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Snowboarding Experiences and Lessons:

Snowboarding Through the Years

Matt Bryker

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Introduction

Professional snowboarding lessons are expensive. They can cost up to a thousand dollars a day for a private lesson at a high quality mountain. Many people are not willing to put that much of an investment in a sport that they might not even enjoy. For this reason, many people seek out knowledgeable friends in order to learn the sport. By receiving help from a friend it can be a more enjoyable experience as well as a substantially cheaper one. The problem with this system is that many of these friends do not know where to start when teaching snowboarding. They might have been taught a crash course on the sport or simply learned by trial and error without much instruction by themselves. Also, they might lack adequate experience to properly relay the information necessary – just because someone offers to teach, does not make them the best teacher available. This project is designed to help people in teaching their friends how to snowboard. A pamphlet was produced as an instructional aid to use when helping friends come to snowboarding. I have been snowboarding for a number of years, but it took a great deal of determination, patience, practice, and people helping me along the way to become the rider I am today. Snowboarding is an exciting sport that I have always enjoyed bringing people to.

History

Snowboarding is a relatively young sport. It had very modest beginnings in the 1960's with a father from Muskegon creating a toy for his daughters which he dubbed a "snurfer". It was a simple board with the front curved upward with a rope attached to offer the rider some control (ABC-of-Snowboarding, 2012). It was mostly used as a toy at first, but eventually the snowboard contraption caught surfers' and skateboarders' attention. Ski resorts did not allow these boards, so people had to find their own off-piste terrain (e.g. away from prepared ski runs) (ABC-of-Snowboarding, 2012). Eventually, a few more companies, such as Burton, started in

the 70's and began creating more advanced snowboard designs (ABC-of-Snowboarding, 2012). Competitions were being held at this time, but only 10 percent of US ski areas allowed snowboarding (ABC-of-Snowboarding, 2012). By the late 90's almost all resorts allowed it. Today, snowboarders comprise roughly 30 percent of visitors to US ski resorts with the number continuing to grow (Snowboarding, 2016).

Personal History of Snowboarding

I consider myself a proud member of that 30 percent. Although I started skiing as a child, I eventually made the transition to snowboarding. It is fairly common for snowboarders to have started skiing as children. Generally, it is easier for parents to teach their children how to ski at first. When I was about 12 years old my older brother, Ryan, and I started “playing” with my family’s snowmobiles together quite a bit. At first, this “playing” would consist of Ryan pulling me in a sled behind the snowmobile giving his best attempt to make me fall off. Eventually, we started making jumps in the yard where we would pull each other with the snowmobile to be launched off from sleds and snowboards. This was my first experience with snowboarding, but being pulled behind a snowmobile created a steep learning curve. My brother at this time was already a very experienced snowboarder being eight years older than me so he taught me, albeit roughly, how to snowboard.

After having all that “play time” with my brother, I accompanied my sisters to a resort to properly learn how to snowboard. The teacher this time was my oldest sister, Mandi, with her students being her two younger siblings, Betsi, and I. Betsi, not being the most athletically inclined, as well as Mandi not being a professional instructor, made it so this would be Betsi’s only day snowboarding on the slopes. She struggled to ride effectively with many painful falls leaving her frustrated and angry, as well as battered and bruised by the end of the day. What also

probably did not please Betsi, was that I, her younger brother, was performing quite well.

Having the prior experience of riding behind a snowmobile went a long way. I was not a professional on this day, but it was as if I had a season under my belt already. The following season my father would buy me a used snowboard for Christmas, but unfortunately that season I had little time to use it. The following four years from age 13-17 I did not step foot at a ski resort due to winter being swim season.

