

# The HUGE Backcountry/Outside Magazine Ski Test

Contributed by Craig Dostie  
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Another March has come and gone, and with it, the obligatory Backcountry ski test. Only this year it was the HUGE Backcountry gear test and for this we teamed up with Outside Magazine (hey, someone's got to kick down for the food!).

The HUGE Backcountry/Outside Magazine Ski Test

....and boots and bindings too!

The test crew at the top of Powder Mountain. Time: Beer:30.  
Photo by Drew Pogge

by Craig Dostie

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Another March has come and gone, and with it, the obligatory Backcountry ski test. Only this year it was the HUGE Backcountry gear test and for this we teamed up with Outside Magazine (hey, someone's got to kick down for the food!). So obligatory probably isn't the right word, although as a writer of gear reviews it has become a necessity. Not just skis, but boots and bindings as well. And not just the new stuff, but ALL the stuff that will be marketed to turn-earning fanatics next season. That meant more than 200 pairs of skis (about 120 different models) from 18 manufacturers, over 70 backcountry boots and more than 20 models of free heel bindings. All in one place.

We pulled nearly 50 experienced testers from 10 states&mdash;Alaska to Vermont and many states in between&mdash;to put skis, boots, and bindings through their paces on the slopes of Powder Mountain, Utah. Along with Snowbasin (home of the Olympic downhill course) and Wolf Creek, Powder Mountain is one Utah's Notinwood resorts, located at the northern end of Utah's Wasatch Range. Not being anywhere close to the Cottonwood Canyons means a distinct absence of crowds, something we were thankful for.

Day 0, Monday 24mar08

For Backcountry staff, this was travel day. For the Eastern core, coming from HQ in Vermont, that meant dealing multiple airport connections to get to Salt Lake City. For those of us closer to the left coast, it meant driving. Most of the drive across Nevada is technically boring, but visually spectacular; vast desert valleys rimmed by snow covered mountains. From I-80 the most alluring of these ranges are the Rubies. Some day I'm going to make time to leave tracks in this beautiful range.

The Ruby Mountains from I-80 just outside of Elko, Nevada.

Photo by Craig Dostie courtesy Olympus E-510

Having driven half the distance the day before, the Couloir van and I arrived in Salt Lake City to pick up a few more telemark bindings for test from Voile and Black Diamond, along with BD's new line of boots. That was followed with dinner at my fave Mexican haunt in Mormonville, the Red Iguana. Last stop before heading up to Powder Mountain and our digs for the next few days at Wolf Creek Resort was to pick up Jason Layh from the Salt Lake train station.

Jason is a perfect example of the next generation of telemark skiers making their mark in the mountains. His

enthusiasm for telemark is infectious, owing to his intrinsic perspective that whatever life deals him, it's "fantastic," an expression made somehow more jovial with his native Australian accent. The train station rendezvous was the result of Jason returning from Crested Butte, where he had taken half a dozen members of the Alpine Meadows Kids Telemark Team for the telemark comps. He even entered himself, posting a 2nd place after his first run, an testament to his fluid, free form style, but blew it in the second run, finishing 7th, when he botched his landing from a jump. But no problem there, it was still a fantastic time in CB.

We arrived in Eden, Utah after midnight. Howie politely informed us we needed to rise and arrive at his friend Thomas (assistant ski patrol director at Snowbasin) and Bianca Keating's house, by 6:30am next morning, a half hour drive from here. Ugh. Without further ado the lights went out!

Day 1, Tuesday 25mar08

Jon Howard, Jeff Burke and Ryland pause before loading 170+ pair of planks for tomorrow's ski test.

Photo by Craig Dostie courtesy Olympus E-510

Jason Layh mounting the umpteenth Cobra binding. Photo by Craig Dostie courtesy Olympus E-510

When we arrived at the Keating house Thomas showed us to his barn, the wood supply for the pot belly stove to heat it, and the tons of skis awaiting us. The magnitude of this year's test put Jason Layh and myself into a mildly catatonic state as we considered how many pairs of bindings we needed to mount before the test began in earnest the next morning. Thankfully most of the AT models were pre-mounted, and all the tele skis were pre-drilled. That still meant we needed to get as many of the 40 available pairs of Cobra bindings on to skis. With no new snow in a week, and none predicted, we put a priority on the narrowest skis available. Even so, by 7pm we only had 30 pair ready, and the prospect of swapping 20 pair each night was only made bearable with confidence that there would be more willing and able hands hereafter.

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Day 2, Wednesday 26mar08

It was cold and windy at the top of Powder Mountains Hidden Lake Base Lodge. Unlike most resorts, here you start at the top and ski down to the lifts. Which makes it all the more important to NOT miss the last chair. Otherwise you'll be booting it back to your car.

