

Safety Site  
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Recreational Safety takes Responsibility & Control

This month I am bringing back an article written by Bruce Schmidt in April, 2021. With some weeks of spring skiing after this year's unusually deep snow, his incite on skiing in slush may be helpful. I was intrigued by his experiment with powder skis in the slush.

Safety on Slush  
By Bruce Schmidt

The recent club social ski day at Sky Tavern offered a wonderful opportunity to enjoy the fun of spring skiing. Sunshine, blue skies, no crowd, and good friends. It also gave us a good opportunity to learn about skiing in slush!

Warm spring temperatures soften snow and can help create 'corn' snow, which consists of large crystals of ice which tends to be loose, making it fun to ski on. Continued sun and heat, however, warms the snow further, increasing the water content and creating slush, which can become quite dense and deep.

Typically, spring snow conditions vary greatly during the day. Yesterday's slush can be solid ice in the morning (thanks to grooming machines for keeping the main runs skiable!), then soften to a thin layer of corn or slush as the sun shines. By afternoon, though, conditions can be back to deep slush. Un-skied snow to the side of the runs can become a deep bed of slush which at times can seem like quicksand!

Skiing these changing conditions can be challenging. Skiing the groomers in the morning can seem like normal skiing on hard snow. As the sun shines, the top layer of snow softens, making edging easier and provide the fun spring skiing we all like. As the soft layer deepens and begins to turn to slush, however, skiing can become more difficult.

Skiers who utilize skidded turns can find slush particularly difficult, since as the skis skid sideways during a turn, they need to push the loose snow out of the way to the side. Deep, heavy slush, however, can resist the pressure from the skis, impeding the slide, and tipping the skier over if they aren't ready for it. For that reason, skiing in slush is better approached using a carved turn, where the skis ride on their edges, moving forward along the length of the ski, thus cutting through the slush rather than moving it to the side. Luckily, soft spring snow makes edging easier, so this is the time to work on perfecting your carved turn!

The recent club ski day at Sky Tavern illustrated all of this clearly. The air temperature was already 55 when I arrived at 10:00, and it had climbed to 63 when I quit. The main runs were already soft on top, and skiing was lots of fun. To the side of the runs was snow that had not been fully tracked out, since Sky Tavern is closed on weekdays. That snow had also begun to thaw and soften (except for back in the shade of trees). The snow was carve able, but as the snow softened further, my relatively narrow all-mountain skis sank further into the developing slush, forcing me to exaggerate upward unweighting to

get the skis up to initiate my turns. It was fun, but a lot of work! That may explain why there were not too many people skiing these areas!

At lunch, most club members decided to call it a day, but I decided to stay and conduct an experiment. I had also thrown my powder skis in the car, wondering whether their wide width and greater surface area would help them float and make them more effective at skiing what I was sure was to be a slushy day. I have had powder skis for only a couple of years, having learned to ski in Utah I learned powder skiing early, but on skinny skis. I didn't see the need to add powder skis to my arsenal until a couple of years ago (my now older legs appreciated the new gear!). In these last couple of years, though, I had never tried the powder skis in deep slush.

This may come as no surprise to experienced skiers, but I was thrilled to find that indeed the powder skis floated high on the deep slush! Carving turns was far easier than with my narrower skis, and I had a wonderful afternoon in the slush that most other people had abandoned for the day.

The lesson, then, is that skiing in slush can be challenging, requiring greater attention to carving turns in order to ski safely. However, you can safely extend your skiing in spring by using equipment suited to the spring conditions, which it turns out that wide powder skis are. So, don't put away your powder skis just yet and enjoy what is left of this ski season!