

The last story about telemark skiing, ever May 08, 2017 By Hans Ludwig



PHOTO: Karl Weatherly

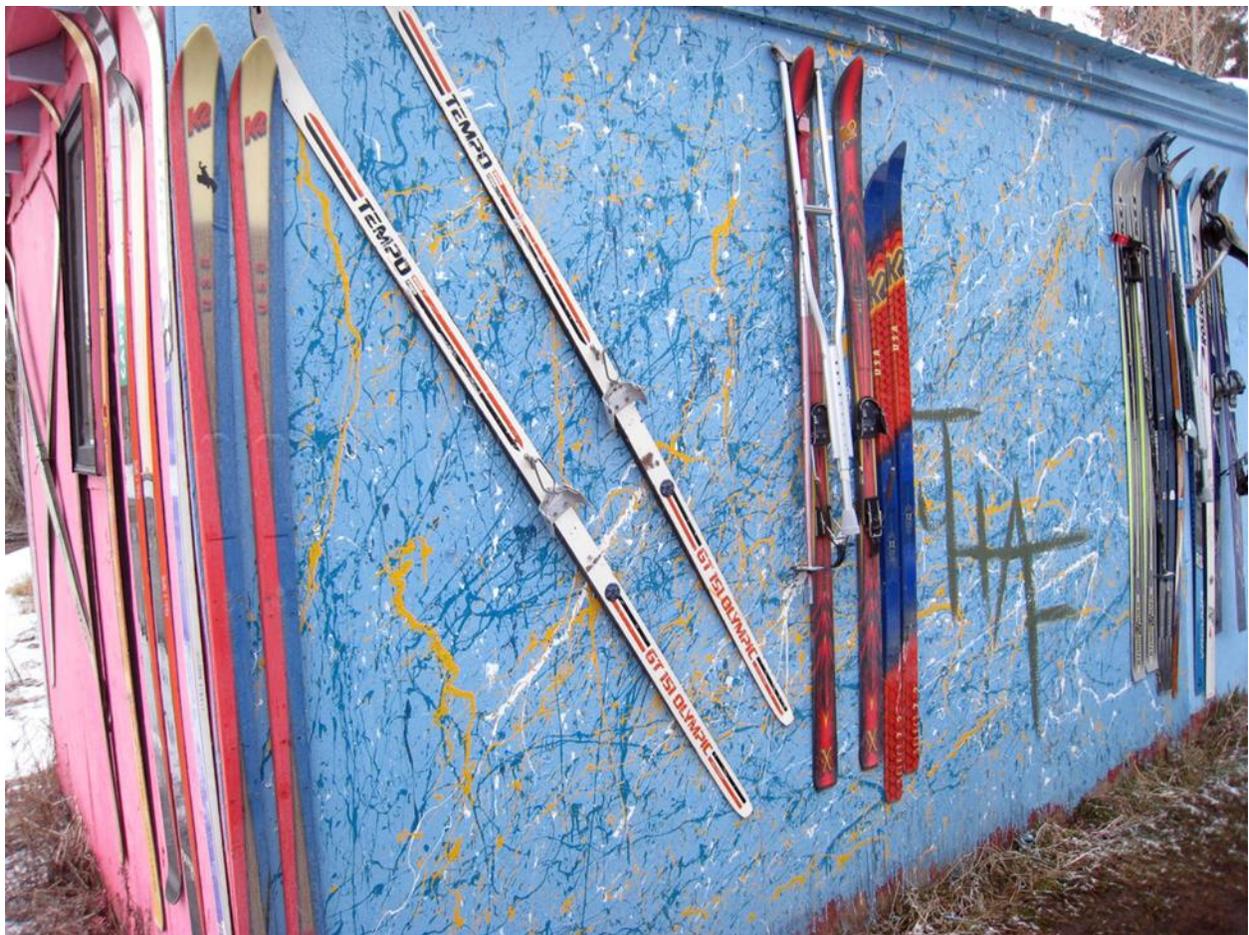
Tele skiers lived happily until an AT meteor landed right on their merry little heads.

Realized by a Norwegian farmer named Sondre Norheim in 1868, killed by Hannes Schneider's more practical Austrian parallel turn in the 1930s, and then revived by a coterie of American hippies in the '70s, telemark skiing appears to have expired again. Many of the best and most dedicated telemark skiers have locked down their heels as gear sales and the genre's growth both collapsed in the 2010s.

