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FREE PIVOT IS THE CATCHPHRASE AS **BIG THINGS** ARE AFOOT IN THE WORLD OF TELE AND AT BINDINGS.

BY CLYDE SOLES

FREE PIVOT IS THE CATCHPHRASE AS **BIG THINGS** ARE AFOOT IN THE WORLD OF TELE AND AT BINDINGS.

THESE ARE EXCITING TIMES FOR THE BACKCOUNTRY SKI WORLD. AFTER YEARS OF HARANGUING FROM MEDIA AND CUSTOMERS, THERE IS SUDDENLY A *LOT* GOING ON WITH TELEMAR BINDINGS.

With two major binding introductions, the operative term next season will be “free pivot.” As telemark skiers have demanded more power and control, the bindings have been forced to increase resistance to heel lift. While skinning up a hill, this greatly increases the amount of work required for telemark skiers, which is why “free pivot” is such a big deal. Less work skinning uphill means stronger legs for carving glorious turns on the down.

At present, telemark skiers wanting a free pivot either had to pay \$200 for the Silvretta Adapter that has no release function and weighs almost 2 pounds, or they could purchase the \$320 7TM Tour that offers release but gives up power. The new entries next season will get a lot of attention but are still a stop-gap until more releasable telemark bindings appear.

On the bright side, the industry has finally accepted a standardized hole pattern. Either directly (Black Diamond, Bomber, G3, Rottefella, Voile) or through adapter plates (7TM, 22 Designs), all popular telemark bindings are now compatible with the industry standard 4-hole insert pattern. At this point, only K2 and Voile are putting inserts on skis. Why other manufacturers aren't following the K2 and Voile lead is, quite simply, inexplicable. Even the Dynafit AT bindings can now use the 4-hole pattern (with a Voile adapter plate). And, the pattern still allows drilling for the other AT bindings.

On the horizon, assuming all goes well with testing, there will be a new releasable telemark binding coming out in 2007-08, GearTrends® has been told. Designed to be compatible with current telemark boots, this will also offer step-in convenience and heel lockdown for when the going gets rough or the legs get tired. Stay tuned.

TELEMAR BINDINGS

» **Black Diamond** – First and foremost, the new 01 binding looks cool. Essentially a 02 binding with a free pivot added, the pole-actuated mechanism gives a sleek look. By moving the exit point for the cables slightly back, the 01 will offer about 10 percent more power when making telemark turns. BD tells us that it has tested the bejeezus out of this thing before sending it to market, and it will prove a worthy, albeit non-releasable, backcountry binding. This touring convenience will come at a hefty price, however, as the 01 price will be roughly 50 percent more than the 02. www.blackdiamond-equipment.com

» **Bomber Industries** – The Bishop retains the crown for burliest, and heaviest, binding on the market. This refined plate binding offers fantastic control for resort skiing. But touring with a \$320, 4-pound binding that lacks either a free pivot or release function is for the young of heart and weak of mind. The titanium version reduces weight by one-quarter pound and nicks wallets an additional \$100. Weight aside, to a machinist, these bindings are a work of art. One big advantage of the Bishop is the optional second ski kit that retails for \$65. The company also offers a \$65 adapter that allows the



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WITH TWO MAJOR BINDING INTRODUCTIONS, THE OPERATIVE TERM NEXT SEASON WILL BE "FREE PIVOT."

HammerHead binding to be used with skis that have inserts. www.bombertele.com

» **Burnt Mountain** – With production of this innovative non-releasable 3-pin step-in binding taken over by 22 Designs, the TeleBulldog is sure to gain wider distribution. The \$185 binding clamps the boot toe more securely than normal 3-pin bindings for significantly more control. And it has a brake, so the skis stay put while attaching them. Look for a cable attachment in the future to give even greater power. www.burntmnt.com

» **G3** – First announced last winter and then postponed before Winter Market '05 to allow more testing, the new Targa Ascent is now a reality. This non-releasable binding adds a free pivot to the popular T9 and will come with either the World Cup (stiffest) or XRace springs. A built-in 3-degree ramp angle also helps improve control and reduces rocker launch in lighter-weight skiers. In terms of power and control of free-pivot bindings, the Ascent will likely fall between the 7TM Tour and the Black Diamond 01. www.genuineguidegear.com

