

Discussion Number One... A Trip Down Memory Lane

You're up in the woods in the Siamese Ponds Wilderness in the Adirondacks, or maybe along one of the tougher ski trails in Vermont, and you're struggling with the steep parts, the roots and rocks, the twists and turns, the trees... Then you see a local couple skiing on some really old-fashioned looking gear. You wonder why they don't update that old stuff... but wait a second -- they're skiing really well. Better than YOU! What gives?

First off, they probably get to ski fifty or more times a year. But also, we Northeasterners are not well served by the ski gear companies, and that's a factor too. Fischer, Alpina, et al target their products for where the big money is -- out west. Westerners get lots of powder, they have nice, smooth horse trails to ski on. And of course, the vast majority of cross country skiers never leave the groomed trails at the nordic centers. The packages you see at EMS or Campmor reflect this. We Northeastern backcountry skiers get ice, we have nasty foot trails to ski on, and parts get *steep*. Many old hands in our north country hang on to the older gear they find works better for our conditions and terrain. Like what kind of gear, you ask?

1) 3-Pin Bindings -

Yes, those old-fashioned things that the store salespeople will tell you are completely obsolete and out-moded. Hah! Poppycock! You can still get 3-Pin **75mm Telemark Norm** bindings from **Rottefella** (Norway) and **Voile** (Utah). They're super-reliable, super-strong, super-simple. But they are more of a pain to use. Oh well, that's the price you pay for backcountry-worthy reliability.

Here's a picture of what I mean -- **Voile HD Mountaineer** binding

Some folks still use lightweight cable bindings like the **Black Diamond Riva**, but those haven't been made for years. The closest you'll come to that these days is the **Voile 3-Pin Cable** binding.

2) Big leather boots with 3-Pin binding-compatible soles -

These used to be really popular. Anybody remember **Fabiano** boots? Those were made by **Scarpa**. Asolo also used to make great leather ski boots. The **Asolo Snowfield** was *the* classic. The heavier version was the **Asolo Extreme**. They're reasonably warm, extremely sturdy, and are comfortable to hike in (an important point sometimes).

3) "XCD" or "Cross Country Downhill" skis -

The classic "backcountry touring" ski was the **Karhu XCD GT** ("XCD" was short for "cross country downhill"). The XCD GT was a bit wider and shorter than the also-popular **Fischer Europa E-99**. The **Madshus Glittertind** was (and still is) the secret weapon for those really in the know. All were not all that different looking than the other cross country skis of the day. You would still ski them in the traditional (long) length. All, however, had metal edges and were heavier than the usual run of cross country skis. They had a softer "camber" than track skis, so that they could deal better with soft, ungroomed snow. That softer "flex" also makes them easier to turn than track skis.

The rest is pretty much what you're used to -- poles, gaiters, clothes, etc.

Why would someone prefer this clunky old stuff over the sleek, high-tech stuff you see in the ski shops today? Because in the rocky, thickly-forested, raucous Northeast backcountry, this old stuff *works*. You need a lot of ankle support to hold a snowplow on a narrow, twisty trail with tree limbs grabbing at you and rocks and roots trying to throw you off balance. You need a good, stiff ski for that too, but you need it to float and turn reasonably well in deep, soft powder. Today's ski gear made for "backcountry" is usually too light and flexible for bushwhacking through the woods here, or at the other end of the spectrum, is so stiff and heavy that it's useless in our rolling, up-and-down terrain. The old "leathers and 3-pins" stuff works much better.

What's Old Is New Again

3-Pin leather ski boots remained popular in Europe, but had disappeared from the US market for more than a decade.

- **Scarpa** and **Crispi** (both Italian) are now making leather 3-pin boots available again. They both have a lighter and a heavier choice available.
- Compatible bindings are still readily available, made by **Rottefella** and **Voile**.

As for skis, two companies in particular have kept the Cross Country Downhill torch burning.

- **Madshus** makes a line of "Cross Country Downhill" skis that are similar to what Karhu made and called "XCD."
- **Fischer** makes a range of similar skis they call "S-Bound."
- Atomic and Alpina make competing models.

The skinnier models are more like cross country skis, and so are skied in longer lengths. What's new is that the biggest models are now the size and shape of downhill skis. For those, you'd choose a shorter length, more like a downhill ski.

You won't find this stuff at EMS, REI or Campmor (unfortunately), but the better outfitters in the Dacks and Vermont know all about it. Check out **The Mountaineer** in Keene Valley, NY, or **Cascade Cross Country Ski Center** outside of Lake Placid, NY. In Vermont, there's **Skirack** and the **Outdoor Gear Exchange** in Burlington. They know.

Next time: Lightweight NNN-BC setups like the ones you *will* find at Campmor, EMS, REI, etc...