
Learning to Ski at Sixty Something

–What to Expect–

by
Garrett A. Hughes

You are sixty years of age or older and you want to learn how to downhill ski. Or, you may only be interested in reading a few paragraphs to reaffirm your conviction that anyone—regardless of age—who voluntarily careens down icy slopes at speeds approaching thirty miles per hour is just plain bonkers. However, if both these statements are true, then you definitely need to read this article.



Anna Marie Hughes on the summit

Pera di Fassa, Trentino, Italy

It's All Downhill From Here

Learning to ski is easy—it's the skiing that's difficult. I discovered that after seven seasons on the slopes beginning at age 62. There are many reasons to recommend learning to ski at this age, none-the-least of which is to improve your relationship with a member of the opposite sex. This was certainly my case.

Before Anna Marie and I were married, I discovered that skiing was one of her passions, and in a generous display of gender equality I volunteered to learn how to downhill ski—if she would learn how to sea kayak. “No way,” I thought, “safe bet.”

Prior to meeting Ms. Annie, I had lived happily in Vermont for twenty years, even helped raise a family of two children there, without ever so much as lifting a downhill ski. As I traveled around the state in winter for the USDA Forest Service, I would see those ribbons of white winding their way down the mountains. Having climbed those same mountains in the snow-free months¹ hunting trees, I did have some experience with the pitch of those slopes. The thought of sliding down icy patches of snow on a pair of boards among those same immovable trees always made me shudder. Vertigo may also have been a factor—for jobs requiring a ladder I normally stay on the second rung, and stretch.

Unfortunately my soon-to-be wife took easily to sea kayaking. The proof of which was a summer paddle on Canandaigua Lake in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State. On a nice day, the chop in that lake from motorboats will rival any tide run against the wind at the mouth of Somes Sound².

So, much to my chagrin, I was forced to live up to my end of the bargain, and thus began my ski-related growth experiences. Bear with me as I share these with you, in the hope that they may ease your entry into this sport—if you are so inclined.

Equipment

Just before my first skiing experience I invested in a pair of boots and skis. I looked at the price of rentals

for the season and compared that with the cost of used equipment, and found that I could buy rather than rent for about the same price. Off I went to the second-hand ski shop. The clerk brought out a pair of boots. Both of us pushed and I eventually got them on. “Do they feel tight?” he said. “Yes,” I complained. He brought out another pair, and yet another until I found some nice boots that fit as comfortably as a pair of loafers. If I was going to be buckled into these things for several hours on a cold day, I didn't want boots that were going to impede the circulation in my feet. Right?

He also sold me a pair of skis. When I told him that this was going to be my first skiing experience, he retrieved a pair from the backroom. Their length was 158 centimeters and they just made it up to my Adam's apple in stocking feet. I am 5'10 and weigh about 180 pounds—when I can get the scale to cooperate. The advertising on the body of the skis read *Super Carver*, but they didn't look much different from a pair that Annie had hanging in her garage from the late 80s. Not being much concerned about their looks, I didn't mind that someone else's name had been written on them with a magic marker, and then crossed out with another. In addition, the dings on the base of each of the skis weren't much worse than those on my spring season cross-country skis. And since I didn't want to be worried about cutting the palm of my hand, or my new ski jacket, on those sharp metal edges, I filed them down a little when I got home.

I picked out the poles myself. I found a pair that fit comfortably from the floor to just under my armpits—like I always did for cross-country skiing.

At Home With The New Ski Equipment

Not having had any time to walk around the store in my new boots, I decided to give them a try right there in my living room. For some reason they went on a lot easier in the store, but I eventually got them buckled up. I marveled at how comfortable they were, despite the difficulty of getting them on. Then I tried to take a step. It was as if I had a cinder block attached to the bottom of my foot. I literally could not move. I made several attempts with both feet but remained glued to the floor. “What have I gotten myself into?” I thought.

It came down to learning how to walk all over again. Walking is usually an effortless process that we

1. Snow-free months of the year in Vermont include July and part of August.
2. Mt. Desert Island, Maine. Ms. Annie has since comfortably paddled in Somes Sound with me.

don't give much attention to, but this situation required a new approach. I don't know the last time that you examined the process in detail, but there is a lot of bending of the ankle and the foot. Encased as they were in layers of plastic, neither my ankles nor feet were willing to cooperate. I finally got going by lifting up an entire leg from the knee and placing it down a few inches ahead of where it started: repeating the process with the other leg, I was able to move forward a total of six inches.

"I hope we don't have far to walk to the lift," I thought. "And what about stairs?"

My First Time

Unlike most rank beginner slopes, which are usually no higher than a pitcher's mound as viewed from home plate, this one consisted of two slopes: the base and the upper. The base had a vertical of about 80 feet. I didn't know about the upper slope until I was prodded onto the lift at the midway point. That added another 100 feet of vertical.

A ride on the *Tapis Magique* provided the means of transportation to the summit. This consisted of a moving rubber mat coated with ice. My skis kept slipping backwards, and I came very close to having an unusual love affair with the person standing behind me, but we persevered as riding seemed better than having to walk up. I couldn't escape the vision, however, of a sort of domino effect on this crowded mat.



What the novice sees: rock walls, people and houses
Mt. Tremblant, Quebec, Canada

At the top I slipped off ("Pick up your poles!"), and slip-slided my way in a well-worn path towards the middle of the upper slope. Once there, by picking up one ski, rotating it a couple of degrees, and then the

other, and repeating this action about 45 times, I was able to turn in the downhill direction of the slope.

