

## Cross Country Skiing – Level 2

We started you out with the basics of moving forward on a level surface or slight inclines. Most courses have hills because it makes the skiing more fun! Hills also give you the challenge and the satisfaction that you can traverse them. First you need to know some more advanced techniques for these situations. We will cover turning, going uphill, going downhill and stopping.

### Turning:

Going downhill will be easier--and less stressful--if you also learn how to turn. This is particularly important on steep hills, or hills with turns in the middle or at the end. And if there are trees beside the trail, this can make beginning skiers very uneasy--as well it should. Collisions with trees are not fun and are best avoided (Hint Hint). Here are some turning tips to make your next journey on cross-country skis more enjoyable.

**Point your skis where you want to go:** This bit of advice seems so obvious, but we need to start someplace. If you're on the flat in untracked snow, and want to go left, simply move your left ski left, then do the same with your right ski. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter: You're around the turn. There's no secret to turning on the flat. Most beginners figure out how to do it without being told.

**Push off the way you want to go:** This sounds the same as the advice given above, but is not. Rather than merely pointing your skis the way you want to go and pitter-pattering around the turn, make an aggressive move to get around that turn. If going left, place your weight first on your right ski, lift your left ski slightly and point it directly to where you want to go, then shift forward onto that ski. Pushing with both poles will give you extra momentum. This is how skaters move, and it is a particularly effective way for getting around a turn. Just because you're a classic skier, that doesn't mean you can't adapt a few skating moves.

**Trust the tracks:** Where the trails have been groomed, the tracks will get you around most turns if you simply relax and let them do the job. Keep your weight forward, your hands out in front, and your weight more or less balanced across both skis, and you can ride out the turn safely, assuming the hill is not too steep or the turn too sharp.

**Steer like on a bicycle:** So what do you when you encounter steep hills and sharp turns? Answer: Panic, no, steer like on a bicycle. If you position yourself correctly, you should have your hands well out in front of you, almost over the tips of the skis. The poles that those hands hold should be close to your body, pointing straight back. Pretend that you are on a bicycle and that your hands are gripping the handlebars. Turn your bike the way you want to go, rotating your hands on the handlebars. If turning left (for example), your left hand will come down, your right hand will come up, and your entire body will rotate slightly, leaning left, just as it would making a left turn on a bicycle. When this happens, your skis also will tilt slightly in the tracks,

left edges down, right edges up. This subtle movement will help you ride the tracks through the turn.

**Snowplow around the turn:** This basic technique used by downhill skiers works on cross-country trails too, particularly when there are no set tracks. While in the snowplow, you simply weight the downhill ski (i.e., the one that will be downhill after you complete the turn) and let the skis do their job taking you left or right. Turning while you are snowplowing also will help slow you down.

**Take lessons:** The best way to learn different cross-country ski techniques is to take lessons. That seems obvious, but less obvious is the fact that you can become an even better Nordic skier if you also take lessons on downhill skis. Perfect your downhill ski technique, and you can apply what you learned while cross-country skiing. Similarly, downhill skiers would be well advised to take some cross-country skiing lessons. What they will learn is how to shift their weight from ski to ski, treating each ski as an independent steering unit. Combining downhill and cross-country skiing will make you a complete skier and insure that you have more fun on the snow.

## **Going Uphill:**

To identify degree of difficulty, ski trails are marked: green circle (easiest); blue square (more difficult); and black diamond (most difficult.) Unless you stick to the appropriately marked green trails, sooner or later you are going to encounter a hill..

Which uphill technique you employ depends on the steepness of the hill:

**Shallow:** If the hill is shallow (only a few degrees rise), you should be able to walk right up the hill, using your normal ski stride. The wax (or grooves) beneath your boots will grip the snow, allowing you to push off normally. Here's where good technique comes in, because the more you commit your weight to the push-off ski, the easier it will be for you to ski uphill and the steeper the hill you will be able to ascend without taking your skis out of the tracks.

