

Speed Skiing for You and Me

NOW AT ASPEN: 75 MPH ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON

Speed skiing used to be the exclusive domain of an elite fraternity of highly trained daredevils who start high atop a steep, obstacle-free run, point their skis straight downhill, and go as fast as gravity — and guts — allows. American Jeff Hamilton, the current world champion, broke the 150-mph barrier (150.02 mph, to be precise), in Vars, France, in 1995; Frenchman Philippe Billy went even faster last year: 151.4 mph. Top racers can go from 0 to 100 in 5 seconds — quicker than a Ferrari. Now the speed-skiing fraternity is expanding its membership. Last year, Aspen Mountain opened a “citizen” speed-skiing course, where anyone with a few hours and five bucks can hurl himself downhill on four-inch-wide boards in search of maximum personal velocity.

The Aspen course isn't the first speed-skiing run in the U.S., but it's the only one that's open regularly at a major resort. Every Friday, part of the Slot, a black-diamond slope on Aspen's Snowmass Mountain, is closed off, to create a swath of bowling-lane-smooth groomed snow about 300 yards long and 15 yards wide, marked by colored flags on either side, with a long run-out area and a fence at the end. At \$5 for three runs or \$15 for a full day, anyone can ski the course, provided he's deemed competent by the on-site monitor (who observes skiers as they approach the starting point and asks a few questions about their ability). The higher the start, the greater the speed; the monitor decides how far up the slope each skier is allowed to begin. About halfway down the track, at its fastest part, a radar gun measures speed.

In its inaugural year, about 400 skiers ran the course, including children as young as 7 and one 75-year-old woman. Dave Zamansky, the head of the Rocky Mountain Speed Skiing Association and of the Snowmass program, reports that just one person needed to go down in a sled (with a blown-out knee) — a safety record Zamansky attributes to the careful monitoring and to the meticulously groomed slope. Still, serious practitioners of the sport have been known to suffer third-degree burns, and more than one has broken his neck.

Professional speed skiers outfit themselves with thousands of dollars' worth of highly specialized equipment — from carbon-Kevlar aerodynamic helmets to skintight, one-piece Lycra suits to boots with foam fairings that reduce drag. Amateurs can don as much or as little custom gear as they wish. When I traveled to Aspen last winter to test-ride the course, I borrowed a pair of 217 Atomics (long, heavy, stable skis), cranked down my bindings tight enough to keep a hippo from an inadvertent release, and strapped on a downhill racer's helmet — just in case.



WHY TURN?: A citizen-racer scorching the Slot

Tuck and Run

When I arrived at the starting point, Zamansky was there with a clipboard and radio, clearing skiers to start. While snapping on my goggles, I asked how fast your basic recreational skier goes when he cuts loose. “The average Joe thinks he's skiing really fast when he's hitting 35 miles per hour,” said Zamansky. That gave me a good first goal: If I could ski my age, I'd go 5 mph faster than the typical weekend schusser. “Just get into a tuck and stay there” was

Zamansky's final advice. I took a deep breath and skated onto the course.

From the instant I hit my tuck, I began accelerating madly. In seconds, I was going faster than I've ever gone without a motor. The wind rushed by, the snow blurred. When I reached the end of the run, I emerged slowly from my tuck, stood up, spread my arms, and used the rushing wind like an air brake. The results: 0 to 57 mph in about 8 seconds. Frankly, I felt a little smug, having shattered my ski-my-age goal. Unfortunately, the kid who followed me clocked a 63.

My second run started about 30 yards farther up the hill but got me only another 5 mph. Run number three began at the highest official starting point, and I hit 67. *Fast enough*, I thought. Better than the snot-nosed kid. I could go home. Intact.

That's when Zamansky invited me to let rip from 75 yards above the designated highest start. “Maybe just a little farther down,” I croaked. By the time I hit the starting point of my first run, I was screaming. Suddenly, my skis seemed to have a mind of their own (Zamansky had warned me that they would start to drift a bit if I topped 70; I had a hunch I'd topped 70). *Don'tcatchanedge, don'tcatchanedge*, I was thinking as the acceleration continued. Then I was through the radar zone, at the bottom of the run, and gasping for air. Top speed: 75.75 mph — as fast as any recreational skier that year.

I rode the lift one more time, to pick up a parka I'd stripped off before my final run. As I skied down, I ran into Zamansky, about 500 yards above my last starting point. “This is where we start when we hit 100,” he told me. I looked down and tried to imagine the quantum leap. Nah.

—DANIEL GLICK

JAWS AND PAWS

In this been-there, done-that age of adventure travel, a close encounter with one man-eating species per vacation apparently isn't good enough. Hence the latest twist in outdoor adventure: shark dives and big-game safaris combined. South Africa is the one place in the world where you can dive with the great predators of the sea one day and view the great beasts of the land the next. The best, most varied shark diving anywhere (great white, hammerhead, ragged tooth, Zambezi, and whale sharks) is found along the country's southeastern coast, and in the nearby bush, the “big five” game animals (lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, and buffalo)



BEASTLY BOYS: Roar (above), chomp (below)

traverse huge preserves in abundant numbers. In one week, I stared into the eyes of three great whites (I was locked in a shark cage), then sat mesmerized in a Land Rover while a searchlight beam caught 11 lions munching on a freshly downed wildebeest. No, I wasn't bored. Winter in the U.S. is summer in South Africa — peak season for these tours. For more information, call Reef and Rainforest Adventure Travel (800-794-9767). • CHARLES BALLINGER

