

# ASSEMBLING THE ULTIMATE SKI QUIVER

BY KARIN KIRK

WE ASK A LOT OF OUR SKIS. They need to carve on hard-pack, float through the cold smoke, behave themselves on traverses, be forgiving yet burly, and be light enough to shoulder up the bootpack. Oh yeah, they also have to look cool and cost less than a semester at MSU. Some skiers remain faithful to a single pair of skis while others withstand dirty looks from their spouses and covet niche skis that are purpose-built for specific tasks.

A visit to a ski shop reveals an impressive array of skis on the wall. Fat skis, rockered skis, skis with early rise, skis with traditional camber, women's skis, AT skis and park skis. Never before have there been so many distinct genres of gear available to the average skier. Which one should you choose? Or should you own more than one? And how do you decipher the technology behind all those colorful graphics? Let's examine the various genres of skis as we assemble a fantasy quiver of four skis.



Elan Amphibio 76

## 1. THE HARD SNOW SPECIALIST

Granted, we live for powder days. But corduroy can be ridiculously fun on the right set of skis, especially if no one is in your way. Recreational skis that were primarily designed for firm snow and groomers were commonplace in the early 2000s, but are being nudged out by fatter and more rockered skis. But if you travel to groomed havens like Sun Valley, or you enjoy pretending that you're Ted Ligety, then having a dedicated carving ski makes sense.

The **Volkl RTM 81** is one such offering, with a trim 81 mm waist, integrated bindings, and reinforced edges that deliver unwavering edge hold. There are pretty much only two things you need to do on this ski: stand in the middle of it and tip it on edge. After that, just hold on and enjoy the ride. The edge grip feels uncannily connected to the snow, and lends a sensation of autopilot as it navigates crisp arcs with seemingly little input from the skier. Are you a skier who likes to ride in the backseat and enjoy the scenery? This ski is not for you. The tail is stiff and will deliver a stern rebuke if you settle into the back of the ski.

On the other side of the spectrum, the **Elan Amphibio 76** is an entry-level carving ski designed for those with a light touch. Thanks to a novel asymmetrical design, the skis engage easily, offering the reward of carving to those who don't need to travel at 40 mph to feel alive.



Volkl RTM 81



DPS  
Nina 99  
Pure3

## 2. THE WELL-TEMPERED MIDFAT

A versatile fat-ish ski can serve as an everyday ski for those who prefer to keep life simple, and is the go-to tool for skiing on old powder or a few inches of new snow. An all-rounder for our area would be 90-105 mm underfoot with enough sidecut to carve when needed and sufficient width to avoid getting bogged down in deep snow. Skis in this genre typically use traditional camber in the midsection of the ski with an early rise shovel for easy turn initiation. This best-of-both worlds design allows the ski to rise to the challenges of any given day. These well-rounded skis are popular in our area for good reason and there are many choices that fill this niche. The Line Sick Day 95, Volkl Mantra, Atomic Ritual and K2 Remedy 102 are some worthy examples.

At 99 mm underfoot, the women's **DPS Nina 99 Pure3** (identical to the men's Wailer 99 except for color and length) is a relatively slim ski from a company that is known for making powder skis. The Ninas made their initial impression when I picked them up to head out the door; they are surprisingly light thanks to their carbon construction. Out on the snow, this lends a nimble, maneuverable flavor to the ride. These skis are eager to please and respond predictably to a wide range of inputs. Tip them on edge and they grip capably. Flatten the ski and it will surf through piles of soft snow. Pivot them and they'll snap through the bumps. This ski blends the rare traits of performing when pushed but also complying with just about any move you make, even if it happens to not be the most perfect move. It will encourage you rather than punish you; that's a nice characteristic to have in a ski that you take to tricky places.

## 3. THE NO-COMPROMISE POWDER SLAYER

Today's fat skis are wonderful tools, engineered to bring even more bliss to a deep day. Several attributes make these skis well-suited to soft snow. First, their width provides ample surface area for floatation. Beyond that, the rockered shape maintains a loose, flowy feel to the ski that allows for one of my favorite ski moves: the schmear. The ski can be easily pivoted, sliced or surfed through powder, depending on your wishes. Typically, these skis are not overly stiff, further enhancing the easygoing personality that makes these skis so darned fun.

I spent a fun day on the **Volkl One**, which has pronounced rocker and a 116 mm waist. One thing I love about skis in this category is that you can ski right into moguls without fear of getting rocked all over the place. Their supple flex soaks up bumpy terrain and leaves you to focus on keeping yourself in the fall line rather than dealing with repercussions from slightly

unwise decisions. The One was unfussy about the particulars of any given turn and it was always game to go where I pointed it. The ski employs a cleverly designed wood core that uses stiff ash underfoot and soft and springy poplar in the tip and tail. Thus the ski will deliver when pressured from the middle, but it's also forgiving and absorptive.

