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Sports Tuesday

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When Going Downhill Is a State of Mind

Older Skiers Defy Middle Age and High Costs to Test Their Limits

By BILL PENNINGTON

WINDHAM, N.Y. — The Wolverine trail, with its double-black-diamond rating, had just opened. Signs at the top used scary language to ward away the timid or inexperienced, and two ski patrollers stood sentry, stopping everyone to explain that the only safe path was next to a treeline where trail becomes forest.

With an instructor leading the way, Betsy Rich plunged over Wolverine's first steep headwall on a sunny Saturday early in December. This, after all, was what she had paid nearly \$5,000 for — to be led, or indeed pushed, to ski better and more confidently.

Rich, a 49-year-old mother of two and a small-business owner, threaded her way down the steep track of snow carved out of the side of Windham Mountain in the Catskills, then stood at the bottom with a smile of

satisfaction.

"This costs a lot of money," she said later. "But I have friends who spend as much on Botox. I'm not trying to look prettier; I want to ski better."

Her guide was Mermer Blakeslee, ski-teaching guru, who dreamed up this eight-day, tough-love ski program with people like Rich in mind. Blakeslee heartily shouted her approval from across the trail.

Rigorous specialty ski and snowboarding camps — mini-boot camps that promise improved skills — have become a popular, upscale adjunct to the conventional one-hour private ski-school lesson. The menu of choices is as breathtaking as the mountains where they are held, from the Steep and Deep camps offered at Jackson Hole in Wyoming (cost:

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Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Windham Mountain in New York has programs for all ages, but some middle-aged skiers are increasingly drawn to expensive coaching that challenges them to improve.

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\$860) to the ski-training excursions via helicopter in Alaska (\$5,995 minus airfare).

These are more than vacations or daylong diversions. Although the camps are directed by North America's most elite ski instructors and coaches, their target audience is not hot-shot ski racers or nimble twenty-somethings. A majority of students are 45 to 65 years old. They are baby boomers refusing to go quietly into the night. They are boomers who want to ski what would give others a fright.

"We want to get better before we can't do it anymore," said Paula Gotthelf, 53, another of Blakeslee's Windham Mountain disciples. "The window is closing."

Another factor driving the rise in specialty training programs is the blooming market for second homes near mountain resorts.

"Our growth as a specialty ski clinic parallels the growth in mountain real estate sales, and that's not a coincidence," said Jenny Fellows, who with her husband, Chris, founded North American Ski Training Centers and based it in California 12 years ago. "People have spent a lot of money on a mountain-home lifestyle, and they want to upgrade their ski level, too. They're not staying at the Howard Johnson anymore when they took one-hour ski lessons. They've bought a \$2 million slopeside condo and want a multiday, high-level ski clinic."

When the Fellows started their ski-training business in 1994, they wondered if it would survive. Now, in a year, they shepherd nearly 700 students around North America, and to Chile in the summer.

"It's been really gratifying to see the women's population growing in our camps," Jenny Fellows said. "It used to be 10 percent female, now it's at least 40 percent. That might be a baby boomer thing as well. We see women who were once wrapped up with their kids and didn't spend money on themselves. Now it's thrilling to see them out there."

At Jackson Hole last season, more than 600 people signed up for four-day tutoring sessions in skiing or snowboarding on very steep slopes, in deep powder or in the backcountry, where the training included avalanche situations. That was twice as many students for the specialty camps than Jackson Hole had 10 years ago.

A weeklong racing camp during the second week of December drew 125 students, most of them over 60 years old, said Erik Kimball, the reservations manager for the camps.

"They go hard and they push themselves — they're usually pretty driven people," Kimball said. "They're used to being good at something, and they want their skiing to be the same way. Of course, it's also a social thing. They make friends and cut loose off the mountain."

Blakeslee, an author who lives in the Catskills, spent years at the highest national level of professional ski instruction. A teacher of top ski teachers, she is treated like a spiritual leader by her peers, a swami on

skis. She described her Windham Mountain program, called Power Learn, as a holistic approach to better skiing.

Students pick eight days of training offered at intervals during the winter, with a daily fee of \$600. The fee covers lunch, a midweek season pass, a private locker, valet parking and evening après-ski gatherings.

During those weekdays and weekends, Blakeslee and four other instructors work on the students from head to toe, right down to an analysis of the fit of their ski boots.

"The student becomes a project of mine," Blakeslee said. "It's not a quick fix. That's the problem with the one-hour private ski lesson. It's fine for a beginner, but for the better experienced skier, it's a dumb idea."

"I've had people come to me and say, 'I've taken hundreds of private lessons and I'm still skiing the same.' That's because in an hour you can't break students down to the fundamentals, stretch them to the point of failure, and then bring them back to that point where they really grasp and understand what works and why. That's a learning experience. From there, they can self-coach and continue to grow."

Blakeslee concedes it is not a gentle, hand-holding process.

"It's sweaty, hard work," she said. "It's fun, but it's work."

A typical day has students congregating at 8 a.m. and doing training drills for three and a half hours. There is often one-on-one coaching,

with an instructor skiing behind, not ahead of, a student and shouting directions amid turns.

"It's getting the advice you need at the moment you need it," Blakeslee said. "Not before and not after."

Lunch is interrupted for interactive tutoring on proper stance mechanics, then it is back on the hill for another three hours. Later, over drinks and snacks, participants watch video taken during the day, with Blakeslee and the other instructors offering more suggestions, and praise.

Rene Gonzalez, 38, drove three hours from his Long Island home for the first Power Learn session earlier this month.

"Some people might think it's a lot of money, but how many golfers with 16 handicaps would pay \$4,800 to lower their handicap to an 8?" Gonzalez said. "They would do it in a heartbeat. And they'd fly to Myrtle Beach and wait in line for it, too. If you take your hobby seriously, it's not too much at all."

Gotthelf, a director of a synagogue, made the trip from her northern New Jersey home for the first day of training. She said she no longer wanted to be one of those people who remained "an advanced beginner forever."

But on this day in December, she was not going down the Wolverine trail. Not yet.

"I will go down Wolverine in our next session," Gotthelf said. "I know I can do it. Mermer told me so."