

Holly Wademan

SKI LIKE WATER

Extreme skiing, formerly deemed a lethal activity, is now more amicably known as free skiing, and accessible to everybody. Holly Wademan offers an introduction to this challenging, fun sport – complete with input from a NZ pro

THE true essence of extreme skiing used to be “You fall, you die.” It’s the kind of skiing or boarding you see on DVDs – straight down a vertical slope in the depths of Alaska with an avalanche nipping at your heels and a helicopter buzzing overhead trying to get the best angle on film. However, extreme skiing has undergone a revolution – it’s now more commonly known as free skiing and anyone can do it. You no longer have to risk life and limb to experience the rush of pointing your skis downhill

and going where gravity takes you. Free skiing is all about enjoyment and challenge – pushing your personal boundaries in a safe way to expand your on-snow experience.

Geoff Small (in action on page 124) is New Zealand’s top free skier. He’s held the title for six years and has also won three consecutive North American free rider championships. Internationally, he’s ranked in the top 10 and has plunged down countless slopes around the globe. His secret? Ski Like Water.

It sounds very Zen, but in fact this analogy is the best way to describe free skiing. “It’s called the Laminar Flow, which is the way water works – strong but supple. You don’t fight the mountain, you work with it,” says Geoff whose style embodies this philosophy.

He points his skis downhill and works with the natural contours of the mountain including drop offs, berms, jumps and chutes to have fun. On camera, Geoff looks completely relaxed and simply reacts to whatever comes next. However, this apparent ease has taken years of experience to cultivate.

According to Geoff, the first step to moving out of your comfort zone and into the realms of free skiing, is learning how to re-read a mountain. In free ski terms, it’s called ‘terrain management’.

It’s best to start doing this on a ski field where you can build up your strength

Photographs: Miles Holden (nzski.com), Sam Hall

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and skills, and find out what your safety zones are in a controlled environment before heading into the back country.

It’s best to spend a few days warming your legs up on piste to get ready for a free ski challenge. The first thing to do is pick a route. Stand at the bottom of a ski run and pick a line down the mountain you’ve never taken before. Assess the obstacles – deep snow, drop offs, rocks and jumps.

“In free skiing you have to look at the mountain as a whole – not on and off piste,” Geoff says.

This skill takes some time to develop. It’s a gradual process of experimentation and experience, which ultimately lets you decipher between a real and perceived risk. A perceived risk is when the mind and too much adrenaline make you freak out halfway through a relatively safe jump, so you land it badly and hurt yourself. A real risk is going off something that is too big with a dodgy landing and really hurting yourself.

“Through bad mistakes comes good experience,” says Geoff, who I’m starting to suspect is not a free skier at all, but a Zen master! Another similarity to the art of meditation in free skiing is the necessary ability to clear the mind of clutter before attempting a difficult run.

In free ski competitions, skiers scope out lines on distant mountains through binoculars. They’re then flown to the top by helicopter and judged on the line they take down, which is extremely hard to do when you’ve only studied the mountain from afar.

and starting chips away at your natural momentum and limits the overall enjoyment of moving down the mountain freely. “It should be effortless,” says Geoff.

Once you’ve got the flow, feel confident you can read a slope and know your limits, it’s time to add some air – the icing on top of the adrenaline cake.

Geoff considers air (time spent off the ground after hitting a jump or taking a drop) a natural part of skiing, but you have to build up to it. Start small and work up.

The key part of getting good air is knowing where you’re going to land and making sure it’s transitional – a slope. You don’t want a flat landing which will jar every bone in your body and give you a headache. The trick is to find a landing that continues the speed and trajectory of the jump for a smooth touch down. “Work out your trajectory before you hit the jump, so when you’re in the air you’ve got time to think and not max out,” Geoff explains.

A little bit of air also helps initiate turns, which control your direction and speed in free skiing. If you want to slow down, make small quick turns. If you need speed, open up your turns.

When you start exploring the world of free skiing or boarding, the natural progression is to head into the back country, but be careful. You need to know how to accurately assess snow conditions and use a transceiver in case you, or one of your mates, gets caught and buried in an avalanche. An avalanche course is a must.



FREE SKI FACT FILE

- Coronet Peak is ideal for first-time free skiers as its tussocked and undulating terrain is both challenging and safe. However, always check with patrol for up-to-date avalanche and mountain info.
- Geoff Small is running a free ski programme called QAST for people who are serious about free skiing. For more info, visit www.qast.org.nz or call Geoff on 021 169 9618.
- Treble Cone offers Big Mountain Freeride clinics. Visit www.treblecone.co.nz for details.
- The Free Ski Association of New Zealand's website, www.freeskier.co.nz, offers plenty of information on free skiing events and training.
- The Mt Hutt Academy also offers free ski courses. Check out www.nzski.com or email them on school@mthutt.co.nz
- In Australia, check out www.perisherblue.com.au The Perisher Blue ski resort in NSW offers mountain workshops with a focus on free skiing and riding.

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Geoff is cautious when skiing in the back country. “There are 200 basic snow crystals that build up on top of one another in multiple, complex layers,” he says. “It takes years of experience to accurately read snow conditions, and it can be dangerous if you make the wrong call.”

Geoff recalls one of his close encounters on a fresh powder day in Utah. After skiing with friends all day, he decided to go for one last run on his own. “I got tripped up, landed heavily and triggered a mini avalanche which swept me off a cliff and partially buried me. I was two feet away from never

seeing the sun again, which shook me.” Geoff has seen his fair share of avalanches and helped dig people out, but this hasn't dampened his enthusiasm for free skiing. “There's nothing else where you can just stand up and accelerate to 250km per hour. You live in the moment when you're free skiing – it's hard to think of anything else like work or stress when you're on the mountain.” 