The first thing I noticed was that we were up very, very high—noticeably above the rooftops of the village below. The second thing I noticed was the 20 foot high rock wall at the base of this slope—I kid you not, I have pictures—a 20 foot high rock wall covering the full width of the slope. The only way to avoid it was to make a left hand turn near the bottom. And that slope ended in a crowd of people waiting in line to get on the magic carpet.

A Human Snowplow

Fortunately the instructor of our group had enough empathy to realize what we were experiencing, and assured us that no one in his class had ever died by hitting the wall—you were more likely to fall or collapse of a heart attack before you hit it.

Whereupon he demonstrated a surefire technique for obviating any of these tragic events: the infamous *snowplow*. This is a skiing technique where you ski with the tips of your skis together while the tails are as far apart as your anatomy will allow. "By rotating the inside edges of both skis up and down you can apply more or less pressure to the snow surface and control your speed in the forward direction, even causing yourself to stop, if you rotate the skis high on their edges." At least that's the way it's described in most books. Try doing that when your legs are spread-eagled to the max, and your knees are knocking together from fright.

OK, it worked. I'm exaggerating a little.

The reason I sound a bit overwrought is that the older I get, the less inclined I am to leave my comfort zones—at least not without a good deal of hand holding. Our instructor was patient and long-suffering, however, and I think he liked me because at the end of a week's instruction he gave me the award for *The Skier Most Respectful of Life*. But that's getting ahead of the story.

Ski Trails Are Color Coded

After a day-and-a half of struggling up the *Tapis Magique* our instructor deemed us ready for *The Mountain*¹. Fortunately for us there was a gondola

1. Mt. Tremblant, Quebec, for those of you who haven't hit the wall.

with a beautiful view of the surrounding mountains on the way up. At the top, we headed for a green slope.

For those of you new to this nomenclature, let me explain. Ski areas in the United States grade their ski trails into three color categories based on the relative ease of skiing them. They are color coded on a trail map as green: the easiest way down, blue: the more difficult, and black: the most difficult. European ski areas use the colors blue, red and black for these same designations. For a European example, see Ms. Annie's picture at the beginning of this article. Note that the length of each "pista" (ski trail), given in meters, decreases as the level of difficulty increases. The easiest run, *Pra' Martin*, is more than twice as long as the most difficult, *Alberto Tomba*. As you will read further on, I didn't learn the European conventions until it was too late.

All green slopes in the same ski area are not created equal. This was obvious as soon as I began to make my way down *The Mountain*. There were some pitches along the way that just seemed to drop off into an abyss. On these, I snowplowed to a stop, turned 90 degrees, and continued by side-stepping down. I got really good at side-stepping that first season, and it came in handy the next year when Annie and I headed off to the Dolomites¹ with some other members of the ski club.

Skiing In The Italian Alps

Annie and I had been studying Italian at the local community college for a semester, so I was having a lot of fun translating signs as the bus wended its way up the mountain roads from the Venice airport.

I had so much fun when we reached our destination that evening that I decided to sleep in the next morning. Even Annie left me in bed to catch the bus for the slopes. (As it turns out, the term *slope* is a gross understatement for what one actually encounters in the Italian Alps.)

There was a loud knocking on the door of our room. I staggered up, wondering why the "Do Not Disturb" sign was being ignored: a fire perhaps? Opening the door I found one of our club members asking why I was not going skiing. Apparently the club had decided last evening that this was "my day." They

would stay with me for as long as I wanted to ski, and ski anything I skied. My memory of this decision was nonexistent.

The bus to the lift was due in ten minutes.

"OK," I said, not wanting to disappoint 17 people whose very future was hanging on my decision. I grabbed what I could and headed out the door. Have you ever watched someone dress at a bus stop? At any city in the U.S. I would have gotten arrested.

Still dressing ten minutes later, we arrived at the gondola which took us up one of the peaks. The views were breathtaking, mine especially.



Pra Martin Lift

Pera di Fassa, Trentino, Italy

Note the plexiglas covers for the chairs! Lift tickets are RFID tags so you simply walk through the gate without stopping to have your ticket scanned manually—as in the U.S.

The gondola held about 50 people and there was a rush to get off. I was still trying to buckle my boots. I got outside the building and put on my skis; the others, including Annie, were waiting at the top of a slope far below. I skied down the hill—about a quarter of a mile—and as I approached they all turned and disappeared down the slope and into a glade. Reaching the edge I noticed the trail was designated blue. "I don't ski blues," I thought as I careened over the edge. I immediately put on the breaks, a side-ways skid that took me about 50 yards down the hill. Large trees loomed on both sides of the narrow trail. It was then I noticed Annie waving her arms and yelling up at me from the bottom of the abyss. I thought she was saying "Don't come this way." I waved back and shouted agreement. Then I began sidestepping back up the hill. Annie disappeared.

About 20 minutes later—somewhat out of breath—I got back to the top. Now what?

