

POWDER VS. GROOMER

Follow these eight easy steps to ski powder stashes like a pro

I moved to Montana after 20-plus years of skiing on the ceramic-like surfaces of the northeast U.S. Upon gaining employment at Bridger Bowl, I arrived at my first day of work to a chorus of avalanche bombs reverberating through the ski area. We're definitely not in Kansas anymore! An hour later I stood with other newly hired ski instructors, looking down into the powder-filled Whirlpools. One by one we took our leap from the safety of the traverse, plunging into the powder under the skeptically watchful eyes of our new supervisor.

You know what happens next; I don't even have to describe it. Let's just say I didn't impress anyone. I spent the rest of that first season stealing off on my own on powder days, sans uniform, untangling the technique needed for powder.

It didn't take long for me to join the ranks of powder-addicts. You will certainly find me queued up at Slushman's with the rest of Bozeman on a deep day. But I have learned through my teaching that I wasn't the only skier to struggle with adapting ski technique to powder. It's actually quite a common conundrum — hence, a prevalent lesson goal to ski powder as comfortably and capably as groomed slopes. Here are some tips to have you whooping it up with all the other crazies on a blissful powder day.



BY KARIN KIRK

1. Keep your weight fairly even between both feet

OK, here's the super-common scene from the Bridger chair: skier pushes off from the road into Sluice Box, gets up a bit of steam and goes for that first turn. What is supposed to be the beginning of a perfect run slowly goes wrong and unwinds into an awkward sideways cartwheel. Crash. Nothing like snow packed into every pore space of your helmet and clothing to make you second-guess calling in sick with powder flu, eh?

What's going on with the sideways-cartwheel move? Simply, that's what happens when you start a turn in powder as if you were skiing hardpack. It's all about how you weight the skis. On firmer snow, we generally put most of our weight on the outside ski, aka the downhill ski (see illustration). But in powder, if you step hard on one ski, it descends through the snowpack, traveling away from you and pulling you off balance. You enter an unfortunate feedback loop where the other ski gets very light with none of your weight on it. The ski gets so light, in fact, that it comes right up out of the snow, which only puts more of your weight on the wayward downhill ski. And lo, you execute a sideways cartwheel.

The solution is pretty simple. Keep your weight nearly even between both feet. Resist the urge to stomp on that outside ski. Instead, think of weighting and pressuring the skis gingerly — no sudden moves which will send a ski diving into the snow.

2. Create your turn with strong, steady moves

So, if a typical groomer turn starts out with a pounce onto

the outside ski, yet that won't work in powder, what should you do instead? One method is to deliberately steer both skis through the turn. In other words, gradually point both feet around the turn in the direction you want to go. Keep turning your feet all the way through the turn. Think of it like you are slowly turning up a volume knob. Turn your feet a bit, then a bit more, then more still. Keep dialing that knob, all the way throughout the turn. Because your skis are in the snow instead of on top of the snow there is more resistance on the skis in powder compared to hardpack. Your movement has to be stronger than the snow resisting the movement. Quick, stabbing moves almost always cause trouble, so focus on strong and steady. Imagine turning your skis through molasses.

3. Surf with your skis

Another method for turning in powder is to tip the skis onto their edges. On groomed snow, this slicing move engages the skis' edges into the snow and produces a carved turn. In powder, you aren't trying to bite into the snow but instead to bank the skis within the snow. Think surfboard, boat, airplane. Again, this move is best when it is gradual and patient.

4. Seek rhythm

One of the biggest differences between groomed snow and powder is the resistance on your skis when they are submerged in powder. Thus, it feels awkward to try to get a turn going. Having rhythm really helps — you can use the energy from one turn to propel you into the next one. Try this: on a not-too-steep slope, start your run by skiing straight down the hill. Go straight until you get up to turning speed. Then aim for rhythmic, short turns that have a bit of bounce in them. The turns don't need to go all the way across the hill; don't hold on to each turn too long because that will slow you down too much. Instead, use a snappy rhythm and upbeat timing to move from one turn directly to the next one. Use a pole plant for timing — the poles are your metronome and will help you keep on cue with the rhythm.

5. Stand up tall

Skiing through powder can be a balance challenge. Your best bet for balance is to stand up tall over the middle of your ski. The idea that you should lean back in powder is a myth — it never makes sense to purposefully ski in an unbalanced stance. So stand up and strive for a tall and balanced position. That will leave you ready to contend with the uneven terrain that is concealed by the new snow. When your skis inevitably encounter hidden rises and dips under the snow, use your legs as shock absorbers, then seek to regain a tall and balanced stance after each bump. You will find yourself moving around a lot to maintain balance and flow in powder. A balanced stance is not a passive thing, rather you have to constantly adjust and adapt to maintain balance through ungroomed snow.

The best powder skiers seem to just flow down the moun-



The outside ski is on the outside part of the curve made by your ski tracks



For hard snow: strong pressure on outside ski



For powder: nearly equal pressure on both skis

tain, from one turn to the next, over bumps, across dips, and continuously moving down the hill. It may look smooth and fluid, but in reality those skiers are moving a lot. They are absorbing terrain changes, actively working to maintain their balance and not letting small upsets get in the way of their momentum.

6. Let it flow

Momentum is your friend when skiing powder. The resistance of powder snow has a constant braking effect, so it's OK to let the skis run a bit. Since the snow will take care of your speed control, you can relax a bit and loosen up your turns so that you flow downhill as much as possible. If you try too hard to control each and every turn you will a) work way too hard and b) slow down too much and wind up mired down in the snow. So let it flow. I know that can be hard for you A-types, but you do have to give up a bit of that tight grip in order to successfully navigate through powder.

7. Get fat

No, I'm not suggesting an all-bacon diet. Instead, try out some wide, rockered skis. They absolutely make this so much easier to learn. A ski with a waist-width in the mid-90s to 110 mm or more will create a distinctly different experience on a powder day. Wider skis float in powder while rockered skis allow a surf-inspired schmeary turn that is simply too easy and fun to resist. Even if you do not strive to own multiple pairs of skis, it's still well worth the money to try out some demos even if just to help you get the hang of skiing the deep stuff. (Warning: you may become so addicted that you can't resist buying another pair of skis. But there are worse things in life than having too many skis, right?)

8. Go with a Pro

I know this sounds self-serving coming from a ski instructor, but lessons really do help. If you are an accomplished hard-snow skier, a bit of coaching will help you identify the key differences and adapt accordingly. If you are timid or uncertain about powder, some friendly and encouraging instruction will help you trust your turns and let it flow through powder-filled meadows. And in either case, an instructor will lead you to hidden powder stashes and parts of the mountain that are best suited to your tastes and abilities.

So I hope to see you on the next powder day. Or better yet, to hear you: whooHOOOO! Have fun out there! ♦

Karin Kirk is a ski instructor and staff trainer at Bridger Bowl. Now that she's finally gotten the hang of skiing powder, don't even think about cutting in front of her in line on a powder day. She can be reached at karin@kirkframeworks.com.