Junior year of high school I was no longer swimming and was back at the slopes with the first few times being a very rough transition. One of the first times back involved a tree crash, where I was not injured, but I bought a helmet before I went out again and have worn it every time since. After a few years on standard Michigan slopes, my good friends and I were ready to expand our horizons. With my friends Andrew and Ryan, I headed to Mont Tremblant in Quebec to snowboard for spring break sophomore year of college. We were all roughly the same experience levels, and looking forward to exploring everything the mountain had to offer. Unfortunately, with it being Quebec, most people spoke French so we were not able to ask many people for advice. Mont Tremblant has a 2,116 vertical foot drop from the peak to the base, consists of 96 trails totaling 49 miles, and covers 665 acres (Tremblant, 2016). This trip was challenging due to it being my first exposure to this type of terrain. Once the trip was over I was determined to become proficient at moguls and glade runs. The following years back in Michigan I practiced moguls every chance I could. I wanted to be ready to tackle anything on a snowboard.

Mount Bohemia

It would not be until two years later when I would see how the practice paid off with my first Mount Bohemia experience. Mount Bohemia is located in the Keweenaw Peninsula of

Michigan. For being located in the Midwest, Mount Bohemia is held in very high regard across the country. It is a mountain that consists of strictly advanced and expert terrain. One of Mount Bohemia's slogans is "No beginners allowed" which I would strongly urge everyone to consider before going there. It is not for the faint of heart or the inexperienced. Known for its 900 vertical foot drop, which is unheard of in the Midwest, as well as its glade runs that make up the majority of the 585 acres, Mount Bohemia is a gem for those who enjoy this type of challenge (Mount Bohemia, 2015). It is not for people looking for a typical ski resort experience, because there is no resort. Their operation consists of just a few buildings that serve very basic food and lodging. Those who make the trek, come to ski or snowboard. Due to its location with Lake Superior on either side, Mount Bohemia receives on average, around 280 inches of snow a year (Mount Bohemia, 2015). While most ski resorts in Michigan rely greatly on man-made snow, Mount Bohemia relies completely on natural snow.

My first visit there I fell in love with the mountain. Exploring the glade runs to the point of getting lost several times, made the experience a wonderful adventure. I knew I would become a Mount Bohemia season pass holder for years to come. Season passes here are only \$100 if bought by the first Saturday in December. This price is unheard of for such a high quality mountain. So it was only natural for me to buy one this past winter. When you arrive at Mount Bohemia as a season pass holder, you head to the bar where they have binders full of hundreds of names of season pass holders. Seeing these binders, you truly appreciate the following that Mount Bohemia has.

Luckily, the morning we arrived to the mountain there was a small snow storm that had dropped six inches of fresh snow which made our conditions perfect. My friends Dom and Alex, I were having a great morning at Mount Bohemia. Dom on skis, had to get used to it again after

not going on this type of terrain in many years. Although he fell a great number of times, he did really well in the trees. Fortunately, Dom and I had gone to Caberfae Peaks near Cadillac the week prior to get somewhat warmed up for the challenge. There we were able to race, which I had won only by inches, and I think we both had clocked roughly 40-45 miles per hour. Alex, whom I went with the previous year to Mount Bohemia, performed well on this trip, but he had a very debilitating cold that obviously affected his riding.

We all explored the mountain and all its hidden gems in the trees. Due to the advanced terrain, there is no “easy riding”. It requires complete focus to perform at your best on every run, all day. It also requires an extraordinary amount of energy and due to the warm weather at around 35 degrees Fahrenheit, we were all sweating profusely. Winding through the trees is exhilarating, but also quite terrifying at times. Knowing what turns to make and being ready to stop abruptly is necessary to not crash into a tree at relatively high speeds. I frequently think of the consequences of this type of snowboarding, and I know that one mistake could leave me with a broken leg, rib, or shoulder quite easily. Luckily, it’s rare to see someone without a helmet at many resorts these days.

Alex needed to take a nap in the afternoon due to his illness, but Dom and I went from open to close with two small food and water breaks. We estimated that we did roughly 18,000 vertical feet which speaks volumes because every foot was in single or double black diamond run making that, frankly, one hell of a day. That night we were all very sore and were in bed before 9 p.m. after a large, much needed meal. The next day was only a half day and we stuck to the north facing aspects of the mountain where the snow quality was the best.