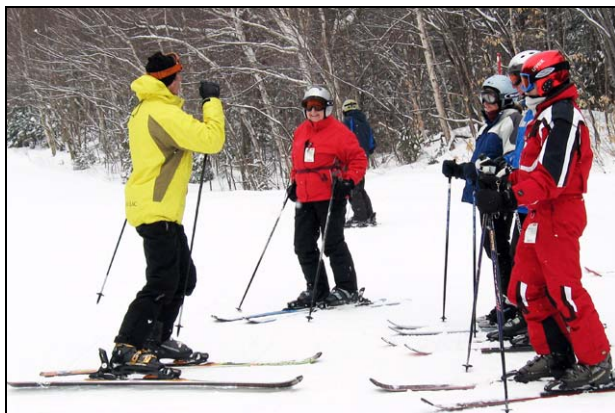
1. In the province of Trentino, northern Italy.

There is not enough space in this article to relate the rest of this story and in any case I want to avoid self incrimination. The Italian authorities will probably find the bodies in a hundred years when they work their way out of the glacier. Annie was spared because she hid our airline tickets and passports.

Instructors

Instructors on the whole are patient and long-suffering as well as empathic: despite the fact that there is always someone in the class who belongs back in the lodge. But that's OK, because it holds everyone back from advancing too rapidly—I mean down the slopes, of course.

I have taken lessons everywhere my wife's ski club has gone, and I must say that the instructors have been really good at keeping me occupied while she and the rest of the group were off skiing.



Back in school again (What did he say?)

Group instruction is often held on a cold windy slope with the instructor drawing a few arcs in the snow with the tips of his or her poles. This is generally followed by a paragraph or two of difficult to hear instruction, a word of encouragement, and then off you go. Once everyone completes the run, there is a brief critique of individual performance, then out come the poles again. This continues for two hours, then everyone heads to the lodge to warm up.

On the positive side, instructors can serve as great guides to a new ski area. Wherever you go, I recommend signing up for a group class for a day or two: one that is going to ski all over the mountain at your level. The information imparted about the mountain and the social aspects of these classes usually compensate you well for the time and money spent.

Some mountains have tour guides that work for the mountain. These folks are a lot less forgiving of individual skill levels and feel compelled to cover the whole mountain in a couple of hours regardless of conditions.

Ski With Your Feet

In those early years, there was a guy in the ski club who was more than happy to share his knowledge and extraordinary skill with me. Every time he would pass me on the slopes he would yell out at the top of his lungs "Ski with your feet!" I endeavored to follow his advice by working assiduously to stay off the seat of my pants or the top of my head (wear a helmet!).

Mambo Turns

Another gentlemen in the club was kind enough to show me how to turn. I was lying prone in a lounge chair next to the heated pool of our hotel, recovering, one fine winter day when he approached and said in an advisory tone of voice: "I hear you want to learn how to make parallel turns." "Yes," I replied. "Watch," he said. He placed his towel on the tiled floor, stood on it with both feet close together, and with a quick rotation of his hips managed to twist both feet in the direction opposite to that of his hips. Both the floor and the towel were dry in this area, so the towel slid easily beneath his feet. He rotated his hips the other way, and his feet moved neatly in the opposite direction. Soon he was doing the Mambo toward the pool and attracting a lot of attention: especially that of the lifeguard who came over to see what was going on. All he needed was a little Perez Prado music and I think he could have kept it up all afternoon.

Lifting Your Spirits

Your first big challenge as a new skier will be reaching the top of the mountain; your second will be skiing down it. Ski areas provide transportation to the top by means of a device known as a "chairlift," ergo "lift ticket." Little or no instruction about how to approach and use these devices is given.

Standing in line and waiting your turn provides no clue about the nature of the encounter. All you see are people, usually in groups of two, three or four, waiting patiently until the lift reaches their derrieres. Then they appear to be plucked from the ground and catapulted into the air in the blink of an eye.

It is not commonly known that the first ski lift was invented by someone whose distant grandparent invented the guillotine. If you look more closely at the event, you will notice that the legs of the waiting skiers are literally cut out from under them causing them to fall precisely into the chair—in the manner of a head rolling into a bucket on the other side of the blade. Rarely does the chair miss.

If luck has it, your chair will be equipped with a safety bar which someone will pull down onto your knees, trapping your poles and hands beneath the bar. You will not be able to lift the bar because the other skiers immediately place their ski-and-boot-cladden feet on the foot rest attached to the bottom of the bar. Exhausted as they are, and anticipating a few minutes of rest, they are in no mood to heed a request to lift their feet; nor are they capable of it. If you are lucky, you will not have lost your poles or mittens as the bar hits your arm or hands.

And this is just the beginning of the lift experience. Imagine, if you will, a cold (ten degrees Fahrenheit is not uncommon), windy (twenty miles per hour is not unusual) day (overcast with blowing snow). You are being transported up the mountain having lost not only your poles, one mitten and your cell phone as your legs were guillotined from under you and your hands pinned beneath the bar. As you travel uncomfortably upward, your bare hand getting numb under the bar, be comforted that the roar you here in the distance is not an avalanche—it could be, but most likely it isn't. It's the sound of a snow gun pumping bullet-like ice crystals into the air. The name "snow gun" is only half correct.

Not having worn any face protection, and with your goggles still perched on your helmet, your face is fully exposed to the firepower of the gun. You feel like your skin is being sanded off, but the feeling doesn't last long because, mercifully, frostbite deadens the pain. Unfortunately your jaw muscles also become paralyzed, making it impossible to scream, let alone cry for help.

The snow gun adds another ten miles an hour to the breeze, but soon you will be past it. Soon. Once the lift starts moving again...

