

BOB COX ON SKIING: Things to consider as you gear up

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Posted:

DailyBreeze.com

Looking at the racks of skis available for demo or rental at Killington, Vt., last week, I was struck by the changes in the way we make decisions about skis and other equipment.

The width of the ski is a starting point, but hardly the only consideration. Since the advent of shaped skis, we have been given more and more options. Twin tips or Rockers? Wide underfoot, or a more hourglass shape? Super wide in the shovel?

Free ride or freestyle? Do you plan to spend the day in the terrain parks - that rarely includes those with shades of gray in the hairline - or are you looking for an all-mountain ski?

My first question to the shop employee is always the same: What would you recommend for the conditions on this mountain today?

I figure the shop employee has been out on the hill in the last day or two, knows the mountain, and knows what most folks are enjoying. He knows that the snow is primarily man-made, the surface will become hard as the day progresses, and that any storm will produce only a couple of inches. In short, we'll be happier on a ski that offers a solid base in typical eastern conditions. In this case, the recommendation of a Rossignol Experience 88 was a good one.

Even on trips around the West, asking the advice of the shop employee is a good start, although weather might be more likely to produce the need for a wider powder ski if you happen to be in British Columbia when the skies open for a major dump.

Most rental shops still stock predominantly equipment from the major manufacturers: Rossi, K2, Salomon, Blizzard, Volkl, Atomic and Head.

When you are in the market to buy rather than rent, one concept remains in place: NPR, or never pay retail. Look for the time when shops are starting to move equipment in a hurry. Then consider online options, once you know what you want.

February is a great time to start shopping for bargains on skis. Prices usually drop by large percentages later in the month.

More and more skiers are venturing out to acquire equipment from the lesser names that are nibbling away at the market place. The graphics on skis are now as creative as those on snowboards, and innovative manufacturers are making great product and gaining a slice of the pie. Bargain shopping is still important, but brand loyalty is a thing of the past. My most recent ski purchase was a pair of Dirty Bears, made by Majesty Skis. You'll be hard-pressed to find them in a shop, and they'll be hard to demo before you buy, but it's a great all-mountain ski for places in the West, like Mammoth. Look for them on the Internet.

Other equipment notes:

Helmets: Having finally joined the masses and picked up a brain bucket in the last year, I've learned that, like boots, you want to find the brand that best fits your head. Not all helmets and heads are compatible. You definitely need to work through the brands to find the one that best suits you.

Once you do, there is one additional consideration: How does it work with your goggles? Not all goggles and helmets give you the kind of fit that is comfortable. Consider taking your goggles to the shop when you are trying on helmets.

And if you are still prone to feeling the cold inside your bucket, or maybe you want to avoid helmet hair, consider buying one of the cloth helmet liners that look like what NFL players wear under their helmets. They're around \$15 to \$20 and add a layer of warmth.

Gloves or Mittens: Still the eternal question and still the kind of personal decision everyone has to make. Once you've chosen gloves, you have additional choices regarding the fit around your wrist.

A new set of options includes gloves with fingertip pads to make the glove responsive to your smart phone or iPod on the hill. Seirus makes several versions of the "touchscreen control gloves," which are great if you can't resist answering your phone while riding a chairlift. The price range is \$49 to \$79 and includes all levels of warmth.

Boots: It remains imperative that you find a knowledgeable boot fitter unless you were born with standard-issue, out-of-the-box-sized feet. Most of us need some creative boot work to make the fit most responsive as well as the addition of an orthotic inner-boot device. SKI Magazine has started listing boots by three categories (narrow, medium and wide fit) in its annual equipment guide.

But even a working knowledge of boot technology leaves you with a half-dozen choices in each category. Considering MSRP on high-end boots is now \$800 to \$900, you need some guidance, and you want to wait for the selling season.

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