



# turning heads

BY CLYDE SOLES

**With NTN dead in the water, what does the future hold for a tele system that actually works? Plus, a look at other developments in the market.**

# tele

mark skiing was once the exclusive domain of the lunatic fringe that spent more time skinning up hills in the backcountry than riding lifts at resorts. Not that our skinny skis and leather boots were ideal for much else.



Today, telemark skiers are common at most ski areas and growing each season. More and more bored alpiners and snowboarders make the switch. Ask around and you'll find many will admit, "Yeah, I wanna tele someday." The current fat skis and plastic boots let almost anyone rip it up—and the flowing feeling of the telemark turn is like no other. Addictive actually.

Though quite a few of the converts never make it off-piste, except to poach out-of-bounds freshies, the lure for many is the backcountry. They may spend countless days riding lifts to refine their skills but the ultimate goal is to find the untracked quiet.

According to a study by Leisure Trends, the number of telemark skiers has jumped from 1.3 million in 1998 to 3.3 million in 2002. More telling is the number of dedicated skiers (12 or more days per season) grew from about 200,000 to 435,000 in the same time period.

Telemark skiers as a group are among the most dedicated of snow-sport enthusiasts, skiing early and late season when most alpiners and boarders have put their gear away. They're also quite adept at the fine art of spending money. Between equipment and clothing, modern telemark skiers waiting in the lift line typically have each invested \$2,000 to \$3,000 in their fun. And little of that lasts more than a couple seasons, either because of style or durability.

## The Weak Link: Bindings

Last season, the question that concerned many in the industry was, "What's the status of the New Telemark Norm (NTN) binding system?" With more people understanding what the fuss was about, the response now appears to be—yawn—"So what?"

Nearly everybody agrees that the 75 mm bindings used by backcountry and telemark skiers today are Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions based on a Nordic racing binding from 1971 that was never intended for heavy-duty usage. The current designs are the result of throwing more material at the problem to increase control and solve breakage issues. This sledgehammer school of design works but the result is inelegant, fickle gear and disgruntled customers.

The promise of a new boot/binding system designed from the ground up for modern telemark skiing still appeals to everyone. Yet turf wars and poor communication have all but killed the NTN concept—for now. The impasse came when the leading binding manufacturer couldn't convince the three boot companies to give it an exclusive; the boot companies wisely wanted other players in the game.

This closed-door infighting has gone on for several years but as more details of the NTN system trickled out, the reality sunk in that it brought almost nothing new to the consumers except an opportunity to spend more money. Sure, round toes are much better for walking and climbing than the duckbill. But NTN has no provision for a release system or locking the heels down—the two topmost items on any wish list. Variable modes for touring and turning, ease of entry and

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exit, and full testing before reaching consumers are all desirable features that should be standard.

Why is release so important? That depends upon the destination. For backcountry skiing, avalanches are the huge concern—attached skis are a potential death sentence that pull the skier down and prevent swimming. For lift-served skiing, knee protection just makes sense; speeds are greater and more vertical is skied per day. Along with release come ski brakes to prevent windmilling skis whacking skiers in the head.

Of the releasable bindings that have been offered, the first (Voile) is a knock-off of long-abandoned alpine technology, another (TRP) is a difficult-to-use plate seemingly made of lead, and a third (SkyHoy) was a mediocre design rushed to market. The most recent and best entry yet (7tm) forces skiers to weight the rear foot to prevent pulling out. The next release plate system (Telebry), which hasn't reached production yet, appears only suitable for backcountry, though, the bigger market is with lift-served skiers. None of these offer heel lock as an option.

Why is heel lockdown desirable? Well to paraphrase the T-shirt: "If telemarking was easy, it would be called alpine skiing." No matter how fat the skis and burly the boots, tele will always be a thigh-burning activity. Most consumers simply can't manage a full day on the slopes. But if they had the option of making tele turns in the morning when the powder is good and easily switching to fixed heel when the snow gloms up or is skied off, a LOT more people would be attracted. And, no, paralleling with freeheels is not even close to the same thing.

Despite all the infighting, some decent product is coming out in the next year—albeit nowhere near as good as it could be if everyone would just get together and figure out a better system. Sigh.