So what exactly happened, and why? The rebirth of telemarking in the late '70s into the early '80s had appeal as a lighter, cheaper backcountry alternative when skiing had become more than a little over-groomed. It allowed skiers to access powder, freed them from uptight resorts, expensive gear, conventional ideas of performance and style. For skiing's hardcore, telemarking represented a scruffy underground cool and the freedom of the backcountry. Free-heeling had massive cachet for cognoscenti like the editors of POWDER, where telemarking—even spandex-suited telemark racing—graced the cover multiple times. With the rise of more effective plastic boots in the '90s, the scene burst from the woods onto the groomed runs of every ski hill—soon there were tele magazines, sponsored athletes,

film companies, race series, and freeride competitions, a free-heel mirror image of the contemporary trends in alpine skiing.

A decade or so later, sales have dropped, growth has stalled, there is no new gear of note, fewer young tele skiers, and many of the best and staunchest free-healers have switched to alpine or AT gear. The passion for dropping a knee lives on with many skiers, but the state of tele gear tells the tale: There's no tele-specific ski manufacturing and only a few boot and binding manufacturers. Nobody is putting real money into product development, and most tele skiers consider the available gear flawed—heavy, not as practical as AT gear for touring, and prone to breakage, among other complaints. The introduction of the Fritschi touring binding around '98 and then viable Dynafit-compatible AT boots in 2010 or so killed telemarking's efficiency advantage in the backcountry for good. There are still a few thousand telemarkers in America, but that number probably won't ever increase.



Telemark taxidermy. PHOTO: Jonathan Selkowitz

My favorite theory is that by trying to become equivalent in performance to alpine gear, telemarking rationalized itself out of existence. But it's probably better to go to the source—some people with actual authority on the subject—than to speculate on the existential morbidity of telemarking. So, by way of

looking at the decline from the inside, I spoke with some of the most experienced telemarkers and ex-telemarkers in America for an after-action report.

THE PANEL

Megan Michelson, 34, is a former champion of the World Telemark Freeskiing Championships and a Tahoe-based writer.

Sam Cox, 36, is a Montana smokejumper who telemarked for about 15 years until 2011.

Noah Howell, 40, is a former tele skier who founded Powderwhore Productions and recently completed a 100-mile race through the San Juans on AT gear.

Brooke Edwards, 44, is a longtime Girdwood, Alaska, local, competitor/competition organizer, advocate, and social pillar of the telemark community.

Ryan Boyer, 45, is one of the most athletic and accomplished telemark skiers on the planet. A telemarker since 1988, he is still at it.

Is telemarking dead?

Boyer: I think it's dead. I'm recycling boots from 2007—the new boots are kind of based on AT boots and it just doesn't work. There's going to be a point where you just can't find the gear anymore.

Howell: I don't see much of a future. It's not dead, but it's in a deep coma.

Michelson: I think it's still alive, just much smaller. Maybe it's back to the hardcore, the old men, the Vermonters, the purists.

Edwards: I refuse to say it's dead. I think it's on life support. Maybe it's undead.

So what happened? For one thing, there's the gear.

Cox: The only thing dependable about all that shit is that you will break something. On no less than seven or eight occasions, I left a full high-speed turn on my face because I pulled a binding out. And they never really solved it.

Boyer: We're putting archaic tech well beyond its limits. A lot of it had to do with the fact that the alpine industry had money to prototype and test stuff, but tele never did. I still have to epoxy all my screws, still ski with a cable and heel throw in my pack.

Howell: I'm all for suffering, but it doesn't make sense as a BC tool now.

Boyer: Skiing an icy Ronde [the Glacier Ronde off the Aiguille du Midi tram], I had the actual thought that my children are going to be fatherless because of my choice of gear.

Maybe some cultural backlash was inevitable?

Michelson: Tele skiing was no longer an original, counter-culture thing to do. That sticker "nobody cares that you tele" sums it up to me. There was a weird 'I'm better than you because I'm different' attitude that went along with the sport, and that definitely turned me off.

Cox: Trying to make tele skiing as rad as alpine skiing was never going to happen.

Is there a future? There are still people telemarking out there who love it.

Michelson: The future of tele skiing is what monoboarding is now.

Howell: Splitboarding is maybe where that kind of person has gone.

Boyer: I think it's ghosting. Maybe it'll live on in the underground.

Edwards: People are getting on thrift store gear now for that same sense of fun. But it's going to be one of those retro arts that comes back at some point. I'll be 83 and teaching tele lessons.

Read more at <http://www.powder.com/stories/opinion/telemark-skiing-dead/#BxmMPZjtpdB4rK3C.99>