Having passed out from excruciating pre-hypothermic cold in a matter of minutes, you miss most of the ride to the top. You are awakened by a searing

pain as the bar is lifted from your arm. At least blood can still flow in that limb. But now, just in front of you, at the end of the ride, there is only a cliff—a sheer precipice. You watch the chair in front of you empty its contents into the abyss, and then whirl like an eggbeater 180 degrees. The execution is complete.

You can't stay on the chair; it's designed to hurl you, and others like you, off. As you approach the end of your days, you see the mangled bodies scattered below you. Boots, poles, skis, mittens are everywhere. You put your skis back on the ground as the lift nears the edge. The other skiers on the chair fly forward as if by magic and disappear over the edge. You are still glued to the chair. You manage to stand just as the chair reaches the drop point. You hesitate, and the chair pushes you over the edge with such force that you tumble down the face of the cliff joining the melange of bodies at the base. Welcome to the top of the mountain.

Get Me Down

In 2008 the ski club headed for the Canadian Rockies. Our destination was Panorama, British Columbia. We flew into Calgary and took a bus from there to Panorama. It was more than a three hour drive and was dark when we arrived. Our condos were practically on top of the lifts but I couldn't see anything of the mountain. Everyone assured me it would be fantastic skiing for a beginner (now my fourth season). This was my first trip out West.

Next morning I awoke to bright sunshine and opened the blinds expectantly. Gulp! It looked like the ski area back home—whose steep slopes I had been assiduously avoiding—only these were ten times higher. Where are the "greens," I asked? "Those are the greens," was the muted reply. You recollect my emphasis on ski trail designations being relative.

I signed up for lessons and skied the steepest slopes of my nascent career for most of the week. By the end of the week I had skied a couple of blues so the "gang" offered to take me to the top of Mt. Goldie where I was assured that there was a trail down designed especially for people like me. ("Really Charlie Brown, I'll hold the football this time.")



There are several ways to get down
Panorama, British Columbia, Canada

The Summit Quad took us to the top on a beautiful clear day. Every one of the Thousand Peaks was visible in the distance.

After lunch and a round of picture taking we started down. It was only years later that I read a description of the trail euphemistically named “Get Me Down.”

The easiest run off the summit and the only blue trail from the top of the mountain. Get Me Down is narrow in parts, so ski with care.

In reality, the trail is only a couple of meters wide—about six feet—for most of its traverse across the mountain. It’s what is called a “catwalk.” This is an appropriate naming convention for *all* trails of this sort.

On one side of *Get Me Down* was a vertical rock wall going almost straight up. On the other side was a continuation going straight down, whose height at the top was equal to the vertical height of the mountain: 4000 feet. There was no barrier fence. I dug my left ski into a snowplow configuration with the tip touching the rock face.

The other ski I laid up flat against the rock face to provide some friction. I looked like a dog taking a pee. The reality of this image was not far from the truth. I crept along like this for miles. I was

even able to drag the tip of my right pole along the rock surface. On close inspection, whenever I stopped to rest, I noticed what looked like the tips of finger nails embedded in the rock.

The other members of our party, who were forced to ski behind me, complained of groin injuries when we finally reached a skiable run. I was glad they suffered. The run was blue-black but it looked like a green pasture compared to what I had just survived. I led the way down at breakneck speed.



Get Me Down for real!



You might find a reason to ski just in the views alone

From Mt. Goldie, Panorama, BC, Canada

We renamed *Get Me Down* to appropriately describe what in reality it attempts to do to novice skiers. It does not take much imagination to guess the new appellation.

A ~~Walk~~ Bus Ride in the Park

You can see the Wasatch Range of mountains from downtown Salt Lake City. They're on the eastern edge of the basin and range complex described by Pulitzer Prize winning author, John McPhee¹. You can also see them clearly, if the weather is good, just before you land at the airport. This regular formation of mountains and valleys—mostly in Nevada and Utah—is one of the largest and most fascinating geological features in the United States. I spent the last fifteen minutes of the flight with my nose pressed against the window of the aircraft.

Park City, where our group was headed in the late winter of 2008, is just a half-hour's drive east of Salt Lake. The *Transit Guide* for the area leads you to believe that this is a vast ski resort—and it is.

I liked Park City from the get go—I've already described my fascination with the geology. Our condo was located away from the slopes. There was a grocery store right across the street, great restaurants within walking distance. A bookstore. And it was a hop, skip and jump to the bus stop which would take you downtown in a flash. The back of our condo overlooked a huge park with miles of well-groomed x-country trails. And our place was quiet.

Skiing? Oh, that.

Our package included passes to three ski areas: Park City itself, The Canyons, and Deer Valley. I managed two out of three, while the rest of the group did them all. I skied a couple of days at Park City and a couple at Deer Valley. Deer Valley advertises “No Boards Allowed,” although I kept hearing the melody for “No Dogs Allowed,” from the Charlie Brown feature *Snoopy Come Home*.

Park City has some wide-open manageable slopes that were great for beginners like me. Deer Valley



Share the slope with your neighbor

Deer Valley, Utah

was unique in its “Share the slope with your neighbor” program, as you can see from the photo.

