

# BACKCOUNTRY Pyrenees

BY CLYDE SOLES



**B**ackcountry skiing has changed a bit since I bought my first pair of 210 cm wooden cross-country skis (66/58/62) and mounted them with Silvretta cable bindings to use with Galibier Super Guide mountaineering boots. Since then, the evolution of equipment has been constant refinements with two major revolutions.

The first thing to rock the tele world was the introduction of plastic telemark boots in 1992. Prior to this development, none of the leather boots had sufficient torsional rigidity to crank wider skis up on edge. The plastic boots gave skiers far greater power and control...and led to an era of exploding bindings.

The next major revolution, which is still ongoing, was the adaptation of wide, shaped skis from the alpine world. Since the days of leather boots, telemark skiers had been mounting up short, "fat" alpine touring skis with free-heel bindings. But when shaped skis hit the market, suddenly turning became easier for everyone.

The combination of big boots and fat skis has given downhill free-heel skiing a quantum leap in performance. This synergy is most evident at ski resorts and recent films—telemark skiers can equal any stunt. But it's also showing up in the backcountry where "light is right" has long been the mantra. Increasingly, skiers are willing to carry more weight for greater downhill fun.

## THE MARKET GAINS CACHE

For much of the tele years, there was a certain amount of truth to the stereotype of backcountry skiers as granola-eating, tree-huggers in smelly underwear. The free-heel niche was the exclusive domain of outdoor specialty retailers who featured Nordic equipment.

## ADVANCES IN EQUIPMENT HAVE CATAPULTED TELESKIERS INTO A NEW PLANE OF EXISTENCE.

Largely due to the advancements in technology, telemark has gained a certain cachet that is rapidly attracting longtime alpine skiers and even snowboarders. Witness the first-ever free-heel gear review in the December 2002 issue of *Skiing* magazine, with a circulation of 400,000. At the opening day of Front Range Colorado's Eldora ski area, an informal survey showed a 50/50 split with alpine and free-heel skiers—both outnumbered snowboarders considerably. Elsewhere, the numbers of telemarkers isn't as high but the telemarker isn't any longer a rarity on any mountain.

Alpine retailers are taking notice too and increasingly making rack space for fat telemark skis and wall space for big boots. While these stores will capture some of the resort gear market, they're unlikely to bother with the lighter backcountry ski or Nordic track (classic and skate) equipment. For the most part, the days of massively discounted alpine skis flooding the market are over and many of the free-heel skiers buying alpine are paying full pop for high-end products.

The Internet is still a factor, particularly [www.telemark-pyrenees.com](http://www.telemark-pyrenees.com), and brick-and-mortar shops should know what they're up against. This just emphasizes the



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### SKIS AND MORE SKIS

When cap skis hit the market, it resulted in a lot of close-outs on skis made with more traditional sandwich construction. Yet, though they looked snazzy, capped skis didn't raise the bar on performance (just hype). Huge quantities of cut-rate alpine skis, however, did entice many skiers to mount up cheap boards with telemark bindings. This trend, in turn, nudged tele companies to produce more alpine-like skis.

While some backcountry purists have bemoaned the march toward bigger skis, the big smiles on faces of consumers are clearly winning. Never before has handling the wide range of snow conditions been so easy and fun! The energy lost to greater weight is more than made up for by fewer crashes.

After caps came along, it took a few more seasons for manufacturers to develop and refine the shaped ski designs. The trend has certainly been shorter and fatter. What was considered "fat" three seasons ago (about 75 mm to 85mm at the waist) is now called mid-fat and the biggest tele planks are coming in around 90 mm to 100 mm under foot. Customers who haven't been in a backcountry store in a few years are in for a shock.

While not a revolution, the new binding inserts for next year's K2 telemark skis is a positive thing for the industry. This creates a de facto standard, based on the G3/O2 hole pattern, as well as secure attachment and easy swapping of bindings (other bindings can still be mounted normally). As a bonus, the new K2 lifter, with 23 mm of rise and integrated crampon attachment, is pretty cool too.

### BACKCOUNTRY TOURING

Even touring skis have felt the effects of the shorter, fatter trend. For decades, these skis have been skinny (about 68/55/62) and long (up to 215 cm). This long stagnant category has suddenly had new life breathed into it with the introduction of skis like the Alpina Cross Terrain (102/64/87), Fischer Outtabounds (88/68/78), and Tua Traverse (90/67/80); none of which are longer than 190 cm.

