

ON SKIING Step into Winter

Autumn can be tough on snow-starved skiers. Relief, however, may be as simple as putting one foot in front of the other. By Paul Tolme



THERE'S A TIME IN LATE

autumn, before the first big storm arrives on my front steps like a long-lost friend, when my longing for snow prompts me to go find it. Absence may make the heart grow fonder, but abstinence just plain sucks.

This is how I found myself at Colorado's Silverton Mountain last December, several weeks before the ski area opened. Along with dozens of other snow-starved skiers, I had enlisted in Silverton's bootpacking brigade.

Bootpacking is a throwback to the days before machines groomed slopes. You strap your boards to your back and clomp across a mountainside in ski boots to break up and compact layers of early-season snow. This helps form a stable snowpack, both reducing the risk of avalanche and extending the life of the snow deep into the ski season.

Silverton itself is kind of a throwback. No grooming. One aging double chairlift. No real amenities to speak of—aside from a yurt that stands in for a day-lodge—and no worries about finding challenging pitches on what is a ridiculously steep, experts-only mountain. It seemed like the perfect place to get my ski season started.

In exchange for two days of labor, I would get one \$99 late-season lift ticket (Silverton operates on a guided basis only, with skiers escorted in groups of eight people or fewer.) But the free ticket was an afterthought. I came for the chance to reintroduce myself to the mountains and assuage my ego that, at age 38, I could still spend a few days stomping a mountainside without pulling up lame. (When I was younger, I ran marathons and pushed myself in athletic



pursuits to show off for other people. Now I just try to prove to myself that I've still got what it takes.)

When I tell my girlfriend about my bootpacking plans, she's less than enthusiastic. Two days of work on avalanche-prone slopes for *one* lift ticket? "Isn't that kind of dumb?" she says. I foolishly had hoped she would want to join me on what I considered a cool adventure. So like an armchair quarterback unable to convince his wife to spend a Sunday afternoon watching a ballgame on TV, I'm frustrated that she doesn't share my growing excitement.

"Dumb? Of course it's dumb," I respond. "That's the whole point of most adventures, sweetheart." Somehow my logic fails to convince her. This would be a solo mission.

Heading out the door, I promise not to hurt myself. She reminds me that I'd made the same promise before breaking my arm two summers ago trying to do a flip on skis into a swimming pool. Nonetheless, I'm a sailor too long in port.

I need snow.

About 30 of us gather at 8 a.m. in Silverton's dirt parking lot, don avalanche beacons and prep ourselves for the long day ahead. I notice several guys passing around a roll of duct tape

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and ask what they're doing. "You gotta tape the bottom of your ski pants to your boots," says Chris, a college student from Crested Butte, tossing me the roll. "Otherwise the snow will get jammed all the way up to your crotch." So much for impressing strangers.

Before embarking on any arduous



endeavor, I mentally calculate a cost-benefit ratio. Hiking up a peak for three hours to enjoy a 15-minute descent through virgin snow? Yes, the payoff would be worth the pain. Not very long into my bootpacking adventure, however, I begin to question my math.

We march in a long diagonal line across the slope, each successive person several steps behind and a few feet lower. (On an avalanche-susceptible slope, you don't want anyone disturbing the snow directly above you.) Any fool who has ever been in the wilderness in midwinter knows that skis were invented precisely to avoid having to walk through deep snow. But here I am, repeatedly sinking my lead-weight boots into thigh-high powder: It feels like I'm climbing up a ladder out of a swimming pool filled with wet cement.

As exhaustion sweeps the ranks shortly into our second hour, our once-orderly picket line degenerates into a confederation of staggering dunces. After a long autumn of food-packing, I'm out of shape and winded. Even more inexcusably, I'm also overdressed. Beneath my jacket and fleece, my sweat-sopped base layers stick to my skin like wet newspaper.

"Drive your heels in! Punch through the layers!" exhorts Jen Brill, who owns Silverton with her husband, when she notices me tiptoeing across the crust, trying to stay afloat to conserve energy. Apparently, that's a bootpucker no-no. "You gotta bust up those layers!"

Delirious, I have a vision of Jen sitting on a horse, a shotgun across her lap, mirrored sunglasses hiding her eyes. She's a Southern sheriff, and I'm working on a chain gang. The worst part about bootpacking is the temptation to escape—realizing that you could be skiing this beautiful, untracked snow rather than stomping it. That thought torments me with every plodding, painful step.

Out of Jen's earshot, I listen as Jordan, a mountaineer from Aspen who's training for a trip to the Himalayas, plots his escape. Did I want in? As I think it over, Jen, out of the

blue, tells us to click in. Finally, the moment has arrived. The snow on Chaser Face is tracked out from our efforts, so I cut into the stand of Aspen saplings on the right side and sail through several short sections of fluff, then straight-line the chop near the bottom to gain speed for the long run-out. It's hardly a historic run, but I'm exhilarated.

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At lunch, I look around for Jordan. He's gone. Any of us could have split as well, but on that brief run down Chaser Face we've gotten a taste, and we want more. Plus Jen has promised us an even better descent down Tiger Bowl.

Later that afternoon, I stand admiring the 30-foot-wide swath of punch holes that cross Tiger like tractor rows in a Kansas cornfield—the work of previous packers. I find my groove as we traverse the slope. Slow and steady. Conserve energy. No need to be a hero. All the while, I admire the untracked snow just below us. When Jen finally utters the magic words, "click in," a shudder of excitement sweeps the ranks.

This time, my laggard, half-assed pace pays off. Higher up the slope than the others who had already started traversing back across, I can drop into the deep snow on the right side of Tiger Bowl. The day-long suffer-fest is nearly over. I eye the virgin snow and think of epic powder days past and future, and wait for the word to drop in.

For skiers, waiting for the snow to fall is one of life's great torments. Some hit the pavement, running into ski shape to pass the time. Others rent skiing videos. Many just peer out their frosty windows each autumn morning searching for a miracle. Me? I pull on my ski boots, head uphill and welcome back winter one dumb posthole step at a time. ♦