Skiing over snowy trails is no glide in the park

by Ed Zieralski

MAMMOTH LAKES, Calif. - Cross country skiing has been one of those outdoor endeavors I've always wanted to do, but somehow never took the time to pursue.

MAMMOTH SKIING - Ski instructor Dana Taussig shows off California's Mammoth Mountain to students Susie Christensen (middle) and Franny Perez. CNS Photo by Ed Zieralski. One of my favorite Winter Olympic sports has always been the biathlon. Skiing, carrying a rifle, doing some plinking, what could be better than that? TV always showed those incredibly fit individuals gliding effortlessly along snowy trails, rifle strapped to the back.

Looks easy, doesn't it?

Trust me on this one, it isn't. Those incredible specimens in the Olympics make it look like a stroll in the snow. Me, and thank goodness I wasn't toting my 30-06 Remington, I looked a lot like Humpty Dumpty on a couple of sticks. And I was as challenged as the Dumpster when I tried to get up after some of my spills.

Five minutes into this thing my knees were burning. I mean the caps were on fire. But my doctor should be proud to know that his surgical repair on my right wheel held up. The left one, the candidate for a replacement, was its usual flat-tire self, offering very little support. Like Pilates, cross country skiing lets you know just how out of shape you really are.

"You have to be comfortable balancing on one knee," my ski instructor Dana Taussig said.

Clearly, I wasn't.

My first hint that I was in for a challenging couple of hours came shortly after I put the boots and skis on at the Tamarack Cross Country Ski Center north of Mammoth Lakes. I thought I'd get a little glide time on my own, you know, set out like those biathletes and mark some trail. The cockiness ended when I realized I couldn't stop gliding and got real cozy with a tree. Stopping or slowing are big parts of the lesson, and I struggled with both.

I became a very focused pupil from that moment on, and Taussig, from Queens, N.Y., who also is a white-water river guide in the summer, is an excellent teacher. She stressed that we bend our knees, keep our weight forward and stay loose. I fought all three, especially the knees part. I kept telling my knees to bend, but they kept disobeying and barking loud obscenities at me.

"I tell people if they want to just get out and walk and take in some views, snowshoeing is the way to go," Taussig said. "But if you want exercise and a great workout, cross country skiing is the best, and I recommend a lesson so you learn how to do it right."

Before long Taussig had our small group that included Susie Christensen of Ventura, Calif., her friend Franny Perez and young Sierra Streip of La Mesa, Calif., gliding over the beginner's section of the trails. These picturesque routes, 19 miles in all, cut through a section of the Inyo National Forest and wrap around the lakes. They are groomed every day, with lanes for cross country striding and skating along with snowshoe trails.

To get an idea of the snow level here, we were skiing over stop signs for the road system. The snowfall is around 120 percent above normal, 12 to 16 feet high in places, after a year in which it was one of the worst on record.

Ueli Luthi, the manager at Tamarack since 1999, said business has been increasing slightly every year. The cross country ski season goes to April 16 here.

After experiencing cross country skiing, I tried snowshoeing the next day, and just as Taussig said, it wasn't nearly the workout that skiing was. But it was more my speed. I found myself alone on the trail, listening to the sound of the wind, the first breath of spring here, as it whipped through the pine trees.

Occasionally a cross country skier raced by me. As I trudged along like Nanook of the North, I did so with a greater respect for cross country skiers, especially the woman who glided by me with her blanketed baby strapped and harnessed to her chest.

For information about cross country skiing or snowshoeing, call 1-800-MAMMOTH or visit MammothMountain.com or TamarackLodge.com.

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