

The one thing that every skier and every rider needs to be successful is confidence. Confidence trumps brute strength, finesse and education.





# CLEARING THE HURDLES

Returning to the slopes  
with confidence

by Rena Perkins

Many people I know spend the winter huddled by the woodstove, peering out the window hoping to see the first green shoots of spring. Not me, though. I love everything about the wintertime: the cold crispness of the air, the frost on my windshield in the morning, the quiet that comes after a 20-inch snowstorm.

Of course, as a snowsports professional, I also love everything about being on the hill, and one of my favorite sights is the guy trudging up to the ski school lineup in a fluorescent jacket and pink Lange boots toting a pair of 210 cm straight skis. His equipment was state-of-the-art in the 80's; he is serious about the sport. Or was, until something happened to take him away from the mountain. Perhaps he moved to a non-snowy area; maybe he had an injury or health problem that made skiing uncomfortable or impossible; or he could have started a family and become caught up in the whirl of soccer games and ballet lessons. The important thing is that he is here, eager to come back to the sport. This is an opportunity for me to share what I love about skiing and to welcome a fellow enthusiast back into the fold.

There are myriad reasons that a person might stop skiing or riding and be hesitant or apprehensive to start again. There are the issues of time and money that affect all of our decisions regarding leisure activities. But the one concern that pervades a return to snowsports across the board is fear. When asked what frightens her, one former skier replies, "Fear of looking like a fool, fear of incompetence, fear of injury and fear of splitting my ski pants." Whether you are skiing or riding for the first time of the year or the first time in 20 years,

you are bound to be experiencing some trepidation about your return to the slopes.

When Henry injured his back at work, he had to take a season off from skiing. He was a good patient; he changed his lifting techniques, and he faithfully completed his physical therapy requirements. When he arrived back on the hill he was healthy and strong; so, feeling great, he rode the lift to the top of the mountain and chose a long, winding intermediate run for a warm-up.

Just three turns into his run, Henry recognized that he'd made a mistake. His legs didn't seem to remember what to do. His boots, which had always fit perfectly, were now causing his feet to shriek in agony. He had forgotten to put on his pole straps, and left one pole stuck in the snow behind him. Off guard, he tried to put on the brakes with his aching feet straining at his high-performance skis that now seemed enormous and unmanageable. He skidded to a stop in the biggest snowplow he'd ever performed. Before his injury, Henry had been an advanced skier who had been at it for most of his life. Now he felt dejected and demoralized; he felt like a beginner again.

Henry had only been away from the sport for one season, but many people are returning after 5, 10 or even 20 years away. In these cases, coming back can seem like starting over.

Leslie had learned to snowboard in high school with the help of a learn-to-ride program in her community. She had attended college and then gotten a job in Florida, where she never had occasion to snowboard. She got married and had 3 children, and when her kids were elementary school-aged, the family decided to take a ski vacation. After their first day of snowboard lessons, the kids had been up the chairlift and were able to ride all of the green trails at the mountain. Leslie marveled at their swift success, but was hesitant to get out and try it herself. She couldn't remember a thing that she had learned in high school, and the equipment all looked different.

Leslie had also been through all of the physical and emotional changes that come with starting a family and building a life and knew that she simply wasn't the same person that she was when she learned to ride. She decided that, to be safe, she would attack this challenge as if she were a beginner. While she was being fitted for new boots and a board, she picked the bootfitter's brain about new innovations in snowboarding. Then

she signed up for a private lesson. At the end of her day, she still couldn't keep up with her kids, but she suspected that she never would. What she could do was ride confidently at the level she had in high school, and she now remembered why she loved snowboarding so much.

No matter the skill level or duration of time away, skiers and riders returning to the sport have similar hurdles to clear. Changes in the sports and changes in participants' physical and emotional status combine to make relearning a specialized skill incredibly difficult. But the one thing that every skier and every rider needs to be successful is confidence. Confidence trumps brute strength, finesse and education. So if you miss skiing or are determined to get back into riding and you can only work on one thing, build your confidence, and everything else will fall into place.

*Rena Perkins is the children's alpine skiing program supervisor at Smugglers'. She grew up skiing in Connecticut. Her hurdle? Breaking through the intermediate level. Rena confesses, "I was always a hopeless intermediate until I discovered shaped skis (HUGE) and began following Smuggs ski instructors around the mountain. True story! Smuggs ski school really did teach me how to ski!"*

