

THE MOUNTAIN JOURNAL

MOUNTAIN CAT TRACKS DEMAND CAT LIKE SKILLS

By TONY CRESPI, SKIER NEWS' TECHNICAL EDITOR

Sometimes cat tracks, narrow connecting trails on mountains, feel monotonous. Other times they seem dangerous. Whether friendly and playful or narrow and intimidating, most mountains possess these connecting trails.

Vermont, where I largely ski, has many cat tracks. Whether at Mount Snow, Okemo or the long unforgiving cat tracks of Killington or those found at Snowbird, Utah, most skiers routinely negotiate these catwalks as they move about the mountain. Do not fret. Do not laugh. A few years past, testing skis with Olympian Pam Fletcher at Stratton Mountain, I rocketed along several cat tracks as we criss-crossed the mountain. Still, how does one best negotiate these byways? Slowly or with suicidal abandon? Interested? Stay tuned.

In truth, at one time or another, most skiers end up on some catwalk. The odds favor it. Fortunately, most tracks are not wild and wooly. Most cat tracks can be tamed.

Whether a burgeoning novice, a died in the wool intermediate, or a true black diamond expert, catwalks require a bit of care so they can be tamed properly. First, understand, not all catwalks will be as wide as you would like. It is part of the nature of the beast. Much as resorts would love you to think otherwise, mountains were simply not designed for skiers and cat tracks cannot always be cut terribly wide. Many are actually service roads for summer maintenance or summer hiking. In winter, they also provide a consistent pitch for on-mountain services like snowmobile use for the Ski Patrol or for evening horse-drawn sleigh rides to a mid-mountain dinner.

On skis, take heart, there are strategies to make you feel more comfortable negotiating cat tracks.

The mountain class is in session:

Technical Pointer #1

Move Like A Cat

One particularly useful approach for cat tracks is to practice a sideways, braking wedge. Sort of like a cat with one paw forward and another poised for attack.

You can have one ski braking forward momentum, in a wedge position essentially, while the other ski moves along down the cat path. Got it? This is a key movement and, a useful drill for refining edging, pressure control, and balance.

Interested? To start, first practice this on the side of a trail: A well-groomed, moderate, slope. After all, practice is key to advanced skill development. Moreover with practice you can refine this skill such that the cat tracks themselves will not seem nearly so ferocious.

Is this truly important? Yes! Many cat tracks are narrow. Some even steep. I know of at least one Western resort where virtually half the intermediate runs are comprised of catwalks. Some are very narrow, and most are sufficiently long that most folks I have skied with have become tired of simply using the one maneuver we just reviewed. I know it is a favorite, but even cats like variety in their diet.

Perhaps you have negotiated catwalks while connecting to some hidden chute or while fleeing from some veritable precipice. Cats love high places and catwalks often seem to appear overlooking the most intimidating of runs. At such times, like a cat stalking game, some folks claw their way along at barely a crawl.

Keep your vision up. Avoid the other big mountain cats and ski safely.

Technical Pointer #2

Turn Cat Tracks into a Turning Game

One secret for controlling speed on a catwalk is to turn often. Each time you twist or pivot your skis sideways, whether in an exquisite carve or using a wind-shield-wiper-type turn, you can slow momentum. Remember you will be most apt to pick up speed when shooting straight forward, so on a cat track you will want to maximize turning. The tough part is that lots of folks are not all that comfortable practicing short, tight, turns.

Try the following drill.

My wife Cheryl, a strong expert skier, still finds it helpful to practice the following turning drill to prepare

for catwalks. Usually, she executes this on the side of a trail, using a narrow track of space. Then when on a crowded cat track, she mirrors the same moves. She finds it a perfect way to negotiate cat tracks.

On the side of a friendly slope, pick a narrow corridor. A recently groomed track is the ideal width. Keeping a straight line, execute a turning contest with your skiing partner. See who can turn the most. See who can move with the slowest pace. See who can vary their turning rhythm and turning shape while maintaining a slow, controlled, rate of descent.

Over time, practice this contest on different slopes, on different pitches, and on different snow conditions. Variety can enhance your skills.

The Take Home: Practice Makes Puur-fect

Learning to negotiate catwalks involves both physical skills, technical skills, and a bit of psychological savvy. Remember, you need to learn to maximize your speed control. You need to refine your ability to turn and/or brake in a relatively narrow space, often while other skiers swoosh by, and you need to be visually aware of dips and drop-offs which may border these pathways. Just as different type of cats have different personalities, not all cat tracks are the same.

Here's the good news: While you may not possess the balance, or speed of a cat, you can learn from a cat. After all, most cats cope with steep narrow pathways quite well and you can too if you arm yourself with the right strategies and skills both physical and mental.

Be Aware, Ski With Care, and Watch out for the cats

Contributing Columnist Tony Crespi has served as both a Ski School Trainer and Development Team Coach. Contributor to publications throughout snow country, his instructional pointers are published throughout the season. Although he is enthusiastic about his Persian cat's antics, he personally prefers to confront narrow chutes rather than long cat tracks.