Mount Bohemia will always be one of my favorite resorts. Its terrain is comparable to any expert terrain out west. I would like more friends to join, but I am also very cautious in who

I suggest to go due to its challenging runs. If people are interested in going I suggest practicing tight turns on steep runs and becoming proficient on mogul runs at other resorts before attempting Mount Bohemia. Crystal Mountain near Cadillac, Michigan has introductory tree runs that give a decent amount of exposure to what Mount Bohemia consists of. With snowboarding and skiing it is imperative to be safe, take one's time in learning, and seek proper advice and instruction when called for. It takes a great deal of dedication and practice, but the rewards are great for those who are up to the challenge.

Although I have always desired to teach a friend how to ride moguls and glade runs, I have never had the opportunity. Mostly because it takes at least a couple seasons for someone to be ready to learn how to do these, and then it takes another season to practice them enough to be able to tackle something as challenging as Mount Bohemia.

Snowboarding Lesson

This year in the lower peninsula of Michigan snow conditions were not ideal. I had planned to teach and help many more people than I did, but you have to work with Mother Nature as well as attend to practical matters with scheduling before snowboarding. Luckily, I was able to give a lesson to an old coworker and good friend, Mike.

First, after arriving at Cannonsburg Ski Area, I went over the basic design of a snowboard so Mike would understand exactly how it works. I then talked about the basic form of heel-side riding. I quickly realized that I could only say so much and gave a brief demonstration of heel-side riding. Mike, whom is athletic and bold, "went for it" right away. He had the basic concept right so I knew it was just going to take more fine-tuning and instruction to go from there. I described the "falling-leaf" maneuver that we used the rest of the lesson. The falling-leaf consists of riding on one side, such as the heel-side, of the board in a pattern that

imitates a leaf falling to the ground. It transitions the leading foot (the foot that is in the direction of motion) from the rider's dominant foot to the non-dominant foot in a zigzag pattern (ABC-of-Snowboarding, 2012). I helped him on one run by holding his balance so he would not worry about falling, and instead could focus more on form. I gave pointers on where to bend properly, because Mike was bent over with his back too much which was causing him to fall forward. I showed him where to bend at the hips, knees, and ankles, where he found his center of mass to be situated best over the board. Next I had us move to a faster, bigger hill where he could improve further. The bunny hill is exhausted quickly due to how slow it is.

At the big hill I had Mike "plow" or "sideslip" the first 50 feet of every run to fine-tune where to break and practice the balancing act of sideslipping. Sideslipping is simply sliding along the fall line (the line directly downhill). This allows riders to learn edge-awareness (ABC-of-Snowboarding, 2012). For the rest of the run Mike would perform the falling leaf on the heel edge. Once he began to understand it more I emphasized staying in control, being consistent with the amount of pressure, and trying to have fluid motions instead of jerky ones. I also noticed that Mike would perform better if I was in fairly close proximity. I think this put him at ease and I was able to give plenty of encouragement while he performed. I would coach him on things he was doing wrong and helped him to correct his errors, but not so much as to be overbearing.

We discussed basic form, culture, snowboard design, and more advanced snowboarding styles while riding on the lift. Some basics included various areas for him to focus and work on, such as where to bend, but also things he was doing well like his overall balance and control. Snowboard designs today are very style-specific in riding. For example, most lower-peninsula Michigan snowboarders enjoy groomed runs predominantly. One of the best snowboard designs

for groomed runs is a cambered board. Cambered boards are simply where when the board is flat on the ground, the board is convex, or the center is curved up away from the ground (Snowboarding, 2016). This allows the rider to have an extra “pop” coming out of every turn where the board flexes to give the rider more speed from each turn. Advanced snowboarding techniques involve freestyle, which involves performing tricks from boxes, rails, or jumps. Big air riding is where riders perform tricks maximizing height and distance from massive man-made jumps (Snowboarding, 2016). Freeriding, which happens to be one of my favorites, is where riders descend a mountain slope as fluidly as possible either performing tricks, or not, on mostly natural features (Snowboarding, 2016). I believe the conversations about snowboarding we had helped to give Mike a full picture of what it was he was trying to learn. Hopefully they helped him assess where he might see himself in the future as a snowboarder.