Setting up shop at the top of Powder Mountain. Photo by Drew

Pogge

Step one for the day, aside from John Hancock's on the legal liability docs, was setting up our turf. Powder Mountain donated the snowboarders shack for the week, and four deluxe, wooden ski racks. Once the skis were out the testing began. Even though conditions were firm and fast, and we strongly encouraged everyone to ski the skinny skis first, temptation got the best of most folks and they were naturally drawn to the fatter planks. It wasn't until I pointed out that the skinnies wouldn't go away until we had sufficient tester feedback on all of them that folks acquiesced and skied "em. As expected, those who dutifully obeyed were rewarded with solid skiing—after all, conditions were hard and narrower skis DO actually hold a better edge on that.

Was this the source? Eric Schnette shows off his pre-pontoon

pontoons.

By and large everyone was psyched to ski and while some skis stood out more than others, nothing sucked. That didn't prevent the Goode Rando Race ski from getting a few laughs. Only 160cm long, and narrow by today's standards. So narrow that the Fritschi Freeride bindings were wider than they were, so testers experienced the boot-out phenomenon old leatherneck telemarkers are not so fond of remembering. Most agreed that for a ski that narrow it should be a crime to mount anything other than Dynafit's on it, and as a rando race ski, you wouldn't expect anything else. We understand why they mounted Fritschi's. It was, after all, the AT binding we recommended for testing.

In the telemark binding department G3's Targa Ascent with World Cup springs, Black Diamond's O1 with MidStiff springs, 22 Designs Hammerhead with their normal spring in position #3, and Rottefella's Cobra were paired against each other. Very quickly we learned that, once the heel is raised above 15 degrees there is little discernable difference among these four. Not that there aren't differences. My prediction that the Cobra and HH#3 would be similar was resoundingly proven, with everyone saying they felt identical.

While the power level of each was very similar when fully engaged in a telemark turn, the initiation phase of each was quite different. It seems the "feel" of a telemark binding is determined by how it reacts in the first 5-10 degrees of movement.

Back to our homes for the week at Wolf Creek we unloaded skis, boots, and bindings and set up to swap out bindings from skis for the next day. Then, we all loaded back into cars and shuttled down to the Wolf Creek Resort Association office for a reception they were holding for the entire Backcountry test team. I was thinking this would be a frivolous use of our time with so many skis to be un-mounted and remounted until we spied the hors d'oeuvres awaiting us. This turned out to be an excellent time to meet the folks who had helped to make this entire week happen. Rich Koski and Sarah Toliver, from the Ogden Convention Bureau were instrumental in setting up travel arrangements and all the off-mountain logistics.

Apres ski done right. Good food, good wine, good beer, good people

and nice digs. Sign me up! Photo by Craig Dostie

When Howie told me we were hosting the test at Powder Mountain, with lodging, I was mentally prepared for dormitory style lodging. Instead we found ourselves in the lap of luxury, 50 of us split between four huge trophy homes outfitted with multiple rooms, baths, big screen TVs, pool tables, ping pong tables, hot tubs, and a view of the Eden Valley. Terry Murray deserves a huge thank you for arranging the accommodations. In hindsight we should have thrown them a reception, but we played along and enjoyed every delicious morsel and drop of wine while also enjoying fine conversation with them. Simple face-to-face meetings like this usually have unexpected side benefits, so I was psyched to see a few of them join ranks with us over the next few days on the slopes of Powder Mountain.

Day 3, Thursday 27mar08

Oh joy, more firm and fast conditions. Clouds continued to threaten the

possibility of fresh snow, and flurries kept the hope alive but wind was the dominant effect of the storm clouds.

Mid-afternoon Powder Mountain offered us the services of their snow cat, and a dozen of us headed for sun ripened snow. Serendipitously the clouds broke for a few hours and the south facing slopes we skied were made deliciously soft underneath a powdered sugar coating from the morning's flurries.

Drew Pogge smiles before going OB. Our guide ponders what sort of skis he is testing. Drew would be too, soon enough. Photo by Craig Dostie

The funny of the day was when Drew Pogge was tripped up by a small branch that caught the tip of his skis. Ordinarily that might not have done much, but he was on a pair of Goode STR08s, nice and squat underneath with a squared off tip. Rather than deflecting off the branch as a typical ski tip might have done, the branch grabbed hold of that square tip and twisted him into a mandatory cartwheel. It was pretty humorous to watch from above, reinforcing the opinion the skis should be renamed to WhatThe? Aside from absorbing protusions full force, Drew said they skied great.

With slight softer conditions, it was time to venture forth and experience more of what Powder Mountain could serve up. I'd been here before, in conditions that justified the name Powder mountain. For consistently steeper terrain, it is hard to beat the Paradise lift which runs up the spine of a ridge. On skiers left, glades and chutes that face north, yielding prime pow-pow days after a storm. To the other side, aspen glades, and since it faces south, velvety corn late in the season.