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ASPEN SNOWMASS, FOUR MOUNTAINS to CHOOSE

ASPEN, CO – Congratulations, you have arrived in Aspen, the sun is shining and there is fresh snow on the slopes. There are four separate mountains with the company name Aspen Snowmass from which to choose. How do you decide where to schuss first?

Indeed, each of the four ski areas, Aspen, Aspen Highlands, Buttermilk and Snowmass, has its own distinct personality. If time and ability allow, definitely sample them all since your single lift ticket covers all four resorts. Totaling more than 5,300 acres across the four mountains, there is a lot of ground to cover. Here is a bit of guidance to help you distinguish the flavor of each. Remember, figuring out which mountain to slide is a good problem to have.

Aspen Mountain

This is where it all began in a sleepy post-World War II town in 1946. Aspen Mountain is the skier's classic. The trails were designed and cut by the men who served in the US Army's 10 Mountain Division as well as some of Europe's best mountaineers and skiers. Aspen Mountain, sometimes called Ajax, gained fame hosting national and international ski races in the 1950s and 60s. To this day, you can channel your inner Ingemar Stenmark or Mikaela Shiffrin, on the perfect groomed intermediate pitches on the west side, off the 1A lift named Shadow Mountain and the famed Ruthie's chairlift.

With the Silver Queen Gondola rising Aspen Mountain's entire 3,300 vertical feet directly from downtown Aspen, it is an easy choice if you are staying in a downtown hotel or want a few quick and efficient runs before a lunch date or other non-ski plans. That is the secret sauce of Aspen Mountain: It is comparatively small in size, a mere 675 acres, yet packs an amazing variety of terrain, all quickly accessible. It is known for its mostly intermediate to advanced terrain. Want some steep and deep? Lap the Walsh's area on the east side after a snowstorm. Bump skiers can tire themselves by strategically

zigzagging their way down the Face of Bell. There are gorgeous aspen glades to navigate in the Dumps, amazingly fun lines under Lift 1A, and more than 70 shrines hidden in the trees that commemorate locals and celebrities alike and contribute to the unique character of this place.

Aspen Highlands

You have probably heard of Highland Bowl, that legendary all-aspects basin of double-black-diamond terrain accessed via a hike to 12,392-foot Highland Peak at the top of Aspen Highlands. "The Bowl," due to its location and limited accessibility, holds snow well all season long. It offers some of the best turns in ski country for expert skiers and riders along with bragging rights and memories that will last well beyond après-ski.

However, to focus solely on Highland Bowl does a disservice to what is considered the locals' mountain. For one thing, there is plenty of proving ground that does not entail a hike, like the steep, no-nonsense fall lines in Steeplechase on the plentiful powder stashes of Deep Temerity. Highlands also offers plenty for those who are not as radically inclined. There are fun learning bumps on Scarlett's, which was home to many a freestyle contest back in the day. Find impeccably groomed, wide green and blue cruisers with incredible views, and pockets of challenging terrain on the lower mountain, which has very little traffic. And while crowds are never really a problem at Aspen Snowmass, the feeling of having a run all to yourself is probably most felt at laid-back Highlands.

Buttermilk

Buttermilk is known for two things: being the beginners' mountain and hosting the Winter X Games. Its reputation for both ends of the ski/snowboard spectrum is well earned. Countless local families swear by the gentle, accessible terrain of kid-oriented Panda Peak to introduce their little ones to schussing. On the other hand, Buttermilk's two parks – the

West Buttermilk one ideally suited to learners and the real-deal X Games park, with over 100 features and pipe – keep aspiring freeriders busy all day.

However, there is more to Buttermilk. Kids who have graduated from Panda Peak and their families can explore this mountain's wide groomers, tree trails, and many glades. Tiehack, the east side of the mountain with its own lift and parking lot is the go-to place on a powder day for many locals. Then again, you cannot overlook the attraction of convenient free parking. In sum, Buttermilk is an oft-overlooked gem of a mountain.

Snowmass

The "mass" is in Snowmass. More than 3,300 acres and the highest vertical rise, 4,400 feet, in the country, mean that it truly offers something for everyone. Got a family or group that includes all abilities and preferences? Mom can lap the steeps and powder fields of Hanging Valley, while Dad enjoys the endless cruisers and finding their Noon Groom, without skiing the same run twice. Kids of all ages can explore the dozen-plus tree trails or Snowmass' three terrain parks. Or better yet Mom and Dad can learn from the real Pros in the ski and snowboard school. Everyone then can meet for lunch at Elk Camp, possibly adding a few spins on the new Breathaker Alpine Coaster to really round out the experience. Snowmass, known as the family-friendly mountain, really is, no matter what any skier or rider in the family might desire.

For more info, log on to www.aspensnowmass.com

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