I've read a lot of how-to books on skiing and one of my favorite authors for some time was Lito Tejada-Flores. Lito writes feel-good books about skiing, and his videos are remarkably professional. In fact, you won't find any better quality on the market. At this phase of my skiing challenge, I would sing the praises of Lito every chance I got. I was at the peak of my admiration for Lito at Park City when I got the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: a chance to even the score for Val di Fassa and *Get Me Down*, all in two short hours.

After my lesson for the morning, the group agreed—no matter what—to ski with me for a couple of hours. Unbeknownst to them, I conspired with one of the instructors to pretend he was a disciple of Lito's, and that he was going to show them the fundamentals of the technique with which I was so highly enamored.

We met at the base of the mountain at the appointed hour and the instructor began putting this group of expert skiers through the most fundamental exercises ever devised for absolute novices. Step left, step right. Hop, left, Hop right. Step forward, step back. Turn, turn, turn in place. Balance on one leg, balance on the other. This went on for about ten minutes before anyone got to ski. Then it was only to snowplow down a gentle slope in a long S turn to the lift. I was laughing so hard I could hardly stand.

Our groups' traditional videographer got the whole thing on camera. He later made a speeded-up version of the event which made the entire scene appear

1. *Annals of the Former World: Book 1: Basin and Range*, John McPhee, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

even more comical than it was. I continued to laugh all the way up Eagle Lift.

It had snowed heavily the night before and there was about a foot of new snow on the trails leading down from King Con Ridge. Unfortunately we were skiing later in the day, and all the trails had been skied over many times, and piled into a random assortment of mounds. It was a mogul field everywhere you looked. My instructor thought this would be the ultimate joke—unfortunately it was on me.

In all of Lito's videos, you see graceful skiers carving down perfectly groomed slopes in slow motion. Smiles cover their faces—aware, I'm sure of the fact that they are getting paid to do this. Their corduroy slopes have been untouched by other skiers and it's always the middle of the day!

Our trails, however, appeared to have been run over by a herd of stampeding elephants who were simultaneously whipping at the snow with their trunks.

I watched helplessly as every skier in our group including the instructor skied down "Temptation" carefully, if not easily, navigating the mogul field. I followed as best I could, only falling once, but, of course, everyone was gone when I got to the bottom.

As I have learned since, there is a technique to skiing crud, but it wasn't yet in my repertoire.

Getting High: Altitude Sickness, It Ain't Fun

Breckenridge Colorado. Breathing the crystal clear air—if you can find some.

I realized something was wrong as we neared the Loveland Pass Road interchange on Interstate 70. The ride from Denver to Breckenridge had been uneventful up to that point.

I couldn't breathe. Or at least that's the feeling I couldn't shake. I remembered the same feeling while flying in a C-130 aircraft when it suddenly lost cabin pressure at 22,000 feet. The pilot couldn't bring the plane down to a lower altitude because a violent storm raged below us (we were headed to the Antarctic from New Zealand). He did the next best thing, however, and passed two oxygen bottles to the thirty or so passengers seated along the sides of the aircraft. Back in the van and still conscious, I asked one of our ski group members who was wearing a watch/altimeter what the altitude was. He replied, 11,500 feet. Yikes!

At Breckenridge, our condo sat at the 10,000 foot level so there was no respite from the altitude. We arrived on a Sunday and it was Tuesday before I could put on a pair of skis. Apparently some thirty percent of people who arrive in Breckenridge suffer varying degrees of altitude sickness. Businesses will deliver oxygen bottles to your door like pizza.

There is no cure except for acclimation which usually takes from three to six days. The only preparation is slowly building tolerance by staying at an



I didn't take too many pictures from the top

Breckenridge, Colorado

intermediate altitude, and making daily trips into zones of higher altitude. In this case, I might have stayed with friends near Denver and skied in areas situated in the foothills.

Apparently it doesn't matter what kind of physical condition you are in prior to your visit. Well-conditioned athletes are known to experience the same symptoms.

I was tired most of the time I was in Breckenridge. Walking around downtown—the one time I did it—was actually painful. I skied with an instructor-led private group Tuesday through Thursday but took the rest of the week off because of fatigue. Yes, and I did drink gallons of water and energy drinks, avoided alcohol, and moved around as often as possible.

I was extremely grateful to leave the Loveland Pass interchange behind me on the way back to Denver. Monitoring the altitude further with my own GPS unit, I noted that all my symptoms were gone by the time we reached the 8,000 foot level.

Ron Ilgen, my instructor for the three days that I skied Breckenridge was of a different breed. He approached skiing with an irreverence and raw sense of humor that is extremely rare in his profession: personality traits that I could relate



Ron Ilgen
Ski Instructor Extraordinaire
Breckenridge, Colorado

to immediately. His attitude can be summed up in one short sentence: "This is supposed to be fun." And he made it so. A superb skier himself, he cajoled, challenged, and eventually taught our small private group of four how to carve and steer our way through the most god-awful bumps imaginable. Look him up when you get to Breckenridge.

The best part of the Park City skiing experience for me was a timed race on a NASTAR track set up especially for visitors. You get registered, there are starting gates, a slalom-like course, and of course an

official NASTAR time at the finish. I slammed the course. And then collapsed.

Our package at Breckenridge included Vail and Beaver Creek. I wish I had been up for that.

Sunshine On My Shoulder

Sun Valley, Idaho, is one of the oldest ski areas out West. The first chairlift in the United States was installed there in 1936. I think I rode on it this year. The lift I'm talking about runs between two peaks on the top of Bald Mountain, and is appropriately named *Lookout* (a better spelling would be "Look Out!"). They shut it down shortly after Annie and I took the five minute ride across the valley a few thousand feet below—or so it seemed.