**Steep:** If the hill is steep and/or the tracks are icy, it may be difficult for you to maintain your straight-forward stride. In that case, move out of the tracks and into the untracked middle of the trail. The softer snow may permit you to maintain your classic stride. If not, open your stance. Start skiing pigeon-toed with your ski tips angled outward. Even a slight shift into this "V" or "herring-bone" position may provide enough traction to keep you moving uphill. Don't forget to use your poles to provide extra push and weight that downhill ski on each stride. Proper weight transfer is essential to practically every cross-country skiing technique.

**Steeper:** If the hill is steeper still, you may need to start herring-boning. If you take a ski lessons, your instructor will show you how. Now the "V" of your skis is wider: tails together, tips spread far apart. You now need to more aggressively plant your poles for extra push. And ski more upright so that your weight is on the back of your skis. (If you lean forward too much, your skis will slide backwards.) One way to insure your weight is back on the skis is to look up toward the top of the hill. That's not always easy, particularly if you're fatigued, but keep looking up as you ski up.

**Steepest:** If the hill is very steep, or if the snow is deep, even the herring-bone may not work. In that case, you may need to sidestep the hill. Place your skis perpendicular to the slope, plant your downhill pole firmly into the snow, and raise your uphill ski to a point higher on the slope. Plant your uphill pole for support and raise the downhill ski to a point next to the uphill one, then repeat. It's hard and tedious work sidestepping up a hill, but sometimes that's the only way you're going to get to the top. This technique can be used in reverse to get down a steep hill.

Master these simple uphill techniques, and you'll be able to ski comfortably on trails that previously may have seemed too difficult a challenge. The "more difficult" trails often are marked blue only because they present more an aerobic than a technical challenge. You will enjoy cross-country skiing more if you can ski the ups and downs as well as the flats.

## **Going Downhill:**

The aspect of cross-country skiing that worries most beginners--in fact, keeps them out of the sport--is going downhill. And even when people become skiers, uncertainty over their ability to navigate hilly areas often keeps them off the most scenic trails. With a few simple techniques you can learn to not merely survive downhills, but also to enjoy them.

Here is what to do the next time you are at the top of a hill faced with the necessity of getting down it still standing up:

**Trust the tracks:** Analyze the hill. It may be easier to navigate than you think. Nordic trail designers usually know what they're doing, and they realize skiers possess different levels of ability. At least on the blue trails, there often is a straight run-out into the flat, so even if you do pick up speed on the descent, you can use that speed to carry you over the flat, gradually slowing down before starting to poll again. You spent a lot of energy getting up the hill; now it's cash-in time. Leave your skis in the tracks and enjoy the ride down.

**Position yourself properly:** Unlike going uphill where you weight the backs of your skis, you want to keep your weight forward going downhill. If not, your skis will slide out from under you, dumping you on your behind. The proper downhill position, thus, is ankles flexed, knees bent, butt back, shoulders forward, hands out in front of you. In fact, one way to get into this flexed-forward position is to reach out with your hands toward the tips of your skis. Make this a conscious movement every time you start downhill. Reaching further forward will lower your profile and cause you to move faster because of decreased wind resistance. But you'll be less likely to fall in this lowered position, and if you do fall, you're closer to the ground. You'll kiss the snow, not smack it.

**Learn the tricks of slowing down:** You can control your speed with subtle movements. Since lowering your profile decreases wind resistance, standing more upright and catching the wind will slow you. (Be sure to maintain your forward lean, however.) You can also shave some of your speed by dragging your poles. Since the snow often is softer outside the tracks, moving one or both skis into this softer snow will help you slow down. To really put on the brakes, you can place your poles between your legs and sit on them, digging them into the snow. They'll

bend, but shouldn't break. Before doing this, however, you should learn how to snowplow.

**Snowplow:** This is the first technique that instructors teach beginning downhill skiers. Snowplowing is the reverse of the herring-bone that got you up the hill. Instead of separating the tips of the skis, you point them together. Your tails draw apart, forming a reverse "V," or snowplow. The farther apart you push them, the slower you will go, particularly if you press your weight on the inside of the snowplowing skis. Unfortunately, the skinny skis employed by cross-country skiers offer less drag than wider downhill skis, but you can still slow your speed using this basic technique. Another variation is to use a half-snowplow with one ski, keeping the other ski in the track.