- The **Rainey** HammerHead proved the viability of a binding that can be adjusted for better touring performance or greater downhill control; the system is effective but can be a nuisance. New for this season is a heel elevator that actually works, unlike the previous version. The Internet-only sales model has expanded to include seven stores in protected regions; dealers must pre-pay for 100 bindings.
- The new **G3** Targa Two features a lever that switches the binding from an active downhill mode to a looser touring mode. There are some other refinements to make the binding more active as well. It's an important step since the one-time industry leader was getting long in the tooth.
- There will also be a new version of the re-

leasable 7tm that has a free pivot to allow better touring performance at the flick of a switch. The **7tm** Tour gives freeheel backcountry skiers the best option yet for safe travel. An adaptor for the K2 inserts is already available.

- The **Rottefella** Cobra line of bindings has yet another upgrade so that all are compatible with both 3-hole patterns and K2 inserts. Also, the R6 and R8 have a new riser plate.
- **Bomber** is also introducing an adaptor plate for K2. It also has plans for a titanium version of its Bishop binding that should appeal to techies.
- New to the U.S. market, the **Silvretta** Telemark Adaptor is essentially a stripped-down alpine touring binding that acts as a hinged platform for heavy-duty tele bindings so they can tour more effectively (it has no release function).
- **Linken** remains the only step-in telemark binding on the market and offers maximum edge power. No major changes are planned, though the binding was tweaked this season for even greater strength.
- **Voile** claims to have some new products coming but despite numerous requests no one from the company bothered to return calls. Rumor has it the company will produce the Telebry, so perhaps the CRB will finally go away.

### Tele Next

With NTN essentially dead in the water, the immediate future of telemark bindings and boots hinges on tightening the current standards. An attempt to incorporate telemark specs into the DIN alpine touring norm was quashed. Some cynics have suggested the alpine world sabotaged the proceedings due to telemark's perceived threat on market share.

Most of the boot/binding compatibility problems rest squarely on the shoulders of the boot companies—Scarpa, Garmont and Crispi. At present, binding designers don't have a prayer of fitting all the variations in toe thickness, heel widths, heel groove depths and walking lever shapes. The result is boots that twist out of bindings, heel levers that pop open unexpectedly, and bindings that chew up expensive boots.

Meanwhile, the binding manufacturers have to stop pointing fingers and solve their own problems. It's absurd that skiers still cannot trust their bindings to stay attached and not break. Both the Linken and 7tm (with brake) require an ankle strap for security though, in theory, this should be unnecessary. Other bindings still have reports

of exploding heel levers, breaking cables and cracking parts.

A look at the new Atomic Neox EBM alpine binding gives an example of how far behind the freeheel world remains. The EBM (Electronic Binding Management) took 11 years to develop, with the last three used for testing, before it reached consumers. It has onboard diagnostics, rather like cars, to ensure optimal performance and batteries that last 80 ski days and can download information to a computer. Sure, it costs Euros 1,000 (approximately USD \$1,220 as of mid-December), but it sold 2,000 units the first season just in Europe, and it won't reach North America until next season.

Not that the tele world needs an electronic binding but everyone wants better thought-out and tested products. Consumer testing programs can no longer be the norm.

Selling the wonders of backcountry skiing while turning a blind eye to the danger of non-releasable bindings is a potential liability for manufacturers and stores. It makes little sense to offer avalanche safety products yet at the same time greatly increasing the skiers (and snowboarders) risk of death. Putting a big warning sticker on nearly all the telemark bindings that reads "Not For Use In The Backcountry" is not an option, even if warranted.

### Duckbill Boots

With all the uncertainty over NTN, it's understandable that telemark boot companies haven't tinkered much with their product lines for next season. Getting their act together over some common, and real, standards needs to be the biggest priority. The existing poor tolerances are intolerable!

Aside from the necessity for the companies to tweak their molds a bit, the current crop of boots is pretty darned good. Now that all of the companies have gone to custom molded liners on most of their models, a good fit is achievable for nearly anyone.

- The only change for the **Garmont** line is the introduction of the high-performance women's Venus boot (formerly the Vixen but the Germans thought that sounded too much like "wanken," which in German means to stagger or totter). While similar to the Syner-G Women's that it replaces, the flex is about 20 percent softer while torsional rigidity is increased—all good things for lighter skiers. And, of course, the color is more stylish.
- **Crispi** is giving its top-of-the-line CXU an upgrade, though it's still working out the details as well as the name. While this brand has been a distant third in this three-way race, it is starting to gain on the pack.
- **Scarpa** is maintaining the status quo for



the 2004/05 season. It's still the leading brand but had better not rest too long on its laurels.