Nearly everyone acknowledges that these new skis, when matched to lightweight plastic boots, are easier to use and a lot more fun. While backcountry touring is unlikely to return to its heyday, the new equipment may recapture some market as people migrate from snowshoe tromping to slap-happy carving.

### ALL MOUNTAIN

A vast majority of skiers want the mythical single pair of skis that does everything: light for backcountry tours, sturdy for area skiing on groomers, ability to handle powder and crud. The good news is that manufacturers are really delivering on the dream, albeit the skis aren't what old-timers expect.

This is now the biggest category in the telemark market, with most of the bread-and-butter models in each brand's lineup. After several seasons, these skis are well known and seldom tinkered with.

Expanding on the success of this season's She's Piste, the first female-specific tele ski, K2 is adding the InStinx, a version of the World Piste (118/78/105) for the not-so-girly girls. Black Diamond is remorphing the Arc Angel into the Nunyo (107/73/97) with a three-dimensional cap. To satisfy the demand for more, Tua is beefing up the popular CrossRide 112 with metal to create the Titan (112/80/100).

While wide waists are all the rage, there is still a place for narrower skis on hard snow and when quick edge-to-edge performance is desired. Upping its ante in a shrinking category, Atomic will offer the TM.RX (102/64/86) for those who enjoy eye-watering speed. The new Karhu Rox (110/73/98) seems fat for a carver but the extreme torsional rigidity should help it rip.

### BIG MOUNTAIN

The latest buzz that gets much of the hype in magazines and films is big-mountain skiing—you've seen the photos of some gonzo warping down a fall line or launching a cliff. These are monster boards, often with twin tips and a long turning radius (greater than 20 m), for deep snow, high speeds and relatively few turns. Although some consider these quiver skis, others are using them for everything despite their prodigious weight.

The Karhu Jak (127/96/117), built by Line, and Rossignol Mega Bang (123/90/110), a telemark version of the Bandit XXX, were among the first in the tele world to push the envelope. Karhu will complement Jak with Jil so both boys and girls

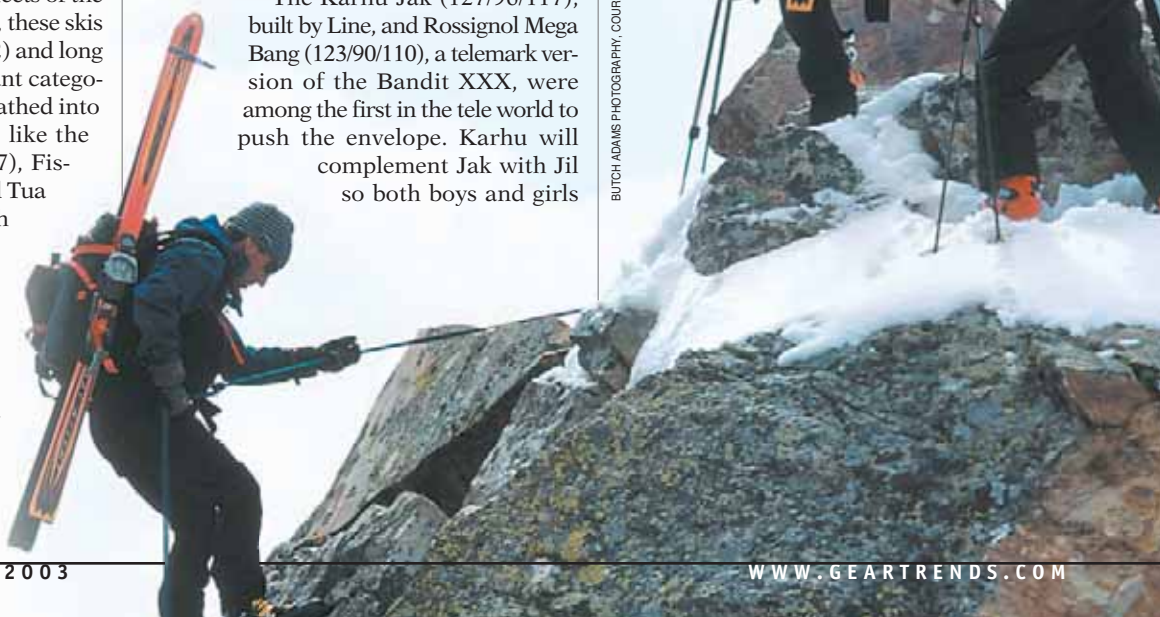
can enjoy the hills. Next season Atomic will introduce the Tele Daddy (124/99/114), a twin-tip based on the alpine Sugar Daddy but made to accept telemark bindings. K2 is beefing up and fattening the Work Stinx (120/90/107), and Tua is busting out the Sunami (120/82/103), and Voile is putting the Surf on a diet to get the relatively svelte Carbon Surf (115/84/107 in 177 cm). Other new twin-tips include the Black Diamond Havoc (120/88/112) and Tua Bubba (125/92/111), while the original tele twin, the K2 Piste Pipe, will be wider (110/78/102) and have a slightly higher rear tip.