**Bailing out:** But alas, some hills are either so steep or so slick that even the most practiced skiers need to take defensive definitive, action. This particularly may be true if the trail curves left or right with trees on side. Falling is one way to come to a stop. In a controlled fall, simply crouch and let your skis slide out from in front of you, letting your poles drag behind so you don't run over them. Then get up and figure out how you're going to complete the rest of your descent.

**Chickening Out:** Don't be embarrassed, we've all done it: novice and advanced skiers. At the American Birkebeiner, the 55-K ski race that attracts only the most seasoned skiers, they even have side trails beside some of the steeper descents. This allows competitors to take off their skis and walk down. Before doing that, however, you may be able to sidestep your way down the hill. This is the reverse of the sidestep described in Going Uphill. Place your skis perpendicular to the slope, plant your uphill pole firmly into the snow, and lower your downhill ski to a point lower on the slope. Plant your downhill pole for support and lower the uphill ski to a point next to the downhill one, then repeat. Maintaining your weight over your skis is very important if you don't want to slide down the hill. If you decide to remove your skis and hike down the hill, please be considerate and move to the side of the trail so you don't ruin the tracks for those who follow.

Although most cross-country trails are marked to show degree of difficulty (green, blue, black), this relates to relative difficulty within each specific Nordic center, not as compared to other Nordic centers. A green trail at one center might be a blue or black at another--and vice versa. Similarly, snow conditions can affect trail difficulty. Soft snow may make a blue or black trail easier to ski; ice may convert even a green trail into one advanced skiers may avoid.

### **Stopping (also known as Falling):**

How do you stop on skis? Simple: you quit moving your arms and legs. If on the flat, you will slide to a halt. If on a downhill slope, you may need to use one of the techniques described in the preceding sections; Going Downhill and Turning. Most effective is a hockey stop, where you suddenly shift skis to the perpendicular--although this takes practice.

No, the subject of this section is actually falling down, but yes getting up must be covered also. I was afraid of scaring beginning skiers by suggesting in the list of screens that "falling" was part of the ski package. Most of you probably figured that out anyway, and the fear of falling prevents a lot of people from starting the sport. Here's how to avoid falling, as well as how to get

up after you do fall.

**Follow the leader:** If you can slide in behind a good skier and do what he or she does, you can learn to ski--and stay upright--much quicker.

**Stay focused:** Most falls occur on the flat. What happened? You lose concentration. If you can stay focused, you will be much less likely to fall down.

**Quit while you're ahead:** Fatigue probably causes more falls than poor technique. This is true in downhill as well as cross-country skiing. It's difficult to focus when you're tired, or cold because you're soaked with sweat and too far from a warming hut. Don't ski too long, particularly if you're new to the sport. Sure, I know you may have driven 200 miles to get to the ski resort and paid for lodging, lessons, and a trail pass, but don't feel that you have to ski all day to get your money's worth. Sitting by a warm fire and sipping a hot chocolate while reliving an hour on skis often can be more fun than spending two or three hours on those skis and dragging yourself back to the lodge.

**Practice proper nutrition:** Cross-country skiing soaks up a lot of energy. Not only does doing the sport burn more calories than almost any other physical activity, but you'll also burn calories staying warm. Think like a marathoner. Eat well and drink well. If you can maintain a high energy level through proper nutrition, you will be much less likely to fall down.

Suppose you do fall down; how do you get up? Squiggle around and get in a position where your hands and knees over the fronts of the skis. Make sure that your skis are perpendicular to the slope, so you don't start to slide the hill. From a kneeling position, stand up pushing off the snow with your hands. If this proves difficult, remove one boot from the ski and stand up. Practice getting in and out of your bindings before you start, so you know how to accomplish this.

If you follow all of the advice above, you will be less likely to fall. However, if you do fall down, don't be embarrassed. At some point, everybody falls--even the good skiers. In fact, some skiers claim that if you never fall down, you'll never improve, because you're not pushing against the edge of your ability. I don't believe this, preferring to remain upright, but it's a good rationalization to use while brushing off the snow.