### Demise, Controversy and Inserts

The demise of Tua this summer had a bigger impact than many of its competitors originally anticipated. Shops around the country that were perhaps sitting on inventory scrambled to order more models or add new lines. Several ski brands were reporting in November that they were already sold out for the season. That would be a good thing—oversupply is the bane of the ski world.

More than likely, we'll see inserts on most tele skis by 2005/06 when the current ski graphics and designs need updating. As in the snowboard world, it's probable some companies will adopt a 4-x-2 pattern (doubling the number of inserts for more mounting options), while others will stick with the existing K2 pattern. At least there is no Burton equivalent to screw things up with a proprietary pattern!

### Backcountry Betties

Just one season ago, there was a single female-specific telemark ski on the market: the flower-power K2 She's Piste. At its

tion of the discontinued Mira but has the addition of a three-dimensional top cap for better torsional rigidity plus brighter graphics.

- **Fischer** has decided to get back into the telemark game—something it's struggled with for ages. This season, it didn't even make an effort and just sold the Big Stix alpine skis into backcountry shops. Next season, Fischer will offer two T-Stix: the Stingray (115-76-100, a tele flex, lighter Big Stix 7.6) and Mustang (120-86-107, a modified Big Stix 8.6). These will give telemark skiers a lot of technology and performance with

## » The immediate future of telemark bindings and boots hinges

Perhaps the biggest controversy this season is whether K2's binding inserts are a step in the right direction. Obviously, K2 believes so since all models of telemark skis will sport them next season. At this point, roughly 90 percent of the telemark bindings sold are either directly or indirectly (using shims) compatible: the only hold-outs are Linken, Rainey and Ultimate.

The naysayers are primarily the other ski manufacturers, most of whom are taking a wait-and-see approach (most models are not changing next season). They argue that there isn't enough flexibility on mounting position—an issue that only affects a small percentage of skiers with very large boots and some tech-weenies (an adjustable shim could solve that). Some also state that their skis are suited for both telemark and alpine touring bindings and they don't want to rule out the latter from inserts getting in the way. While valid, only one or two models in their lines would ever see an AT binding and the binding can be moved slightly if needed.

For stores and consumers, inserts mean much easier mounting—no more measuring, drilling, tapping or gluing. (Bindings ripping out are a thing of the past now that they have sufficient spring travel.) Skiers also gain the huge benefit of easily being able to swap bindings if they want to try something different.

A telemark insert norm also becomes an incentive for freeheel skiers to purchase tele skis instead of alpine skis, which increasingly have their own plates and other systems. Most skiers still believe a telemark ski is just an alpine ski with different graphics because all companies do an absolutely terrible job of elucidating the differences. At least with tele inserts, they are something people can see.

launch, there was more than a bit of skepticism—and some outright derision—from those with XY genes. Not anymore.

The votes are in and the girls had their say—they want performance and style. By this time next year, there will be at least six models of women's tele skis from four different companies.

- **K2** is rounding out the women's line with the new Dawn Patrol, a powder ski which it calls an "extra fat" (122-89-112), though that terminology may not go over well (full-figured, perhaps?). The original She's Piste is revamped with a stiffer flex and deeper sidecut (107-68-97) for rippin' on the firm. The InStinx (117-78-105) remains the same as a great all-rounder.
- The **Atomic** Femme Fatale (106-72-98) has a great name, Beta construction, and extensive testing by the Austrian hard Betties. Compared to the all-mountain men's TM:22, flex in the tip and waist is the same, while the tail is 10 percent softer for less acceleration coming out of turns.
- **Black Diamond** has developed its own Mystic (112-79-102) which is made by Atomic but has its own construction. Designed as a no-compromise performance ski, it is a lighter, softer version of the new Ethic.

### Boys Ski, Too

Though girls are getting most of the new toys next season, there are a few new models for the boys. Both Atomic and Rossignol are carrying over their current lines since they are still relatively fresh.

- In addition to the women's Mystic, **Black Diamond** is adding the slightly stiffer and heavier Ethic (112-79-102). It has the same dimensions and basic construc-

a more palatable price tag.