There are other great powder and steep shots, but most of these lead in to the canyon for the access road. Thus, to get back at the end of your run you need to wait for a shuttle bus. No worries, it comes every half hour, but isn't as convenient as the Paradise lift. On the otherhand, because of the slow return, these slopes see less traffic, and thus remain in good condition long after runs serviced by lifts are tracked out.

Howie's mom was the cook for the week, and she decided it would be breakfast for dinner this evening. What a hit! Scrambled eggs, tons of bacon, blueberry pancakes (with real blueberries and batter from scratch), burp, and good cheer all round.

Marla Bailey leaves her tele signature on Powder Mountains untracked slopes. Photo by Drew Pogge

Day 4, Friday 28mar08

Adjusting AT bindings the Makita way. Photo by Craig Dostie

The effects of partying too late finally take their toll and everyone moves slowly out of bed. The best laid plans of prepping skis and bindings the night before are put off until minutes before we are supposed be headed back up the mountain. Skis are thrown hastily in the vans and we head up the relentlessly steep grade to the top of Powder Mountain. Thankfully we have four Makita drills and everyone lends a hand to swap bindings to skis and keep swapping skis in and out of the test.

Conditions remain, as before, firm. Clouds continue to threaten new snow, but it's a hollow threat. Despite that, skiers are psyched because the only skis left in the test are all fat, fatter, and fattest.

With only three days left in the test, the heat is on to get every ski on snow, and every boot and binding on everyone's foot (that they fit). The night before I somehow managed to help some of the ladies in the test get boots custom fitted to their feet. It took a bit of explaining to convince them that, yes, a properly sized boot does hurt (a bit) before the liner is heated and molded to your foot. Today was the proof of that, and the ladies were smiling. Yeah! Special thanks to Scarpa and Mike Schwartz at The Backcountry in Truckee for providing heaters for molding.

Everyone lends a hand to prep for tomorrow's test. Photo by Craig

Dostie

Jeff Burke was running the Alpine boot test, while I was heading up telemark boots. New for tele this year is BD's line of boots, plus new NTN boots from Crispi and Scarpa. Our on-snow time confirmed that Scarpa had indeed softened the flex of their NTN boots making them much smoother skiing, while Crispi's remained stiff. Hopefully that will change before long and we can get them out on snow again before writing the final analysis.

In the Alpine realm Jeff confirmed that BD's Factor boot was a hit, as was Scarpa's Spirit 4, and Garmont's Radium. Emphasis was clearly on the power delivered for these models. Surprisingly, Dynafit's lower priced Zzero4 outperformed its more expensive brothers with carbon fiber and polyurethane.

At the end of this day, unlike the last two nights, swapping bindings became a priority and several willing hands made short work of that before we settled down for another community dinner, this time, lasagna. Delicious!

After dinner, Jon Howard breaks out the swag bag. Everyone is given a beautiful wool jacket from Ibex with the Backcountry logo embroidered on the right arm, socks, and a Sigg water bottle. Small thanks for the extraordinary effort everyone was providing to make the test happen, but nonetheless appreciated.  
Day 5, Saturday 29mar08

Booting up to the summit of James Peak. Photo by Sean Prentiss

Fresh snow is falling as we head up the steep grade to the top of Powder Mountain. A mile from the top, we see Howie backing up the rental van, a front wheel drive KIA mini-van, which simply can't get a grip on the snow covered road. It takes us another half hour to realize we need to rescue him and all the skis in the van to get the test going. Thankfully, Powder Mountain sends a 4-wheel drive van down to transfer skis, and we only lose an hour.

Early afternoon we learn that the Snow Cat is available again. About 15 skiers head off to enjoy the untracked slopes of James Peak. Despite the use of the cat, the trip remains steeped in backcountry since the final pitch to the top of James Peak is an exercise in booting. At the top, Courtney Howard realizes, "hey, this is my first summit out west!"

Appropriately everyone accords her the honors of first tracks down James Peak.

With five days under our belt, Lance Riek shared his preliminary finds on AT bindings. His binding testers commented on how the entire range of backcountry endeavors is covered by the impressive range of today's AT bindings. The alpine breeding of the Marker Duke/Baron pair was not lost on anyone. The Fritschi Freeride was most often cited as reference point when talking specifics of ease of use and downhill performance. The Naxo triple-pivot feel was enjoyed by most, but a few felt it would take some getting used to. A light went on for one aggressive tester when he realized that coupling the new, high performance Dynafit-compatible boots with Dynafit

bindings would allow lines to be skied that logistically hadn't been possible before due to the effort to reach them. No surprises here, but a nice confirmation of the obvious.

For more a few, this would be the last night together. This, the normal quaffing of the beer provided by New Belgium Brewery was only the beginning, and the keg which had languished in a snow drift all week was uncorked. If there is one thing skiers take almost as seriously as skiing, it is a keg powered party.

The James Peak group, at the top. Photo by Sean Prentiss