



By Karin
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STOP TELLING ME TO FACE DOWNHILL



SKI
TIPS

“Keep your body facing down the hill” may be one of the most commonly used phrases in all of skiing. Right up there with, “Did you catch that on video?” and, “Can we have french fries now?” The concept of keeping one’s upper body pointing down the fall line merits some unpacking. No doubt you’ve seen a hapless skier, limbs flailing in unlikely directions, clearly not having a great run, generally having no real idea of what to do, while the friend/parent/roommate/snowboarder offers the command, “Face down the hill!” I cringe when I watch these scenarios from the lift. Facing down the hill, in and of itself, is not particularly helpful. Almost every time I overhear it being used, it’s not likely to help the skier it’s being shouted at.

So, what do we really mean when we tell someone to face downhill, or when we try to do it ourselves? Most commonly, the idea is to avoid twisting your body in order to generate the turn. Torqueing yourself around the turn seems like a perfectly fine idea until you try to un-torque at the end of the turn and do it in the opposite direction. That’s a lot of winding and un-winding to do, each and every time you change direction. Surely there must be a better way.

The better way is to turn your feet, and the skis that are attached to them. A useful rule of thumb in skiing is to use the lower parts of your body before the upper ones. So if you want to turn, focus on turning your skis, not your shoulders. The well-intentioned advice to point your body down the hill doesn’t tell you what to do to change direction. It only gives advice on posture, not mechanics.

So let’s forget about our upper bodies for a moment and think about our legs, feet and skis. If you sit on the floor and extend your legs straight out in front of you, you can point both feet to the left or to the right. You’d do that by rotating your legs. Similarly, if someone lifted you up by your armpits and held you off the ground, you could point both feet left and right. Or the best analogy might be if you were standing on the hardwood kitchen floor in slippery socks you could also point your feet left, right, or any other direction.

Now imagine this on skis. On gentle terrain, glide downhill with all 10 of your toes equally weighted. Without using any other body part, twist both feet left, then right. This will only be possible if the skis are relatively flat — meaning you’re not edging them too hard into the snow. The lower the edge angle of the skis, the easier it is to steer them. As you’re doing this, feel how your legs are doing the turning. The more urgent the turn, the more forcefully you’ll need turn your legs. In heavy snow, you’ll need to make a conscious effort to



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keep turning your legs, bit by bit, all the way through the turn. No slacking.

The other part of the equation is to tighten your core. You need a stabilizing force to prevent your whole body from twisting. That’s the job of your abs — you know, the muscles you pledged not to neglect any longer? Well, we have a new job for those abs, which is to keep your torso stable while your legs and skis turn underneath you. If you go back to the analogy of the slippery socks on the kitchen floor, you will see that it only works if you keep your core tight.

If you turn your skis under a stable upper body, guess what also happens? You most likely will remain facing down the hill throughout your turn. Ta da! However, that’s only true in a short-radius turn. The longer the turn, the more your upper body tends to follow your

skis — which is just fine. A better guideline than the must-face-downhill mantra is to turn your skis more than your body. Let the skis do the turning, and keep your core tight and stable.

So, next time your friend is flailing through manky snow, or is on a run that is way too steep, or is stuck in some other unfortunate situation, yell at them, “Tighten your core!” or “Steer with your legs!” They will still think you’re a complete jerk for dragging them to inappropriate terrain, but at least you’ll be giving them useful advice. ♦

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