



SKI ROADS CROSS COUNTRY at the

BY BOB WOODWARD



Is decent snow all that's needed to make the sport grow? Or will it take other factors, like Nordic Jibbing, tele and backcountry, to **PUSH IT ALONG?**

PREDICTING WHAT THE CROSS-COUNTRY SKI MARKET WILL BE LIKE NEXT season and beyond is a lot like trying to predict the outcome of a tennis match before the first serve is made. Who knows what will happen?

Will the market grow or decline? Will the sport lose participants in the face of continued low snow years across much of North America? Or, as it has in the past, winter recreational pursuits will it prove a winner during economic hard times when people look to simpler left of this ski season and into the next, the consensus among gear suppliers is that it'll be game, set and match for cross-country's continued growth.

However, there are those who continue to point out that if low snowfall remains the norm across much of the traditional snowbelt states and if global warming becomes fact not theory, it could be game, set and match for cross-country's decline. And lest you begin to think that it's not so hard to predict the future of the cross-country skiing market, you need to take into account those pesky unknowns, those outside influences on market trends that have an affect on purchasing decisions. Factors like the typical cross-country ski consumer's Peter Ashley, "a cross-country gear consumer buys something new once every 16 years."

Ouch. If true, that's not a very encouraging statistic. Then we toss in real estate. Yes, you read that right. Consider the recent sale of North America's largest cross-country ski area (Royal Gorge) to developers. While the sale may not seem important today, it's worth noting because it quite possibly might be



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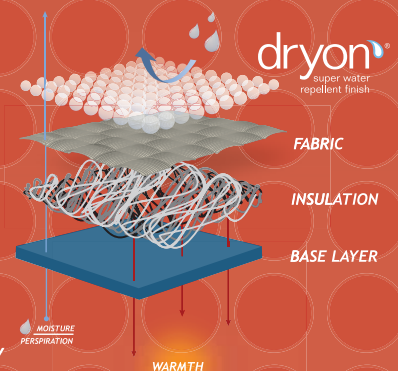


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the first of many such sales of ski areas for future development.

One only has to look at the recent spate of golf courses being sold off and their fairways plowed under to make room for housing developments to see a trend that could replicate itself in the Nordic realm. Of course, the Nordic market doesn't yet have a Tiger Woods to captivate market imagination or drive sales—something that helps keep golfing a very popular pastime even as courses are being plowed under.

Wondering ourselves which factors will finally be the ones that determine whether cross-country skiing grows or contracts, we asked suppliers which way they think the market is headed and what will be important in the sport's immediate future.

GROWING, FLAT, OR WHAT?

"My feeling is that the sport is still snow-dependent. If North America has more good snow, the sport will continue to grow," said Rossignol's Robert Lazzaroni. "And I say this thinking that the much-talked-about trend to warmer winters is still a long way off."

Garmont North America's John Schweizer has a different take on the snow situation. "This season, and in the future, every aspect of the sport, apart from backcountry skiing, will be limited to places with guaranteed snow."

Following a trip to America's key cross-country ski markets in October, Atomic's Rick Halling is in accord regarding reliable snow as key to keeping participation figures up.

"Despite the fact that I hear that cross country is becoming an old people's sport," Halling told GearTrends®, "if we have good snow this winter, more younger people will be out cross-country skiing."

Swix's Steve Poulin countered, "I think that having snow is key, but even with good snow, I view cross country as a stable market with little or no fluctuation up or down in terms of skiers or dollars spent on gear."

"I also see three distinct trends developing. First, consumers are looking more at third price-point gear and bypassing the first and second price points initially and then maybe settling on the second price point at the end of their buying-decision process."

"Second," Poulin continued, "is the continuing trend to consumers being interested primarily in comfort, value and looks in their gear. And, third, I see a trend to vendor consolidation with four, maybe five, companies doing almost all of the cross-country ski business."

For his part, Alpina's Steve Kvinlaug sees a resurgence of interest and controlled optimism among retailers. "Growth will come," he told us.

ENTER NORDIC JIBBING

While not disagreeing with Kvinlaug, Fischer's Ashley told us that only if suppliers build more interesting and innovative gear will consumers come buying.

"The only way cross-country skiing is going to grow," Ashley said, "is through innovation which has been stagnant for the past five years. We haven't given people a reason to buy new gear. So we need innovation in every gear category."

And, right on cue, Fischer is introducing the Jibskate ski for next season, a ski that fully targets the youth market and is seeking to captivate interest in Nordic Jibbing.

"They're twin-tip skis in three lengths (151,161 and 171) in three different graphics. They're designed for kids who want to play on snow. They can use these skis anywhere there's a hill and they have a shovel to make a jump and some terrain features, or they can use them in the terrain park at a ski area. It was time we did something for the kids, and they will tell us where to go next with the concept," said Ashley. (*For more on Nordic Jibbing and the Fischer introduction, see the Nov. 3, 2005, SNEWS® story, "A new youth movement discovers Nordic cool in jibbing," by going to www.snewsnet.com.*)

Not everyone in the cross-country business is as convinced as Ashley that jib skis are the innovation that's needed. So where do Ashley's competitors see the next significant changes happening that will attract new skiers, and what categories within the sport will grow?

Some point to top-end technology and cosmetics coming down into entry-level and second-tier equipment. For example, Leki is taking its Trigger system poles down further in the company's pole line and will introduce the third generation of Trigger poles at both SIA and Outdoor Retailer Winter Market.