From this lesson I realized many things such as one major asset in teaching is demonstration. It helps to see how to perform a maneuver accurately. Second, it helps the student if the teacher is helpful, encouraging, understanding to personal preferences, and is within fairly close proximity the whole time. Lastly, if people are to continue to want to learn the sport and improve, being friendly and having fun is vital. If someone attempts to teach snowboarding by being overbearing, bossy, impatient, or nit-picky the student may never want to return. I outlined all these aspects of teaching as well as various techniques, such as the falling leaf, in my pamphlet titled “So Your Friends Want to Learn How to Snowboard”.

Colorado: A Snowboarding Haven

One of the main “selling-points” I used to encourage Mike to pursue snowboarding further was the trips that you can make. Going out west to snowboard is a great adventure. Seeing snow-covered mountains is beautiful. It truly is a wonderful sight when driving up into

the mountains being a Michigander and seeing the grandness and size of the terrain.

Snowboarding is a great way to enjoy mountains in the winter and it makes exploring these massive resorts an adventure. Most of the resorts in Colorado have bases that are at least at 6,000 feet in elevation and some reach all the way up to 13,000 feet. Vail is one of the largest in North America by area, consisting of 5,289 acres (Vail Ski Resort, 2016). It is virtually impossible to experience a resort that size in one day. Every resort is different as well. Vail is famous for its “back bowls” that are vast in size and consist of a great deal of advanced terrain. Breckenridge is known for its five peaks that consist of a huge variety of terrain. The large variety of runs including a great deal of beginner runs, make Breckenridge a popular place for families as well as making it a “learning resort”.

This year for spring break I accompanied some family members and my sister’s in-laws to Breckenridge, Colorado for a skiing/snowboarding vacation. Snowboarding is one of my favorite sports, but this trip helped me realize that everyone treats it differently. I have been snowboarding avidly for a number of years, and my father, whom I have gone with the most, has been skiing for over 50 years. Last year, he and I went to Breckenridge to hit the slopes together for 4 intense days. We had the luck of going to Breckenridge for two days, as well as Vail and Keystone each for a day. Our goal was to do 100,000 vertical feet in those four days, which we did. So this year, our goal was to match, or exceed that 100,000 vertical foot bar we had set the prior year.

This year though, we were with people who did not think the same as us. First off, my mother as well as my brother-in-law’s parents, were not as experienced, fast, or intense as the rest of us, but being a family vacation, it was important for my dad and I to spend time with the others. There was an idea of “The Moms” taking a private lesson together, but after hearing that

it would cost upwards of \$1,000/day for a private lesson that idea fizzled. Even group lessons with other people cost roughly \$300/day.

The first day at Breckenridge was spent on plenty of easy runs to accommodate the whole group. I was fine with this for a portion of the day in order to get warmed up for the week, but eventually I was ready to get on more challenging, black diamond runs. After lunch my brother-in-law and I headed to some black diamonds where we eventually found very good mogul and glade runs with plenty of soft snow. I generally consider this my favorite terrain, but on this day it took me a few runs to feel comfortable again. Eventually, I felt confident after warming up and remembered how much energy and focus I needed to attend to maneuvering on these types of runs. My brother-in-law is a very good, confident snowboarder so it was fun to watch and join him on these runs. One aspect of the first day that makes it difficult at first, is getting used to the high altitude and thin air. Going from Michigan at roughly 700 feet above sea level to upwards of 12,500-13,000 feet at the top of Breckenridge is challenging when performing at such a high intensity.

The next day my father and I were the only ones to go out, but instead of Breckenridge, we were advised to head to Beaver Creek Ski Resort. The conditions looked great with the resort receiving over a foot of snow two days prior and we studied the trail map to make a rough game plan of everything we wanted to try. The resorts in Colorado are so large you have to plan ahead if you want to get the best day in. We received a lot of advice from a local snowboard instructor of Breckenridge, who says Beaver Creek is there favorite ski area in Colorado. Beaver Creek is considered to be a very challenging and steep resort. My father and I were instantly impressed. We strived to get the most out of our day which meant not stopping much.