- Leaving no nose untweaked, **K2** introduced the Hippy Stinx (125-95-118) mid-season this year. A telemark version of the twin-tipped Seth Pistol is also being introduced that will compete with the **Atomic** Tele Daddy and **Karhu** Jak for the big mountain freeheel crowd. For next season, the ever-popular World Piste (114-78-105) is getting better damping, inserts and new graphics. Both the Piste Stinx and Totally Piste are going into retirement.
- The big boards that put **Karhu** back on the map—Jak (127-97-117) and Jil (129-90-110), as well as the lighter Jak BC—are getting cool new graphics but otherwise remain the same. However, the Rox will be replaced by two wider all-mountain skis with a unique die-cut aluminum internal cap over the wood core: the Grizzly with a 75 mm waist and the Kodiak with an 80 mm waist. The Agent (110-80-102) replaces the Ruckit as the agro ski for ski parks and half pipes; it's now wider and has a full tail. Continuing its effort to bring kids into the freeheel world, Karhu will also offer the Special Agent in lengths of 143, 133, and 123 cm. (**Garmont** still offers the Teledactyl boot for the tykes.)
- It appears that **Vökl** is starting to pay attention to the telemark world and is positioning the Outback (104-70-92) as more than an alpine touring ski. It's even brought onboard some sales reps who know the outdoor market since everyone knows an alpine ski rep would never sink to that level. For the discriminating skier, Vökl is rumored to be planning a telemark version of the 7 24 AX4 (118-83-106, hopefully with a normal name). However, nobody at headquarters deigned to return calls by our deadline.

- A new entry for next season is a twin-tipped telemark ski built by **Donek**, makers of high-end snowboards. This will feature an ash core and a double set of binding inserts and has been designed by the guys at Bomber—should be interesting.

### Light Backcountry

A category once on its last legs, light backcountry touring continues to make a resurgence. This is largely due to the emergence of shorter, fatter waxless skis that put the fun back into day trips—Fischer gets much of the credit here. No longer having to

level backcountry boots; however, details are not yet finalized.

- The **Rottefella** NNN-BC Manual binding is getting an overhaul with a new housing and wider platform. Increasing the width to 67 mm will enhance turning performance and make this more competitive with 3-pin bindings.
- Skiers demanding the ultimate convenience now have the option of a step-in 3-pin binding. The **Telebulldog** is rugged and easy to use, but the \$225 price tag will discourage many.

## on tightening the current standards.

struggle with long, skinny metal-edged skis and the perceived hassle of waxing continues to bring more customers back from the clutches of snowshoeing.

Of course, another contributing factor is that a modern heavy-duty telemark package weighs 16 to 20 pounds! While alpine touring gear can be lighter, it still feels clunky compared to the new light BC rigs. We're betting that even the hard-core skiers will be tempted to try light and fast.

- For next season, the **Alpina**, **Atomic**, **Fischer** and **Karhu** backcountry skis will largely stay the same (new graphics on some).
- **Rossignol** is putting its entire line on steroids by widening all three models and rounding the tips. Thus, the Backcountry 61 becomes a 65; the 68 will be 70; and the 83 fattens to 90. The Backcountry 90 (90-70-80) will also have a cap/ABS construction and a waxable base option for better downhill performance, making it a good yo-yo ski (making laps by skinning up slopes).
- The light plastic boots that have sparked this category—**Crispi** CXT, **Garmont** Excursion and **Scarpa** T4—remain unchanged for next season. Both the Garmont and Scarpa are available for women but only the Excursion has the option of thermo-formed liners (increases comfort and decreases weight).
- Just as it pumped up the skis, **Rossignol** is beefing up its boots. The BC X 9 should nearly equal the plastic boots when used with new 75 mm cable binding. And both the BC X 7 and BC X 3 will be available in women's models called Sapphires.
- **Alpina** plans to offer two new models of men's and one model of women's entry-


### AT World

According to Peter Metcalf, CEO of Black Diamond, "Telemark gear sales are three times that of the randonnée stuff. But randonnée is growing twice as fast." Considering that the skis are now essentially the same and the boots offer the same level of control, it's the more sophisticated alpine touring (AT) binding systems that account for the difference.

Alpine touring bindings offer locked heels for better control and energy savings, release for reduced risk in an avalanche, and easier touring due to the free pivot. Most feature step-in convenience and enough retention that the hard-core skiers won't pre-release. Until tele bindings catch up, expect continued growth in this category.

- Perhaps the most interesting new AT product for next season is the **Garmont** Adrenalin which has interchangeable outsoles. This high-end boot has the flex of an alpine freeride model and allows the skier to use an alpine-norm sole with conventional alpine bindings. For backcountry tours, just swap out for the lugged, rockered sole that fits into AT bindings.
- The **Scarpa** Matrix improves on the Laser with a stiffer tongue, more durable heat-molded liner and a variable-angle (instead of one or two) forward lock—though at the cost of more weight (200 grams heavier). The new Scarpa Avant is a three-buckle AT boot with a thermo liner that should be a great value at \$400.
- A new entry into the AT market comes from **Crispi**, a brand previously only known for telemark boots. Given its technology, this should be competitive with the rest.
- Though details were unavailable, **Dynafit** plans to introduce a "burly boot




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


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that will attempt to push Garmont off the top of its newfound position at the top of the snow pile.”