Swix counters with what it calls "pro" graphics on all entry-level poles.

TELE AND AT: THE SAVIORS?

As to categories that will grow and prosper, Kvinlaug sees the fringe areas of the sport (backcountry touring, telemark, AT and race) gaining strength.

Salomon's Michael Chiasson said he agrees when it comes to backcountry touring: "I think a lot of people simply want to go cross-country skiing for the pure joy of just being out there in nature, and that's why lightweight BC gear is getting more ski consumer attention."

Coming off a season of successful sales of lighter-weight, softer double-cambered, metal-edged skis with moderate sidecut profiles, Halling is also in agreement.

"The growth potential in this category is excellent as people realize how versatile these skis are for both kick and glide skiing and turning," said Halling.

Atomic will offer a line of new SNS-BC boots for rugged touring next season.

Rossignol has also experienced increased interest in its backcountry touring category and will add more 75 mm boots in that category next season.

For years a primary producer of skis and boots for the backcountry touring category, Karhu will continue to push its XCD ski line. That means a new 10th Mountain ski model with a firmer, more alpine-ski-like flex, and the new fat, waxless XCD Guide for next season.

"We're seeing more hardcore backcountry skiers getting into XCD gear to make day tours when the backcountry isn't stable or for long hut-to-hut and multi-day tours with a pack," said Karhu's Charles Lonzer.

In addition to backcountry touring, Lonzer also sees growth next season in, "AT and telemark skiing as more ski areas promote skiing the terrain outside their boundaries."

Coming off several banner years in both telemark and AT boot sales at Garmont North America, Schweizer said he views the telemark and AT markets in a slightly different light: "The telemark market is flat and not growing, while the AT market, which we prefer to call the ski mountaineering market at Garmont, is growing. Ski mountaineering is a four-buckle boot business for people who want to climb and descend a backcountry peak, or ski off the groomed slopes to the powder stashes and then tour back onto the groomed. Ski mountaineering gear appeals to the American SUV mentality. It's generally more than skiers need but they like to have it just in case they need it."

In keeping with that line of thought, Garmont will add the new softer flexing, four-buckle Genesis boot for men and Electra boot for women to its telemark line for next season. The Endorphin, with reinforced carbon-fiber cuffs and new laced G-Fit liners, will be added for men in the Freeride boot category along with a comparable women's version (Xena), which has a softer lower boot flex.

To accommodate boots like the new Garmonts, Atomic will have two new AT bindings made in partnership with Silvertta in its line next season.

Rossignol also has seen growth in AT ski sales and will add two new ski models along with three new telemark skis for next season.

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AT, telemark and the backcountry, women skiers continue to be the focus of more new product. For example, Rossignol is putting more emphasis on its women's boot line next season.

Salomon will also offer more women's-specific ski models. Ditto Fischer with the debut of a line of women's Nordic Cruising ski models. These new skis will be paired with companion women's-specific boots.

At Alpina, what's new for women comes in the form of the new Madshus boot line. "The Madshus line covers everything from World Cup class race boots to touring boots," Kvinlaug said, "with special emphasis being placed on the women's racing and performance boots."

Speaking of performance, several suppliers predict that exercise skiing will continue to be a fast-growing category. Lazzaroni thinks the growth in the number of exercise skiers will be driven, "by mountain and road cyclists taking up cross country to stay in shape during the winter." And that line of thinking has inspired Rossignol to take its NIS boot/binding system down into the company's MAX and EVO lines, to make the exercise ski experience more enjoyable for those crossover cyclists.

Alpina's Kvinlaug also sees exercise ski

growth, but with more people opting to use entry-level race skis over exercise skis, particularly in areas of the country where there are cross-country ski areas with groomed tracks.

OLYMPIC INSPIRATION

And talk of groomed tracks brings us to racing, a category that all suppliers hope will get a boost from TV coverage of the Winter Olympic Games in Turin, Italy. Hope springs eternal.

"In my heart, I'd love to see a boost in the category following the Olympics," Kvinlaug said. "But until we get better television coverage for the sport, especially of the exciting sprint races, there might not be much carryover or an up-tick in racing interest in this country."

Ever hopeful, Salomon's new SNS Pilot Classic system will debut prior to the Olympics, and there will be those aforementioned Madshus boots that will pique interest among race product buyers.

And since there's no racing without poles, it is worth mentioning that while Swix will be at SIA and Winter Market, it will not yet be featuring its new Force 10 top-end skate pole that, through what the company called Internal Pressure Molding

(IPM), integrates the handle into the shaft.

"Force 10 poles will come with three interchangeable baskets and a new carbide tip, and after more testing should be available for retailers to order next fall," Poulin told GearTrends® in early December 2005. "After the skate pole, we hope to eventually have a Force 10 sprint and a classic pole in the line, and in the future use the IPM process down into all segments of our line."

WALKING AS A SALES BOOST?

Beyond racing, and for that matter any specific Nordic ski category, Leki USA's Greg Wozer contends that Nordic walking will, "Eventually spur North American growth in cross-country skiing. We've seen that happen in Europe where people start Nordic walking and then realize that what they're doing translates directly to cross-country skiing," he said.

Well, whatever factors do eventually shape the future of the cross-country ski sport in North America, they should be clear by this time next year ... just in time for another discussion about, yes, the future of cross-country skiing.

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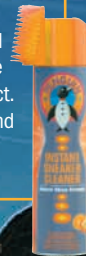
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