The chair is designated as built to carry three adults; it was barely big enough for two: remember the country was in the midst of a depression. There was no safety bar, and the seat from front to back was almost big enough to fit a baby's butt. But remember—this is depression-era furniture. Annie wrapped herself around the chair support on one side while I wrapped myself around the other. The chair tried to shake us off at various points, but to no avail. It is the only lift I've ever ridden—even the ones in the Italian Alps—where I had to close my eyes. They say the view is beautiful. It's hard to see with your eyes closed.

Sun Valley has added trails over the years whenever it struck their fancy:

Designer #1: (looking at a rough map) Let's put a few here; there's an empty spot.

Designer #2: Isn't that a cliff?

Designer #1: Sure. But how the hell will they know that? We'll just put a catwalk on it halfway down. And thus *Lilly Marlane* was born.

The catwalks were apparently a lot easier to build than lifts, so a number of them grace the sides of the mountain: *Roundhouse Lane*, *Olympic Lane*, *Maiden Lane*, *Leigh Lane*, and a couple of lame wooded paths. It's the only ski area I've been to where the number of catwalks rivals the number of trails. And you know my feelings about catwalks if you read my comments on *Get Me Down*.

The trails are steep in an absolute sense. The blue trails in Sun Valley would be designated black at ski



Some members of our ski group contemplating the next run

Sun Valley, Idaho

I lost my mitten along with my poles and my hand froze up. You lost your what? He lost his mitten. Poor little kitten. How could a thing like that happen? Just as I sat down in the chair someone slammed the bar on my hand. Oh mother dear! Did he cry? He said he cried. No he didn't, you made that up. I did not. How's he going to eat the pie? He's not going to get any. Can we get going now, it's getting late? (they begin to sigh) What are we going to do with him? Hang him out to dry. We just can't leave him here. Yes we can. Oh mother dear. Meeow.

areas in the Northeast. Remember it's all relative, though.

And Sun Valley is a popular ski area—even during the week. The groomed trails were skied off within a couple of hours of opening in the morning—just like back home. Whenever I did ski it seemed like I spent more time negotiating bumps than skiing any other type of surface.

There were two big events for me at Sun Valley. First the bad news: I locked myself out of the van I was driving, as we were preparing to drive back to the airport in Boise. One half of the group's gear was in the van, along with my winter jacket, briefcase, rental car info—everything. How could a thing like this happen?

The vehicle was a Chrysler Town & Country with very few miles on it, i.e., a 2011 model. I had turned on the motor and heater and left the doors unlocked so people could get in and out to stow their gear. The rear hatch was open so people could throw their skis on the pile in the center of the van. Finally all the gear was aboard. I was sitting in the driver's seat. All the doors were closed except for the hatch. Everyone was gathered outside the vehicle. I jumped out to close the hatch and closed my door. No alarm sounded while I closed the door. The vehicle had not been out of PARK since I had opened it up about ten minutes earlier. As I went around to the rear of the vehicle, one person attempted to enter the right front door. As I was closing the hatch she said something like: "The door is locked." Her words did not register simply because—it couldn't be locked. I

hadn't locked the vehicle. I went back to the driver's door and attempted to open it. The temperature was 15 degrees Fahrenheit. I was wearing a lightweight vest of windproof polar fleece. Keeps you warm when hiking vigorously in the spring and fall. We had a plane to catch in Boise in a few hours and not a lot of time to spare. It's over a two-hour drive.

"Did you lock us out?" asked someone. A chorus of groans echoed through the crowd. Various scenarios ran through their minds—the mob scene ran through mine. "One half of us will not make the flight," another said. The crowd was getting angrier. Everyone reached for their cell phones simultaneously. Fortunately some of them were locked in the van.

I went back to the condo. I had not left the key on table and locked the door as one usually does. Here's where being 68 really paid off. I always pee as the last thing I do before a car trip through high plateau country and mountain ranges. I called security. They called the Ketchum police. An officer arrived within minutes. "This happens all the time." He opened the van with a long flat blade and a flick of his wrist: so much for high security locks and alarm systems on modern vehicles.

I also mentioned another big event—a good one. I raced two of the fastest skiers in our group down Lower River Run, and beat them both. One claimed the wet snow slowed her down; the other stated emphatically that he had passed me at the bottom. He did. I had stopped to get back on the lift.



The village nestles up to the base of the mountain

Stratton, Vermont

Those Ver-mont Hills Once Again

Stratton—ski out West without the hassle of an airline flight. Sometimes you can return to the same place and know it for the first time.

At the beginning of these essays I mentioned living and working in Vermont for almost twenty years, and never laying a boot on a downhill ski. Generally speaking, the working population of Vermont could not afford to ski. It was too expensive and most were working two or more jobs just to keep their families in food and shelter. My first job in Vermont as a teacher in 1971 paid \$7,500 per year.

The legislature recognized the inappropriateness of this arrangement and passed a law requiring ski areas to set aside one day when Vermonters could ski free. Gear and all. That was nice, except the State's employers did not ante up a corresponding paid vacation day—that explains my dearth of opportunities to ski at the time.

