

THE FIRST TURN:

GET YOUR RUN OFF TO A STRONG START

STORY AND PHOTO BY KARIN KIRK

SHELBY ROGALA STARES DOWN "THE GREAT ONE."

No matter what part of the mountain you ski on, there are always some places that give you pause before you set off down the hill. Maybe it's steep, or narrow, or rock-studded. Maybe it's a line you've never skied, or a cute boy is watching. God forbid, maybe it's all of the above. In any case, the top of a run offers a particular challenge. Until you get into the run, it's hard to know what particular tactic to use.

What are some ways to get your descent off on the right note?

BUT FIRST, SOME ETIQUETTE

Many places at Bridger Bowl and Big Sky have sinuous traverses leading out to the bowls. Please don't stop on the traverses! Instead, move along until you reach the place you want to ski from, then pull off, either above or below the traverse. Find an out-of-the-way spot to sort yourself out, fiddle with your boot buckles, size up your line, and start your GoPro.

POINT YOURSELF IN A FAVORABLE DIRECTION

Take a moment to read the slope. Is the fall line consistent or does the slope angle left or right? Is the pitch the same everywhere, or is there a friendly-looking starting point? What about that suspicious-looking tree branch sticking out of the snow? Suss out the details, but don't stare for too long and get over-analytical about it. Steer clear of terrain features that are going to make your life complicated, and envision your first turn. No need to plot your course beyond that – just scope out your entry and look for an opportune spot to start that first turn.

SLIDE IN DIAGONALLY, NOT STRAIGHT DOWN

In many situations, it's a smart tactic to enter the

slope with a short, skidded traverse. Don't just traverse straight across, but flatten your edges so you slide downhill somewhat. Get a feel for the snow by digging in your edges just a bit, and then releasing them. Similarly, you can gently bounce up and down on your skis to feel how the snow reacts. You can get a lot of information in just a few feet of skiing. Is the surface slick? Or grabby? Is the pow deeper than you thought? Do what you can to get a sense of what's under your feet before you take the plunge.

That said, do not traverse the whole darn slope, because you're likely to dead-end yourself at the trail's edge, limiting your options. Plus, a prolonged traverse is never an inspiring way to set yourself up for your best skiing. So slide on in, feel what the snow's like, and carry on right into your first turn.

MIND OVER MATTER FOR THE FIRST TURN

Will your initial turn be the most awesome turn you've ever made? Probably not, and that's okay. Just get it done. If you end up stepping your ski around, or swinging your shoulder in that dorky way you always do, that's alright. Don't beat yourself up; just get the train moving in whatever way you can.

EASE ON UP TO FULL SPEED

One of the most frequent suggestions I give to clients and ski partners when embarking down a steep or techy run is to start off at about 60% of your normal speed. Once the first few turns are under your belt, you can dial up the intensity. This approach keeps you balanced as you adjust to the snow and the slope. Get yourself in the groove and moving along, and then you can let it run and ski more dynamically.

If you go too fast at the onset, you'll likely find yourself skiing defensively and jamming on the brakes at

the bottom of your turns. This is the opposite of letting yourself flow through each turn. Let the rhythm and momentum come to you; don't force it.

COMMIT, STAY STRONG, AND KEEP GOING

Good skiers make it look effortless, but it isn't. Dynamic skiing in difficult terrain is demanding. Keep your core tight and do everything you can to stay over your feet. As long as you're balanced (more or less), keep moving toward that next turn, without stalling out or losing momentum. This is perhaps the single biggest difference between awesome skiing and boring skiing. Keep looking for your next opportunity to start a new turn, and do your best to make it happen. I tend to yell at myself in those clutch moments, "Keepgoingkeepgoingkeepgoing!" Sometimes we all need a little nudge to propel ourselves down a steep slope.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

Luckily we have many chances to dial in our formula for kicking off a successful run. If you don't nail it, don't fret. Make a note of what worked and what didn't, and give it another shot. Figure out what works best for you, and keep practicing so you're ready when that cute boy is watching.



Karin Kirk is a ski instructor, Ridge guide, and staff trainer at Bridger Bowl. If you happen to hear her yelling at herself as she skis by, don't worry, that's normal for her. Karin can be reached at karinkirk@gmail.com.