



Long live the revo

Freeride skis have come a long way in the last decade. **BY GEORGE KOCH**

It was buttery smooth, exhilaratingly fast and dumbfoundingly easy. It liberated me to ski harmonically with the contours of the terrain. My route meandered whimsically where before it would have been a regimented fall line. Trees and rocks became a new dimension of intrigue. That it was a picture-perfect March afternoon of dazzling Alberta sunshine and settled powder—and set in a remote couloir to boot—sure didn't hurt. Still, it was clear something more was at work. Skiing was transformed. It was a breakthrough—breathtaking and a bit scary. Skiing would never be the same. It was just over a decade ago, my introduction to the freeride ski (and skiing) revolution.

Freeride skis changed the skiing of every

higher-end skier I know. They made powder snow and off-piste terrain accessible to many thousands of others. Their much higher natural skiing speeds placed a premium on long pitches and big vertical, and the larger turns most skiers began making demanded wider slopes. They thereby changed people's evaluation of terrain and their ranking of ski areas. The term may seem gimmicky and after 10 years even cliché. But it's tailor-made. Freeride skis have been genuinely liberating and, therefore, revolutionary. Because all revolutions are innately dangerous, freeride skis have had unforeseen effects. Gratifyingly for skiers, they reversed the ascendancy of snowboarding, as I noted in *Ski Canada* a few years back ("Does size matter?", *SC*, Winter 2006).

Freeride skis directly altered how we ski, physically, and all their benefits flowed from there. They erased the need for the up-and-down, hop-turn-driven approach that had long dominated, in which one physically forces the turn by first unweighting, then making the skis come round. Hop-turning demands an even rhythm. Every turn becomes nearly identical and, therefore, a straight fall line is virtually mandatory and an even pitch preferred. The particular combination of the skier's style and weight, the length of their skis, the gradient of the slope and the snow conditions yield one optimal (and always slow) speed. It was effectively impossible to ski fast off the pistes. One's only controllable variable was bobbing frequency. Breakable crust was arduous, chalky

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snow irritating and heavy wet snow near-impossible. Layered powder challenged all but pinnacle skiers, and even the greatest powder became harder as one aged. Off-piste skiing was a barrier fraught with dangers, anxieties and misconceptions that most skiers never surmounted.

The new approach centred on moving the skis far out to the side, achieving the turn by riding whatever surface was encountered while making only subtle adjustments of pressure, angulation, steering and speed. Smooth, supple, fast—and immensely enjoyable. Freeride, indeed.

Was it a revolution that almost didn't happen? Two precursors—ultra-wide short skis for heli/snowcat skiing and “shaped” or “parabolic” skis for carving—each delivered

major advantages, but in an exaggerated form and with glaring drawbacks obscuring their potentially revolutionary significance. Their marketing increased the conceptual murk. Both were sold as instant, effortless solutions for the inept rather than as tools that on the right feet would make skiing better, faster, more graceful, more varied and freer.

Stiff, short and so wide they required laterally offset bindings, the initial fat skis of the early '90s enabled nearly anyone to make it from a heli-drop to the pickup without dislocating all his or her lower joints in successive cartwheeling tumbles. But they were dreadful to actually ski on—so ungainly they forced a smear-turn effect that rendered skiing utterly artless. A backward leap. Despite heavy promotion, guides and advanced skiers derided them as old-men's skis and made a great show of rejecting them. Nor did they ever catch on at ski hills.

Parabolic skis had a less ruinous start—instructors and racers soon came to love them, and their startling shortness appealed to novices and intermediates terrified of 205s. But they were horrific off-piste. Their shortness held obvious problems of missing surface area. They'd find any underlying hard base, making the actual powder moot. Their wild sidecut made them annoyingly hooky on steep, hard slopes. And their narrow waists caused the underfoot area to punch through any layers in soft snow, bogging you down if not launching you over your tips.

When real freeride skis showed up, many advanced skiers were initially skeptical if not resistant. The message—that these weren't another gimmick for dilettantes, but serious weapons that would liberate serious skiers from the old constraints—was initially lost. Their relative shortness—190, 180 or even 170 was standard, vs. 200-210 cm for the GS skis normally used off-piste—seemed suspiciously unmanly. Back in the late '90s, when an American ski industry friend yelled at me over the phone, “Ya gotta get out and try some of these new Rossi Bandits,” I dismissed it as California psychobabble.

Many of us learned the hard way. In my case, grappling with four feet of layered powder that descended on Champéry, Switzerland, in a fierce three-day blow. In the old days, we'd have all simply struggled together, hop-turning extra hard for a few arduous runs before retiring, exhausted, to the mountain hut to await a break in the weather and the snow's settlement into a more congenial consistency. This time, most of the group still did exactly that. But a couple kept mysteriously gliding past us, floating without apparent effort, never bogging down, showing up at the lift grinning and ready for more. They were on new-style wider skis. I was

won over. The breakthrough day I wrote about above came about a month later. Since then I've owned perhaps 15 sets of skis—and not a race ski among them.

Freeride skis overcame or bypassed nearly every limitation of traditional “pencil” skis. They married the positives and thereby erased the negatives of the two earlier attempts to move beyond narrow skis. At the risk of offending some ski company reps, I must note three skis crucial to popularizing freeride as the millennium turned: the Rossignol Bandit (X, XX and XXX), the Salomon X-Scream and the Atomic Betaride series (Volant Chubbs lent an able hand, as did the Völkl Ranger (later the “G”) series). They elevated an innovation to a revolution.

The breakthrough unleashed a profusion of variants, refinements and envelope-pushing exaggerations, plus novelties and tangents. Dozens and arguably hundreds of great skiing models. As skiers explored, experimented and competed (the new skis birthed a new competition genre as well), freeride's parameters were pushed continually outward—more speed, bigger hucks, steeper slopes, longer fall lines, more and more varieties of previously marginal snow.

Chronicling evolving design parameters could fill a magazine, but one is highly illustrative: waist width. Later-era GS skis were approximately 66 mm underfoot. Initially a freeride or “mid-fat” was perhaps 76 mm and a truly wide ski 85-90. Nowadays 85 mm is considered narrow, and there are 96-mm skis that carve a superb hard-snow turn. Meanwhile the terminal-velocity, Alaska-conquering weapons have grown to 130 mm or even greater underfoot while featuring a double-sidecut and either full reverse camber or an “early-rise” tip trailing a “conventional” freeride platform. In total, virtually everything in ski design once considered settled has been upended.

The freeride revolution's shockwaves continue to reverberate. Some aspects went too far—like shortness. Ski length has crept back up and some skiers now proudly wave around 198-cm monsters, which in turn is clearly too much for most skiers to handle. Some skiers misapply the lessons or misuse the tools. Some skis are too specialized, or are built for one thing while being marketed for another. On balance, however, millions have been liberated from the strictures of the narrow-ski era and thousands more ski powder than a decade back. Today there's a ski out there perfectly matched to any skier of any style, age and combination of skiing tastes. The hardest part is picking it out of the lineup. ❄️

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