Luckily, there were no lines all day. Once warmed up I did my favorite types of runs the majority of the morning – mogul runs. Beaver creek has large “mogul fields” that are very steep, challenging, and on this day had great snow conditions. My father prefers not to do moguls so he stayed on groomed runs. He is perfectly capable, but with his age, his knees are not up to the challenge as much anymore. It is a little curious that I like moguls as much as I do – most snowboarders do not. Generally, skiers are the people you will see the most on mogul runs. Throughout the day we talked to many people on the ski lift who were from all over the country. Colorado is world-renowned for its snow quality due to its high elevation which yields more dry, fluffy snow than wet, heavy snow.

Later in the day, we went through a run that has a vertical drop of over 2,000 feet which is quite extreme in itself, but this run was also a double black diamond where the 2015 Alpine World Ski Championships took place (Beaver Creek, 2016). Downhill skiing was one of the events where the famous Lindsey Vonn won (Downhill, 2016). This competition has people going up to 90 miles per hour regularly (Downhill, 2016). Towards the end of the day my father and I became quite tired, but we set a goal of at least 30,000 vertical feet for the day. Once we hit that we kept going to hit 35,000 and finally my dad suggested we do 40,000 for “bragging rights”. We were doing runs as fast as we could, but were only doing blue intermediate runs due to our fatigue. Once back in Breckenridge our 40,000 foot day greatly impressed everyone including the snowboard instructor who advised us on Beaver Creek.

The following day the whole group skied again at Breckenridge. We explored the rest of Breckenridge that we had not the previous day. Once at Peak 6 we had to bring my mother as well as my brother-in-law’s parents through a small mogul field. This was a challenge, but fun, and everyone was doing their best to be of assistance. My father led my mother through them

slowly and my brother-in-law and sister helped his mother. After that run, my mother, and brother-in-laws parents were ready for something easier. The rest of us stayed and took on more challenging terrain, including hike-to-terrain that was very exciting.

Later in the day we were at Peak 10 which consists of all fast, black diamond runs. My brother-in-law was able to clock his speed with an App at 44 miles per hour! I could not help, but think of the consequences when going at that speed. With how tired I was, I kept myself in control and a little bit more conservative. My dad and I decided we would go for a 30,000 vertical foot day and continued to lap on these very fast runs. Luckily, we were able to get the last chair in order to succeed in this goal.

Our final day was the worst for conditions and lines as well as being exhausted and ready to leave it ended up being a very short day. I made my 100,000 vertical foot goal, but was ready for some relaxation.

This trip was very fun, but it made me realize that everyone is different when it comes to this sport. Some people are not confident and struggle such as my mother. Others are confident, but do not wish to try certain things, such as my brother-in-laws parents. My brother-in-law is a very good snowboarder, but he did not share the desire of getting a high vertical footage with my father and I. My sister is also a very good snowboarder, but she was just having fun hanging out and doing a variety of runs that she enjoys. My father was even more hell-bent than I in getting vertical feet in and ended up getting 10,000 more feet than me. The local instructors that we knew from Breckenridge live there and that is their job, so they treat it very different, they never do long days for fun and they are extremely good and challenge themselves in riding styles due to their time and experience. With us being on vacation for a brief period of time, we felt the need to milk as much out of the experience as possible in our own ways. If not for my father, my

mother would have read books the whole time and skied no more than a day. I believe I am at a point in my snowboarding career, where I would like to ride at more resorts, in a larger variety of terrain, and continue to improve where I see fit, mainly in riding in trees, moguls and steep terrain.

Conclusion

Snowboarding is a great sport that people can do lifelong. People can range from casual snowboarders who go out a couple times a year, to people who take vacations to do intense trips, or people who work at a resort and have snowboarding be a part of their career. It is a fun sport that generally requires some form of lessons whether they are taught by a family member, friend, or professional instructor. This sport has the capacity to bring adventure into one's life as well as expanding people's horizons to new areas as well as meeting new friends with a common interest. Personally, I highly value snowboarding and intend on pushing myself for years to come with many more experiences and adventures in the future. I intend on being a lifelong teacher of friends and family as people decide to learn to snowboard. This project has helped me to practice teaching techniques of the sport that I plan on using many times in the future and hopefully my pamphlet can be of use to others as well.

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