Having tired of minus twenty degree Fahrenheit weather as the norm in Tremblant, a subset of our own ski group set about finding a more hospitable ski area closer to home: one that could provide the same amenities that we found in Tremblant. Vermont seemed the logical choice. We finally settled on Stratton and that knocked a couple of hours off the drive, an easier route with little or no traffic, plus, no border crossings!

Stratton is its own little village that nestles up to the base of the mountain. You can leave your skis in a shop right next to the lift at the end of each day and pick them up there the next morning. The runs are long, the trails wide and well-groomed, comprising a balanced number of greens, blues and blacks.

Because Stratton Mountain is one of the higher peaks in Vermont and has a high base elevation, the snow is better (drier), deeper, and stays around longer than that found in other ski areas in the state. The surprising feeling that I got while skiing Stratton was that I was out West: the wide open trails and their variety and length all spoke of places like Park City, Utah.

We had a pretty good snowstorm while we were there. I took the opportunity to catch up on my latest "How To Ski" books while Annie and the others braved the poor visibility and ungroomed trails. Annie claims they were skiing powder. Sure they did. We will be heading back to Stratton this winter for certain.

Why I Continue Skiing

Anything of true personal value requires effort to obtain and the ability to ski well is no exception. So great satisfaction has come in meeting the challenge and learning to ski well. There of course was some



The Red Brigade: Robert, John, Annie, Patty and Bob

On the Summit: Stratton Mountain, Vermont

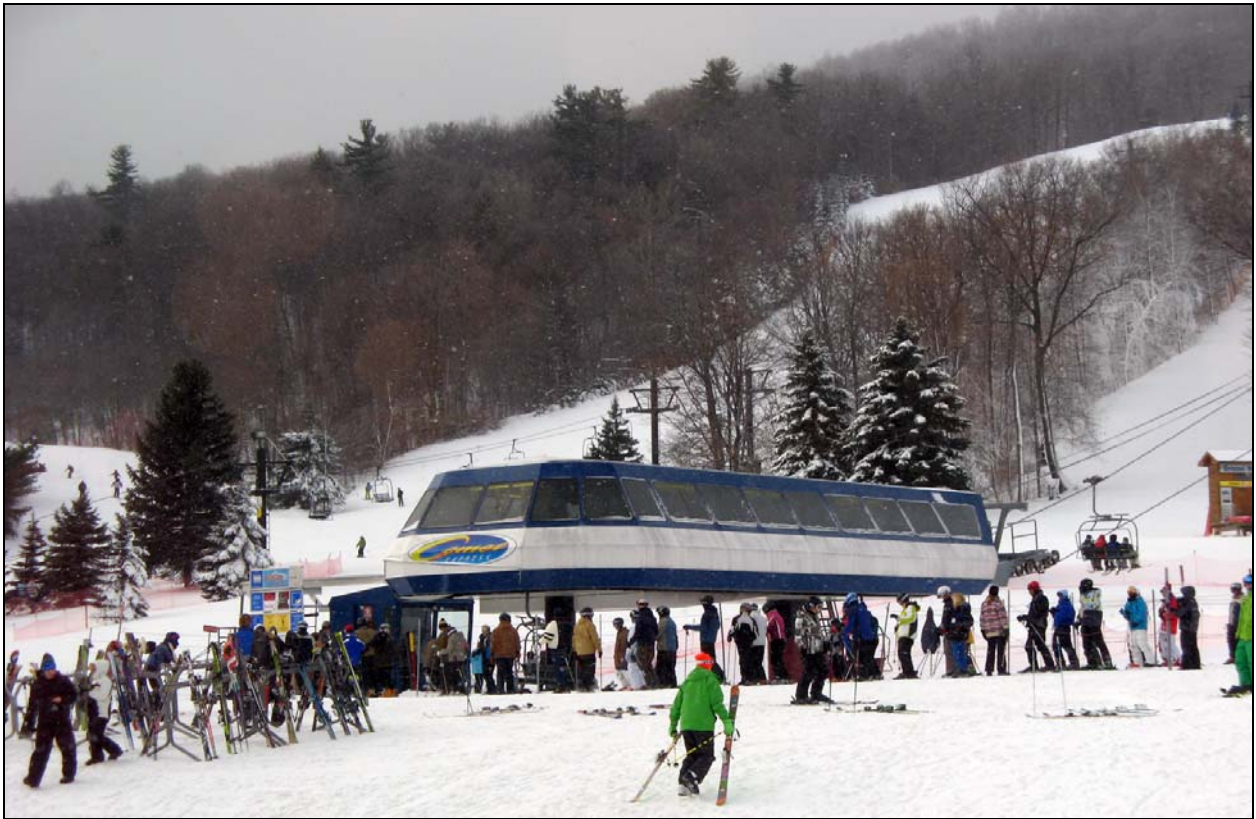
encouragement from my bride-to-be in helping me select from the field of alternative activities. In order to stay healthy as we age we've got to stay active. Chances are, as we get older, we may have the time to do just that. In the Northeast, the winters are long and dreary and can make you depressed if you are stuck inside. To really appreciate winter, and feel like you've got control of it, you've got to get outside. I put on high-tech warm clothing and go snowshoeing in a foot or two of snow, or cruise over a newly laid down x-country track for an hour or two—icicles hanging from my beard, or frost covering Annie's neck gaiter pulled up over her face. Once home our faces show a healthy red glow, my clothing reeks of fresh air, and my blood is racing. And as I am in my late sixties, I stay warm for about an hour before I have to crank up the wood stove. Sleep never comes so well as after such an excursion.