» **Karhu 7TM** – Alas, what some industry veterans have called the ultimate telemark binding is not to be. Following the introduction of the free-pivot Tour last season and the more aggressive Power this season, many in the telemark tribe were hoping for a 7TM Power Tour next season. However, there is insufficient room in the current design, so it will require major retooling of the binding. While no significant changes are planned for next season, the Tour remains the only releasable binding with a free pivot; it will remain one of the best choices for backcountry skiers. The Power is more of a resort-oriented binding with better forefoot retention, so it's an ideal choice for skiers who want control and DIN release. The original All-Mountain is all but obsolete. www.karhu.com

» **Rottefella** – Once again, it's hurry up and wait on the new NTN boot binding system. After it was proudly unveiled last spring at the Livigno Freeheel Festival in Italy, the NTN has gone back under its shroud of secrecy. At the earliest, the NTN system won't be in the U.S. market until the 2007-08 season. When the NTN binding finally arrives, it will offer a front throw closure (instead of a heel lever) and a free-pivot touring mode. No release function is planned, at least for the first offerings, so skis will still act as anchors in an avalanche. A key question that remains about the round-toed boots is whether the rear lip under the arch will be user replaceable should it get chewed up walking on rocks. www.rottefella.com

» **22 Designs** – Since taking over the HammerHead binding, 22 Designs has expanded to 110 shops in the United States, plus 14 in Europe, and will be attending Outdoor Retailer this season. The binding itself has seen subtle refinements (longer spring, easier to adjust settings). It's working on a ski crampon, tinkering with the TeleBulldog, and has plans for a releasable binding in the future. www.twentytwodesigns.com

» **Voile** – The oldest releasable telemark binding on the market continues to improve—skiers who haven't tried it in a few years should take another look. While it isn't quite a free-pivot design, the CRB 3-Pin Hardwire offers a touring mode using just the 3-Pins (heel wires quickly clamp to the ski) and a downhill mode (heel wires clamped to the boot); this will still be one of the best backcountry bindings on the market. Next season, VP II will be mated with the Release Kit for skiers who want the control of a plate binding and the safety of a release function. Voile now offers an adapter plate that allows the Dynafit bindings to work with skis that have inserts. Switching between telemark and AT is now an option though not entirely convenient. www.voile-usa.com

ALPINE TOURING BINDINGS

» **Dynafit** – This line of AT bindings is about as dialed in as it gets. While the Classic still trickles out, the Comfort now makes up 85 percent of Dynafit binding sales. The \$625 titanium Race binding is always going to be a small niche. Expect to see more Dynafit boots with proprietary step-in inserts; other companies with Dynafit-compatible boots use the older inserts that don't self-align. www.dynafit.at

» **Fritschi** – Answering the American desire for more, the new Freeride Plus has a beefier rear assembly to increase stiffness for greater power transfer. This is likely to set the new standard for maximum downhill performance in a touring binding. The Explore gets a beefed up heel unit next season. www.fritschi.ch

» **Naxo** – The burlier NX21 is already out-selling the original NX01, despite the extra weight (5 ounces) and cost (\$75). As the primary competitor to the Fritschi Freeride, the NX21 offers a slightly higher DIN setting (13 versus 12) and somewhat better touring performance. Now that the early durability issues of the NX01 have been resolved, neither Naxo is changing next season. www.bcaccess.com

» **Silvretta** – Despite an excellent design, the Pure sort of fell into no-man's land: not light enough for the weight weenies and not burly enough for the testosterone crowd. The answer this season was the Pure Freeride with solid carbon rails (instead of hollow tubes) and higher DIN rating (12 versus 10). The new X-Mountain is essentially a standard Pure with aluminum rails—a bit heavier and cheaper. Also continuing is the classic 500—the only AT binding compatible with mountaineering boots. www.silvretta.de

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