While ginormous fat skis are getting lots of attention in the press and in the Schlasman's liftline, keep in mind that they are still niche skis. What you gain in surfability in soft snow you sacrifice in carvability in firm conditions. The springy tip and tail can produce an amusing flapping motion at high speeds and the rockered shape is embarrassingly slow on traverses and roads (no one likes to be passed by a girl, even on a runout). So if you are eyeing a ski like this as your everyday companion, it's best to test it in a range of realistic conditions before committing.



Volkl  
One



## SKI TECH PRIMER

### CAMBER, ROCKER, EARLY RISE

Today's skis employ a few different types of geometry. Just to make things a little more confusing, many skis combine several of these profiles into one ski. When you're shopping for skis, put the bases together to see if it's cambered, flat or rockered.

**Traditional camber** is the familiar arch of the ski when it rests on the floor without any weight on it. Camber gives a ski rebound and an energetic, snappy feel. **Rockered** skis have no camber and are flat all along their running length or are bowed such that the middle of the ski touches the ground while the tip and tail do not. Rockered skis are delightfully smeary and maneuverable and are ushering in a whole new surf-inspired technique in soft snow.

**Early rise** is when the area just behind the ski tip is slightly suspended off the snow. This helps the ski engage the new turn with less effort. **Twintip** skis have both the tips and tails turned up. Originally designed for the terrain park, an upturned tail has its place on an all-mountain ski due to its ability to shimmy into tight spots. Some twintip skis also have a softer tail that allows the ski to release easily from the turn. And let's not forget how a twintip generates a wake of powder spray to ward off tailgaters.

### WOMEN'S SKIS

#### WHAT'S BENEATH THE PRETTY TOPSHEET?

There was a time when women's skis were severely watered down designs that lacked the ability to perform. But thankfully, ski manufacturers have come to realize that women are every bit as skilled as men, but we simply don't weigh as much. The actual distinction of what makes a women's ski varies by model and manufacturer. In some cases it's simply a different graphic while in others it's a top-down design intended specifically for women. In general, women's skis are designed to respond to a lighter skier. Many women's skis use less metal and contain softer, easier-flexing materials compared to a similar men's model. They also come in shorter lengths and sometimes are a smidge narrower than their men's counterparts. These three factors combine to produce a ski that is lighter in weight overall, which again is proportional to the size of the skier. That said, don't be fooled into thinking that women's skis are pushovers. High-end women's skis such as the Nordic Hell's Belles or Volkl Aura still demand an expert skier at the helm — however that skier can weigh in at 125 pounds instead of 180.

#### SPECIAL THANKS

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Karin Kirk is a ski instructor, Ridge Guide and staff trainer at Bridger Bowl. Please don't ask her how many skis she owns, as this is a sensitive topic.



#### 4. THE ALPINE TOURING SETUP

Backcountry skiing has become the fastest-growing segment of the snowsports equipment market, and every major brand is diving in and creating tempting offerings. But it's a little confusing to navigate all the choices. Unlike the completely universal DIN alpine bindings, touring bindings come in several different configurations and in some cases traditional alpine boots are not compatible. An ideal AT setup is light, reliable, and versatile since you'll be asking the gear to perform in a broad range of conditions.

For many, the quest for the ultimate touring setup begins with the binding choice. If we're going all in, we'll go with Dynafit. They pretty much invented the modern touring binding, after all. Dynafit bindings are ridiculously light, they pivot effortlessly on the way up and they are secure and solid all the way down. The **Dynafit Radical ST** or **Radical FT** are great choices for our terrain.

A major caveat is that your normal alpine boots won't work, but you wouldn't want those clunky things in the backcountry anyway. Instead, you'll need a genuine AT boot with "tech" fittings. Aside from binding compatibility, an AT boot buys you light weight, lots of float in the cuff for natural striding on the way up, and a lugged sole that makes for easy walking on snow, ice and rocks.

Pair your sleek boots and bindings with a similarly purpose-built ski such as the **Dynafit Grand Teton** (105 mm underfoot) or **Black Diamond Verdict** (100 mm underfoot). Although it's tempting to get a super wide ski for the backcountry, keep in mind that you have to propel the things uphill and they need to perform on windblown snow, frozen corn and a wide range of less-than-ideal conditions. So seek an all-rounder rather than a specialist.

The whole setup may not feel quite as bomber as your alpine gear, but then again you won't be pounding frozen bumps on Bronco anyway. Instead you'll be rocketing through Hyalite pow or making morning laps in April corn. A bonafide alpine touring setup is a luxurious addition to the quiver, expanding your ski season and your vocabulary of ski experiences well beyond the boundaries of resort skiing. ♦

Dynafit Grand Teton

Black Diamond Verdict