermont. The warm temperatures had melted much of the snow pack down in Middlebury, but we were hopeful we would find better conditions up in Stowe. Perhaps a little too hopeful.

My first fall comes about 20 minutes into our ascent. Stripped down to my sports bra and chatting with one of my ski buddies, I plod up a steeper section of the trail that makes quick cuts from side to side. I’m oblivious to the icy patches. My left skin fails to catch the snow. The ski jerks backwards and the rest of my body goes with it. I shoot back, skidding across the ice, arms flailing, and finally flop to my side in an attempt to regain control. My water bottles fly out of my backpack pockets and go careening down the hill. Skis splayed, thumb scraped and bleeding, I look dejectedly after my water bottles, which have landed some five hundred feet from me.

“I’m okay!” I yell up the hill to my ski companions.

I push up from the ground, take off my skis, fetch my water bottles, put back on my skis, take five steps, and the whole thing happens again.

“I’m still okay!” I yell.

Push up, skis off, fetch bottles, skis on. This time, I test each step before I take it, ensuring my skis will grip the snow before I fully commit. Suddenly, skis, which I had trusted and felt in sync with for so many years, have become sliding death traps threatening to send me shooting down the mountain or backwards into a tree. Furthermore, I do not trust the skins. Sure, they are supposed to grip the snow, but pointing my skis straight up hill feels unnatural. They had failed me before and who was to say when they would suddenly give out again.

Slowly, I step up the mountain. Rocks and tree roots lie exposed in many places. I scan for ice, suspicious of even the most innocent looking snow. Along the edge of the trail, where the snow is a little less scraped off, I grasp desperately at tree branches. Every time we reach a section with a steeper incline my whole body tenses up, each muscle preparing to react to the inevitable fall. I throw my entire weight onto my poles, sinking their tips deep into the snow for leverage and gripping them like a life preserver. My hands may as well have been welded on as I wrap my fingers and wrists around the grip and use every single arm muscle to pull the rest of my body up. In spots where I feel least confident, I switch to the sidesteps I drill into my ski students, “Push your knees uphill, lean into your edges,” I repeat the words to myself that I’ve said to my students countless times, digging in my edges for dear life. It’s easier said than done when you’re on a sheet of ice. I had spent most of my J-term focusing on the downhill, but it had never occurred to me that the bigger challenge might be figuring out the technical aspects of getting uphill. But now, here I am, inching my way up the mountain, absolutely terrified that my skins will give out without warning and send me flying backwards. I’m averaging about one fall every two minutes.

In one of the steeper, icier sections my skins lose their grip and I panic as I feel myself start to slip, most likely headed for a long fall, before I catch myself on a tree. My back against the tree, my skis remain slightly uphill from the rest of my body, putting me in a reclining position I’m not sure I can stand up from. Even if I do manage to straighten back up, I’m unsure whether my skis would have enough traction to prevent me my shooting right back down. My ski buddies are up the hill and out of sight and for a moment, I consider just staying there and waiting for them to go up and then ski back down. My view uphill just promises more ice. My terror of another fall paralyzes my movements, presuming movement is even possible from this position. Finally, however, I refuse to chicken out. Awkwardly, I flounder, step, and push myself from the tree and start sidestepping my way up.

Throughout my childhood, as I was learning how to ski, my mom would tell me, “You’re supposed to fall. That’s how you know you’re learning. That’s how you know you’re pushing yourself.” I started to see each fall as a small victory; I was getting better. But the older I got and the more experienced I became, the less I fell. Now, however, these words come back to me as I pick myself up again, and again, and again, and again. If life is all about picking yourself back up when you fall, I was starting to feel I really had both parts down. I fell quite easily and I could pick myself back up again from just about every position – skis twisted sideways, upside down on the slope, back against a tree.

I entered the backcountry searching for that humble feeling that comes from standing beneath, beside, within something so much larger than myself. My terror, however, prevents me from truly taking time to appreciate my surroundings; my focus consumed by my attempts to not collide with my surroundings. Yet, I nonetheless feel I have achieved that humble feeling. I once read an interview with Michelle Obama talking about how she had told her daughters they needed to choose two sports, one completely of their choice and one that they had never tried before. Her theory was that it was important to try something new, to stick with it even if you weren’t good at it, to accept the inevitable failures that are part of learning, and to keep on going.

Scraped-up and slow moving, I continue up the mountain, humbled by my plentitude of falls. My fear ebbs and wanes as I take pleasure in the chill in the air, the strain in my muscles, the tricky spot where I manage not to fall. We don’t make it to the top, our (my) slow pace and the poor conditions lead us to decide to turn back about 2/3rds of the way up. On the way down, I rely on my alpine skiing rather than lifting my heel to properly telemark, my confidence is battered enough for the day. Our final stretch is down a snow-covered road that feels like a neglected, groomed run that’s become slightly bumpy and iced over, but it allows us effortlessly to fly down the mountain.

So, would I do it again? Totally.