

Telemark Touring Evolves

Contributed by The Editors
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Black Diamond's new 01 telemark binding. A firsthand account....

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We're skinning up from Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon toward Cardiac Ridge. A surprise storm has moved in, leaving us with a fresh foot that's growing by the moment. I've hooked up with some new friends Brad, Ed, and Mitchell—it's my first time out touring with this crew. On the drive up the canyon I had taken notice of their chosen gear in the back of the van—the Scarpa F's, Lasers, Dynafit binders; Oh no, rando racers, I'd thought, as I handed them the tele guns (K2 Work Stinx and Cobra R8s) I'd brought along. (I had considered myself traveling lightly with only one setup on this trip to UT, but all of a sudden the rig seems so heavy for what will be a 7,000-day of climbing and trail breaking.)

I make it through the first leg of the tour in stride with group. But it's been a real trial. Sure, these guys are st they're acclimatized, they're locals. I'm aware of where I stand on that end. But being the lone pinner, I find myself subjected to a psychological breakdown. The numbers (I've repressed and forgotten what they actually are) on the technical end of touring efficiency race through my head. How much energy am I losing with each flex of binding cartridge and boot bellow in comparison to my free-hinging AT friends?

"Tele touring is dead," Ed says, through a smirking grin, as he leads me into a tight kick turn in a deep track.

He's joking with me—well, only half-joking—but his point is being made all too well. Where they are able to v drag back the second ski to follow, flick the ski's nose off their knee and slide the ski into track above the kick turn, I am exploring all options of inefficiency, cursing, and finally just excavating snow from the uphill of each kick turn before dragging the second ski across to meet the lead.

We lap a 1,000-bowl in prime condition. Ed's comment is the lit cig flung from the car window, which

quickly catches in the open pasture of my mind and burns wild, singeing an old ego that once lived wholly by the reigns of telemark supremacy and knee-dropped gnosticism. It doesn't do it for me anymore that tele is harder, that it's different—that I'm harder, that I'm unique. It's the sensation of the telemark turn I want, over and over again.

1,000' of snorting blower 4% powder with each turn puts out the flames. But on the way up, I burn again. And each lap, I'm burning out. And falling behind. Just one more lap—

Just one more lap— and okay, now I'll get to the real point of this story, the reason I made this trip to Wasatch, and the reason behind why we who choose to tele, but don't want to get badly burnt, can keep our chins up and move along in the skinning future. It's the reason why tele touring is not dying, it's just evolving.

Days earlier, I made the trip out to see the O1, the newest telemark binding from SLC-based Black Diamond. The O1 is BD's answer to the modern telemark dilemma—one that has gotten quite a bit of press lately. [See Andrew McLean's Freeword article on p. 22 in the January '06 issue of Backcountry.] It will be on the market September 2006, retailing for \$299.

The overall equation includes factors like these: bigger boots, more plastic, active bindings. I won't beat the dead here, but as the tale I've told above reflects, I feel these factors are not the most ideal for touring ease. They're suitable, they're durable, and they make for quite a ride down. But, they don't necessarily benefit touring efficiency.

How the O1 responds to this dilemma is with a touring mode incorporated into the base plate and toe piece of the binding. The basic mechanics: just click the seesawed button in front of the toe piece with your ski pole to turn the touring mode on; a clasp behind the toe piece disengages, allowing the toe piece to pivot freely in front of the toe and without friction; another quick stab at the button, which is cleanly seated within the skeleton of the hot-forged-aluminum base plate, locks the binding out of tour mode.

The presentation of the O1's function and mechanics sounded great. But I had a lot of questions that could only be answered after experiencing how they performed in the field—and the next day was spent touring. While the weight per pair of the bindings is increased by about 10 ounces over BD's O2, the O1 (3 lbs. 10 oz.) made up for it with a dramatic improvement in touring efficiency. The transition in and out of tour mode was quite simple to dial in. Just how well they toured was more in line with an AT binding than I had expected. It opened up my stride, and almost immediately I found myself navigating the kick turns on the morning's icy skin track with the same AT flick technique. A rubber surface where the toe piece hinges off the base plate effectively deterred snow and ice build up over the course of the morning. Also, the O1 will be outfitted with an optional ski crampon.

And while the real news is how well the binding tours, the O1 proved to be a powerful, active turner through a variety of conditions. The exit points of the O1's underfoot cables have been repositioned further back than the O2, increasing the power of performance by helping to keep retention upon the ball of foot. It is available with two cartridge options: mid-stiff and free-flex. In the past, I have steered from the most active cartridges because of how it limited the climbing stride. But with the touring end solved, I went with the power and had at it with no regrets.

The bottom line— As I toured tough days later, I couldn't keep myself from wishing for a pair of bindings

like the O1s underfoot. The fact that I'd seen how you could have touring ease without compromising the telemark performance so soon before this tour really had a poignant effect on the direction of my own skiing future. BD's release comes at a time where we'll be seeing some other tour-focused telemark bindings becoming available. The demand is there, and I think we're all ready. Remember, if you love the turn, then touring on a tele setup will never die off; it will just evolve.

—Jonah Cantor