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Snowboarding: Are We Having Fun Yet?

In the mittens of an adorable instructor,
our novice learns to kiss the snow with her board.



"IIIIII HAAAAATE SNOOOOWBOARDINNNG," I bellow, loud enough to set off an avalanche. Lying on my back for the umpteenth time with falling snow accumulating on my goggles, I am fed up, beat up, frustrated, exhausted. I've had about all I can take, and it isn't even lunchtime yet. The first day. The second hour.

Why bother with this kind of torture at age 34? Because snowboarding is the rage these days. Last season, as I watched many of my oh-so-hip skier friends make the switch from alpine gear to "boarding" equipment, I realized this was not just a sport for

irreverent young punks. It took me years to get to be a good skier, and I was not about to give that up. However, I wasn't one to ignore a sport that might inspire others to call me "hip." So, I signed up for this two-day intensive course. Unfortunately, attitude adjustments are not part of the curriculum.

Welcome to Delaney Adult Snowboarding Camp at Beaver Creek, Colorado. This weekend is the All-Women's Clinic. The crew of instructors, headed by the polite and adorable national-collegiate champion Brian Delaney, are enthusiasts who've converted many skiers and even more non-skiers to their favorite winter sport.

The first night, we're outfitted with boots and boards. One of the more attractive things about snowboarding is the option to wear those comfy insulated boots instead of the stiff, binding alpine variety. As for the boards, most are painted with groovy designs like butterflies, flowers, and corncobs.

In the morning, we meet at the Lodge at Beaver Creek for introductions, stretching, and a light yet nutritious breakfast. Over our winter clothing, we add layers of heavily padded hockey shorts. We pick out free sunglasses. "Great, so I'll look like a snowboard 'Betty' who can't snowboard," I comment sarcastically.

"You don't know how to snowboard *yet*," Delaney assures me as he ushers us out to the slopes and into a snowstorm for proficiency tests. Our group of 30 will be separated into smaller groups according to ability.

My turn to be tested. I gingerly stand up, go a few feet, gain some speed, feel the terror, and sit right down on my butt, repeating the process until I cover the distance to the waiting instructor below. "OK, you're with that group." I look over at the four other panic-stricken faces—my fellow first-timers.

"Snowboarding has a steep learning curve," an instructor says. The steepness, however, has nothing to do with the angle of the slope that our group will attempt on Bunny Run. I ski only on double-black-diamond runs, dammit; I haven't seen the likes of a bunny hill since I was 12 years old. It's practically flat. So here I am, lying on my back, feeling as if I barely survived a crash on some high-speed run. Since when do I care about being hip?

BY BETH M. HOWARD

I brush off the snow and head in for lunch. The other groups are already there—warm, dry, and rested. My mood—which is to say, my bad attitude—was obvious. “Beth’s not happy,” announced my chalet-mate Jane, who was doing fine on her board. “Aren’t you having fun?” she asked. “Fun?” I wondered. Is it supposed to be fun to slam your head against the snow an average of ten times per run—on the baby hill? What kind of fun is it to find that you’ve practically pulled your shoulders out of their sockets from the impact of falling? I am seething inside, but I fake a smile.

“OK, you’re with that group.” I look over at the four other panic-stricken faces, my fellow first-timers.

After lunch, Delaney, sympathetic to my struggle and determined not to let a student get away unconverted, does what every good instructor should do. He holds my hand—literally. He grabs my mittens, and together we glide downhill. “Flatten your board, let it kiss the snow, then make your turn,” he urges.

After we’ve carved a few turns in unison, like figure skaters, a lightbulb goes off over my head.

“Ohhhh! So this is what it’s like!” Few things we do in life are marked by such instant revelations. Snowboarding, it seems, is not gradually mastered, but learned in one definitive moment.

Now I am doing the “falling leaf”—toe turns to heel turns in a fluid motion all the way downhill. I don’t fall even once. My snowboarding, along with my mood, has improved dramatically. I retire that evening tired, happy, and in search of a Jacuzzi.

I admit, if snowboarding camp were not a two-day commitment, I’d be tempted to carve some turns of a more familiar kind in the fresh powder—on my alpine skis—the following morning. But Delaney has figured out the formula: Snowboarding is best learned over consecutive days.

The next morning I warm up with my novice group, my muscles remembering yesterday’s new movements. I’m floating down the hill, linking my turns, flexing my knees, and concentrating on keeping my hands at my sides in the “gunslinger” position.

At lunch, my confidence is high and my smile is real. I sit next to Jane and her group. “Why don’t you come with us this afternoon?” she asks. “We’re going up to the intermediate slopes.” I defect from my beginner group and tag along with Jane and her

bunch of rowdy girls. After a few falls, I am humbled, but consoled by my rapid progress.

The clinic ends with an awards ceremony. When Brian announces my name, I interrupt him: “You don’t have to say it. I already know. I got the ‘Bad Attitude’ award.”

He smiles and says, “No, not at all. You get the ‘I Found the Magic’ award. It’s really great to watch a student discover what snowboarding is all about. There is a magic to it, and you found it.”

I’ll have to log quite a few more days before I can keep up with my already-converted friends. And I doubt anyone is going to call me a trendsetter just because I’ve ridden a snowboard a few times, but that’s OK. I’ve come away with a new sport. I have all my bones intact. And I have an award to remind me that, for at least a few magical moments, I was having fun.

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The author, left, and her chalet-mate Jane, pre-descent.

Delaney Snowboarding Camps: 303-443-6868 or 800-743-3790.

- Aspen and Beaver Creek, CO; Mammoth, CA; Killington, VT.
- “Ladies Clinics” offered in Beaver Creek Jan. 25-26 and March 15-16; in Aspen, Jan. 25-26 and Feb. 22-23.
- “Tune-Up Clinics” and other programs available for experienced snowboarders and alumni.
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