Downhill skiing falls into this same category while adding a bit more of a challenge and expense. The best skiing is available early in the morning, so the preparation involves getting to bed early, and out the door soon after it gets light. Annie and I are fortu-

nate to have only a thirty minute drive to one of the best ski areas in Western New York—Bristol Mountain, where we ski two or three times a week.

Set in the rolling hills of the Finger Lakes, less than an hour's drive south of Rochester, Bristol Mountain has turned out to be an ideal location for me. The beginner's area runs out into a long gentle slope: ideal for overcoming initial fears and practicing turns. You'll find a *Tapis Magique* to carry you to the top of the small hill at the beginning of the slope. Unlike Tremblant, however, the slope is so gentle there's not much chance of sliding into the person behind you on the carpet.

My first blue slope was a short steep pitch at Bristol known as *Sunset*. You can see it behind the base of the Comet Express lift on the following page. My instructor, Karl Butler, led the way. He told me to count to three—out loud—before each turn. I didn't dare look down the slope, I just watched his back and counted as if my life depended on it. "One, two, three, turn, one, two, three, turn, gulp, two, three, turn, two, three, gulp, turn, gulp, one, two, gulp, turn... three, two, gulp." Karl had moved down the



“Busy” weekday morning

Bristol Mt. Ski Area, South Bristol, New York

slope in smooth wide arcs. I zigzagged behind him skidding every turn, my hips and backbone welded together in one straight line and pointing back up the slope. I kept myself from falling over backwards by keeping my poles in the snow behind me. Karl stopped and I stopped beside him. Then he said the magic words that still amaze me to this day whenever I recall the moment. “Just look in the direction you want to go,” he said. “Try it.” I started off in a slow traverse to my left and then turned my head and looked to my right.

My skis started a slow turn to the right. Then I looked back to my left and again my skis came around. I was making smooth turns,



Karl Butler
Ski Instructor Extraordinaire
Bristol Mountain, New York

almost effortlessly. When I got to the bottom Karl came up behind me knocking his poles together in the skiers’ equivalent of applause.

“Nice job,” he said.

Karl Butler is a presence at Bristol Mountain. I often see him from a Comet Express chair carrying about fifty pounds or more of polyethylene fencing on his shoulder as he skis it to the bottom after a race. Karl’s approach to teaching is unconditionally positive. In the hours that I’ve spent with him he has never once started a sentence with “Don’t...” He’s a *can do* guy, and sticks to positive feedback during the entire lesson. With the patience of a saint he stresses fundamentals. I guess he figures if you get those right, the rest will come easy. He’s right. You can easily spot him in a crowd: he’s the guy with the biggest smile.

I’ve found Karl’s demeanor to be the rule, not the exception at Bristol. Everyone I’ve had the pleasure to do business with from sales to rentals to tuning to attending lifts have all have treated me with courtesy, respect and a big smile. Even when I lost one of my grandson’s rental skis.

What captured me about skiing from the get-go were the views both going up the lifts and on the summits of the mountains. There are sights beyond your wildest imagination that you will never see unless you ride a chairlift or gondola to the top in winter. I had a hard time learning how to ski well and it took many seasons—seven to be exact—to arrive at a decent level of proficiency. I think I read every ski book ever published, and some that weren't. I took both group and private lessons and spent many a morning practicing what I'd read the previous evening. All of the authors I read, and the instructors that taught me, contributed something to my ability. But like any complicated skill that must be exercised in a variety of conditions, there are a lot of pieces that must come together at the same time to solve the puzzle.

And because of my background in science, engineering, and teaching, I find myself interested in all aspects of the sport. Why else would you find me reading *A Ski Instructor's Guide to the Physics and Biomechanics of Skiing*¹?

One interesting side effect has occurred as a result of my skiing and training for skiing: my reflexes have gotten better. I notice it especially when I'm driving.

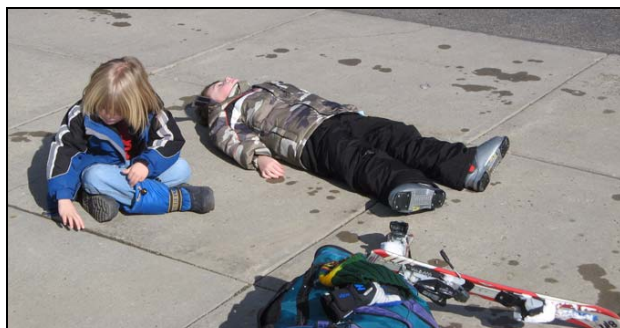
Another good reason to take up skiing in your sixties is to keep up with the grandchildren. Annie and I have eight between us, and we've been out on the slopes with the six of them who are now old enough to ski: the other two will be there soon. Ski packages that include lessons make great Christmas gifts. It is

The best reason of all for me to keep skiing, however, is that when the conditions are right, and I'm personally well-prepared for the activity, and the people in my group are easy to get along with, well, it's just damn fun.

See you on the slopes.



— GAH



Jack (5) And Aidan (7) after a hard day on the slopes

amazing how fast kids learn. They have no fear, but they also don't have that far to fall.

1. by Juris Vagners, Education Steering Committee, Professional Ski Instructors of America, 1995.