With all the attention big mountain skis are receiving, this category is sure to expand further—whether the average consumer needs them or not. Building skis in alpine molds with flexes engineered for the telemark turn is giving designers new freedom to play.

### SUPERLIGHT

At the opposite end of the spectrum from big-mountain skis, which can weigh 9 pounds per pair, are the superlight alpine touring models that are often under 6 pounds per pair.

Long popular in



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**3M** *Innovation*

Europe, organized ski mountaineering races (Randonnee Rallies) are growing in popularity here in the States, where five events are scheduled this season. Combining 3,000 to 5,000 feet of ascent with a challenging downhill course, to be competitive requires lightweight gear.

Dynafit and Tua have long been leaders in this tiny niche but they will be joined next season by Atomic, which will introduce a race ski said to be only 4.4 pounds for a 175 cm.

### TWEAKED BOOTS

The first two iterations of plastic telemark boots from all three manufacturers were better than anything that had come before but still had their problems (pinched toes, excessive stiffness, mediocre buckles, etc). Now that most models are into their third

For the most part, all of the boot companies are in a holding pattern waiting for the next big development. Over next season, there will be a few tweaks to existing models but nobody is re-tooling their molds just yet.

Change is in the air but the 75 mm “duck-bill” toes on telemark boots will be around for quite some time to come. While based in antiquity, this system allows easy touring and good control. The user base is very large and all those plastic boots aren’t going to wear out anytime soon.

### FREE-HEEL BINDINGS

Here it is folks—the main stumbling block for free-heel skiing entering the mainstream market. The 75 mm binding system was originally developed for Nordic racing and has simply evolved to accommodate the

mountain skis sold this season. BD is adding the slightly more economical O3 binding to its lineup (stainless-steel toe versus aluminum on the O2).

The unique titanium Ultimate Telemark Binding is similar in configuration but adds the unique ability to step off the ski (by pushing a button) and onto a snow slope while wearing an integrated crampon; certainly a niche binding for tele mountaineering.

But an emerging category is the superburly bindings that are primarily resort oriented. The Rainey Hammerhead is suited to people who like to tinker with their gear but the payback is both superior touring and downhill performance. The Voile VP-II, Bomber and Linken bindings use the plate concept for maximum cranking power, with the latter offering step-in convenience. All

## ▶ THE FREEDOM OF FREE-HEEL SWEETENS EVERYTHING FROM REMOTE MOUNTAINS TO TERRAIN PARKS.

or fourth generations, designers have tweaked and refined their designs for better performance and comfort.

While the mid-range models (Crispi CXP, Garmont Gara and Scarpa T2) have long been the best sellers, the trend to wider skis is also upping the ante on boots. In fact, more and more skiers are using the next tier Crispi CXR, Garmont Syner-G and Scarpa T1 for skiing in the backcountry. Though often called “race” models, a misleading term, even the top-of-the-line boots are no longer considered too stiff or heavy for off-piste skiing. There’s no such thing as “too much boot” for All- or Big-Mountain skis.

One major trend is the increasing use of thermo-molded liners instead of the standard stock liners. Not only are these far warmer and more comfortable but they greatly reduce the weight of big boots. Molding liners (and making custom footbeds) is an opportunity for stores to demonstrate a level of customer service with which mail order cannot compete—assuming the staff is well trained. As a bonus, customers will browse for about a half hour during the fitting process. Make their feet happy and you’ll have customers for life!

Garmont was the first to offer thermo liners throughout much of its line and G-fits became a major selling point. Savvy consumers no longer had to discard unused stock liners and spend an additional \$120 to \$200 for what they wanted all along. Finally getting with the program, Scarpa will offer thermo liners for all boots next season and Crispi has them on select models.

modern big boots. It isn’t accurate to call 75 mm a standard since there is a bit of variance between existing boots, which can result in lesser performance or even incompatibility with bindings.