- **Naxo**, the newest company with an AT binding, is off to a strong start this season with the NX01 binding, which is distributed by Backcountry Access. This offers superior touring performance with good downhill features.
- The oldest brand in the AT world, **Silvretta**, has changed distributors from Climb High to Garmont North America. Interestingly, Silvretta is owned by Salewa, which purchased Dynafit last year. The new Pure is the lightest step-in binding on the market (1.2 kg versus 1.8 kg or more for others) and goes up to DIN 10.
- The favorite binding of the big air gonzos, **Fritschi** Freeride, will be an insignificant 30 grams lighter (2.1 kg) next season. The binding maintains its claim to fame of having the highest DIN settings (12).

### Avalanche Threats

After the publicity of the two accidents in Canada that killed 14 people, avalanche awareness is increasing, albeit not fast enough. Last season's tally of 58 recreational fatalities in North America set an all-time record, far surpassing the previous record of 35 the year before. In addition to the Canada deaths, 10 other skiers died, as did 23 snowmobilers, five snowboarders, five climbers and one snowshoer.

With more people heading into the backcountry every year, the need and market for avalanche beacons, shovels and probes continues to rise. Yet some of the products sold are not suitable for the task—something you hope you don't discover in an emergency—and stores that carry them may want to think again.

Shockingly, nearly every first-generation avalanche beacon in the past decade has suffered from one defect or another, some that could be fatal. While no deaths have yet been attributed to a defective beacon, it may just be a matter of time. One skier died last season partly due to the impact his beacon received from a rock that broke the ferrite antennae. The current standard for impact resistance is frightfully minimal yet few retailers or consumers know that beacons are indeed rather fragile.

Although single-antennae analog beacons (ARVA 9000, Ortovox F1 and M2, Peips 457, SOS) still work well in the hands of well-practiced users, it is hard to justify the cost savings. The new breed of multi-antennae digital models are so much faster and easier to use that most people are better off spending a bit more.

Some plastic shovels, such as the Life-Link and Ortovox polycarbonate models, have blades that cannot penetrate avalanche debris. These are fine for digging out a car but stores selling them for avalanche rescue could be asking for trouble. The “economy” avalanche probes are often too short (8 feet should be a minimum), too flexible (they can be deflected instead of going straight down), and too slow to assemble—talk about false economy!

- Finally **Peips** has re-entered the market with a new digital beacon, the DSP, which could rival the two front-runners (**BCA Tracker** and **Mammut Barryvox**). This model features three antennae to process signals and tells how many beacons are buried. An advanced model has a lot of gizmos (altimeter, compass, etc.) but functions the same.
- Although the **Ortovox X1** digital beacon got off to a rocky start, its popularity is growing. This season, the company introduces the Heli F1, which is a receive-only model with an external antennae made for helicopter pilots, and the D1 Doggy Xmitter, which is a transmit-only beacon with a shorter range and only costs \$85.
- The original digital beacon that revolutionized the industry, **Backcountry Access' Tracker DTS**, hasn't changed much since 1997. Next season, the Tracker will sport an easier to use harness and a sleeker case; plus the warranty is extended from three to five years.
- **G3** will offer a new snow saw that has a unique handle that can attach to a ski pole, shovel handle or ice axe for cutting Rutschblocks, cornices and even wood.
- The new **Indigo Snow Logic** shovel's unique design makes it very stiff and the handle is possibly the best on the market since it stays attached to the blade.
- The new **Life-Link Ice Pro** shovel is designed to be stiffer and chop hard snow better than polycarbonate models.
- While avalanche packs with inflatable air bags are a good idea to float victims on the surface, these still have many obstacles to overcome for wider acceptance. To ease the sting of low margins, **Life-Link** (the U.S. distributor) allows dealers to purchase a display pack for in-store inflation and will drop-ship a working model to customers. Still, they are expensive (\$650 to \$675), heavy (6 pounds), and probably cannot travel on passenger airlines. (The IATA rules permit them but each airline gets to decide if it wants to carry a 200 mg compressed gas cylinder attached to a 250 mg pyrotechnic charge.)

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