At present there are at least 12 manufacturers making 24 different bindings, plus four other companies offering binding accessories! This diversity certainly fills all the niches but also confuses the dickens out of consumers.

While the majority of telemark bindings look like they’re made in somebody’s garage, they do actually work quite well...as did alpine bindings in the ’70s. It’s almost embarrassing to put telemark bindings on display next to modern alpine bindings such as Looks, Markers or the new Line Reactor 12.

For backcountry touring, traditional 3-pin or expansion cable designs (Black Diamond Riva Z, Rottefella Super Telemark, Voile 3 Pin Cable) remain popular options due to light weight, easy touring and modest cost. New entries include the Burnt Mountain step-in and Peak Rigs pin/cable, both of which promise to be better mousetraps.

About five years ago, the G3 Targa waltzed in and practically took over the heavy-duty binding market with its sturdy construction and compression springs. This lit the fire under a lot of people’s feet and suddenly there are beefy bindings everywhere.

While the G3 is still a major player, the strong contenders include the Black Diamond Riva Comp and O2, Rottefella Cobra and Voile Hardwire; all of which now sport compression springs. These bindings will make their way onto the majority of the all-

of these help the telemark skier pressure the rear ski more for greater control.

A particular weakness of all these free-heel bindings is the lack of release if a skier is caught in an avalanche, making the skis act like anchors. The Rottefella TRP is absurdly heavy, while the Voile CRP has the sex appeal of a rusted-out VW Bug. After the fiasco of the poorly-conceived Skyhoy binding, it’s understandable why manufacturers have shied away. Fortunately, the new 7tm binding, distributed by Karhu, appears to be the first legitimate releasable binding—this is the one to watch.

Most companies continue to view accessories as afterthoughts and it shows; mediocrity is rampant. Heel elevators collapse unexpectedly, are hard to engage or absent altogether. Many elevators are too short now that the huge surface area of climbing skins allows steeper ascent tracks. Crampons are exceedingly rare but needed at times. Leashes and brakes are fragile or awkward.

### ALPINE TOURING

Long popular in Europe, this category of ski mountaineering boots and bindings continues to make slow but steady progress in the United States and Canada. In the past few years, the products have evolved to the point that alpine skiers no longer feel they are sacrificing much performance to get a touring mode.

The market pretty much boils down to this: alpine skiers buy Fritschi bindings, climbers choose Silvrettas, and weight fanatics go for the Dynafits. All three systems are fairly refined now though; but by defi-

dition, they will always be a compromise.

If the popularity of races begins to take off, the Dynafit system has the most to gain. Garmont is adding two models of Dynafit-compatible boots next year and the Scarpa F1 racing boot, which has flexible bellows, is already creating a stir.

### POLES, NOT PROBES

It's taken a while but most skiers have finally clued in to the fact that ski poles make lousy avalanche probes. Although the pole companies still offer this "feature" on many of their products, it is no longer a selling point and could even be a detriment (unnecessary complexity and cost).

Most backcountry skiers favor adjustable-length poles, though the utility of this feature is debatable. For the most part, problems with collapsing poles are things of the past except on the most basic twist-lock models. However, it's been such an issue for so long that many consumers are still wary. Indeed, the newest kid on the block, Epic, saw this as an opportunity to introduce push-button adjustments (similar to the old Ramers).

While aluminum shafts are still the standard, carbon fiber continues to grow in popularity due to its superior swing weight. The higher price tag has held many consumers back but Epic's carbon-shafted poles are competitive with the aluminum models of other brands.

Breakaway straps are a good thing for reducing the odds of a dislocated shoulder, but durability has been an issue. Currently, only Black Diamond offers a good self-arrest grip, which gives it a significant advantage for serious backcountry skiers.

### REPLACING SKINS

The broad acceptance of wide, shaped skis has forced most backcountry skiers to replace their climbing skins; the old straight skins no longer do the job. Often a ski upgrade means a skin upgrade due to different dimensions so this market has expanded greatly.

Lightweight, blah, blah, blah. Whatever. Weight simply doesn't matter except for racers and weenies. Just give us durable adhesive (of consistent quality) that's reliable in extreme cold and won't pull off in patches when it's warm. The material shouldn't stretch when wet and should be a dark color for faster drying in the sun.

The new generation of huge, rounded tips at both ends of the skis presents a challenge for climbing skins. The attachment system must be easy to attach and stay secure even after many days of skiing. There also should be an easy way to get the skins off without removing skis.

Icing has long been a problem, even with

nylon skins. Rub-on skin waxes are mediocre at best. Several companies, including Black Diamond and Nikwax, offer spray-on treatments that are more effective.

### AVALANCHE BEACONS & PROBES

As telemark and alpine touring equipment has improved, more skiers are attracted into the backcountry. This increased market, plus greater awareness among snowmobilers, has been a boon for avalanche rescue technology.

Truth is, all the current beacons are pretty darned good. The connoisseurs can argue the finer points—all have their pros and cons—but it still comes down to practice, practice, practice. The originator of digital beacons, Backcountry Access which makes the Tracker, is even emphasizing this with the recent opening of "Beacon Basin," a hard-wired training area with permanently buried transmitters at Loveland Ski Area in Colorado; more are planned around North America.

Knowledgeable floor staff will make the difference on converting lookers into buyers. Since discounted beacons can be found on the Internet, stores need to be on top of their game. To support a backcountry department requires stocking survival tools, such as a good assortment of shovels, the Black Diamond AvaLung II and K2 Avalanche Ball.

Although they have been around for decades, within the last two seasons, everyone and their brother have developed a line of avalanche probe poles. Since it's easy and cheap to build a mediocre probe, the market is suddenly flooded. Demonstrating the ease of assembly and differences in stiffness may convince some to avoid the bargain-price life-saving tool.

### BODY ARMOR

Since telemark skiing is already an indication of higher intelligence, it should be no surprise that many are donning helmets. Back when we were on skinny skis with wimpy leather boots, fast downhill speeds were seldom an issue. Now with big boots and shaped skis, anyone can be ripping down slopes in no time.

Not only do helmets make sense for head protection but, even more important for wide acceptance, they are finally comfortable and look good. Most free-heel skiers are also mountain bikers—the sports go together like peanut butter and jelly—and they feel naked without a cycling helmet.

It's really a no-brainer for stores to carry a good selection of ski helmets. With brands like Boeri, Giro and K2, there are a wide range of fits and styles available. Offering these wide ranges will again give a retail

store the edge over mail order.

Though the new telemark equipment encourages a higher stance—the deep genuflection of "knee-bangers" is outdated—there is still a greater risk of impacts than with alpine skiing. Arc'Teryx pretty much had the knee pad market to itself for the past few seasons since its Kneecaps were trimmer than the old-fashioned skate board knee pads that made people look like tile installers. Next season Black Diamond will also offer compact pads that can be worn under clothing.

### WHAT WE SEE COMING

We have the skis, we have the boots, we even have the "cool factor." Yet until binding technology catches up, free-heel skiing will remain a fringe market. It's still two more years until NTN (New Telemark Norm) round-toed boots hit the market (2004/05). And it will likely take two more seasons to fully refine the bindings. While 2006/07 seems a long ways off, that could very well be the season when free-heel makes major gains against alpine and snowboard markets.

For the new system to be viable, it must not sacrifice ease of use or durability. It should allow easy switching between free-heel freedom and fixed heel counter. Full release capabilities, both in free and fixed mode, are essential for avalanche terrain and probably useful on-piste. Ideally, the free-heel mode would have a lighter touring setting and a stiffer flex for turning control. Heel elevators for climbing, brakes to stop runaway skis, and leashes for glacier skiing are important accessories. For the European market, ski crampons are important. And, above all, it must absolutely work right out of the box.

This isn't a fanciful wish list; all of this technology exists. Rather than several companies creating proprietary systems, the industry as a whole will benefit more by a common standard that allows diversity. Yet in-fighting and out-dated thinking have been hampering progress for several years now. These trade shows are the time for retailers to speak up and tell manufacturers what they want.

The great fear of many people in the industry is a new boot/binding system that is merely designed to sell more products. If it doesn't bring anything new to the table, and hasn't been thoroughly tested, the entire backcountry world is going to suffer. But if it really offers better performance, and a bit of sex appeal, everyone wins.

Of course, back when I bought those wooden skis, the boots had round toes for better climbing and the bindings had a plate for better torsional rigidity, optional heel lock-down and a release function. Hmmm, maybe some things don't change after all. 