

## “THE TURN”

*Les Carter*

“The turn” is intended to give you control in powder snow, and heavier snow up to your ankles. There are tricks for modifying “the turn” to handle breakable crust and deep, heavy snow, which I will mention later, but it is best not to try learning in those kinds of snow. Pick nice snow for practicing “the turn.”

Much ski instruction has focused on postures - “face down hill, bend your knees, make a platform,” etc., which I find tends to make for tense, stiff skiing. I am going to try to take you through the turn using fluid, interconnected motions instead. I will also suggest how your body should feel as you ski. Having used this approach for a while, I think it works better.

A lot of what I have to say here is aimed at correcting habits developed by learning to snowplow. The snowplow invites a posture that is too stiff-legged and upright, with your weight too far back, and often with one ski wandering around aimlessly. (Properly done, the snowplow is better than that, but it is easy to slip into bad habits.) You may have to actively say to yourself, “OK, now I want to snowplow,” and at other times, “Oops, I am snowplowing when I don’t want to.”

### **BASICS**

No matter what your sport or discipline, there are some things that absolutely must be done right or you can’t advance. Whenever you get stuck, you have to go back and perfect those basics - holding the tennis racket, practicing scales, addressing the ball, sitting upright on the horse, riding your skis correctly. The basics take practice, and you are never too advanced not to need to go back and practice them.

Feel your feet. When you are skiing, you should feel like your bare (but warm) feet are sliding effortlessly through the snow, nicely balanced fore and aft, almost as though you don’t have skis on. You should not feel like you are trying to lever big, awkward boards around. As you slide on a gentle hill, “scrunch” your toes in your boots. You should feel solid contact between your toes and the insoles of your boots. If your toes are trying to grab air, your weight is too much on your heels. Off your skis, try jumping into the air by taking off with your weight on your heels. Not good! It doesn’t work on skis either. You want to be balanced on your feet in the same way as you would be in a boxing match, or in anticipation of catching a ball or returning a tennis volley. Feel your weight in the “sweet spot” under the fronts of your arches.

Drop your stance like a boxer: Many people trying to learn the powder turn, especially those who have a snowplow habit, ride with their legs too straight and upper body too upright, which throws your weight back and locks the tails of your skis into the snow (leading to repeated falls to the inside of the turn). Your basic posture should feel like an active, poised crouch, with your head, hands and shoulders out front hunting for the next turn. (This

reinforces what I said earlier about getting your weight centered on the skis by feeling your feet.)

Traverse with style: Your first turn begins from a traverse. When you link turns, there is a point, just as you finish one turn and begin the next, when you are again traversing for an instant. The traverse is where it all begins.

While sliding across a gentle slope: a) feel your weight on your feet, nicely centered fore and aft; b) ride in an active stance like a boxer, c) shift your weight from one foot to the other, then put your weight almost evenly on both skis, more on your downhill ski if the snow is hard, more equally on both skis if the snow is softer (it's a matter of how it feels); and d) move your uphill ski slightly ahead of the downhill ski. This last move does a couple of good things; it makes it harder to cross your tips, and it turns your body so it faces slightly downhill and makes it ready to begin a turn. (You may have to reinforce this by actively "looking" downhill with head, shoulders, and hips.)

Keep your feet comfortably close together: If your feet are too far apart when you begin your turn, your pole-plant and launch into the turn will be awkward. Strengthen your uphill leg as you get ready to turn, to bring your skis closer together and make them work as partners. (You can't do this if you are snowplowing.) In difficult snow, your skis may separate in the middle of the turn for lateral stability, but they should come closer again as you finish the turn and get ready for the next one. In powder, your skis will float and carve much better if they stay together and act like one board. Keep them just far enough apart to make it easy for the uphill or inside ski to move ahead, and for your legs to work independently when they have to.

The edges of both skis do the same thing: Traversing or turning, both "left" edges, or both "right" edges, carve together. (The snowplow is the opposite of this rule.) To get the edges of both skis doing the same thing, practice the traverse, taking great care not to let your uphill ski wander uphill and tip onto the wrong edge (your inner beginner looking for a snowplow). Then, while gently turning, look at your inside ski to make sure it is close to the outside ski, and using the same edge.

Actively study and practice the basics: Many people trying to move up a level in their skiing don't believe they are still snowplowing until they see themselves on video. Watch your skis; watch your body. Work on your mental images, and compare them to what you are doing.

## THE TURN

Practice the turn while moving slowly. If you are doing it right, it will work at a walking pace. At first, practice one turn at a time, with a traverse in between. As you begin to feel the up-and-down rhythm of the turn, you can shorten the traverse until eventually it becomes just that split second when you link one turn to the next.

Begin: While traversing, drop into a slightly lower stance, and strengthen your *uphill* leg as you reach to plant your *downhill* pole. This gives a firm base for what you do next, and helps to keep you from falling into the hill. It is also the opposite of trying to sneak into a turn with

a stem or snowplow; it makes the turn happen when you want it to, not when your skis get around to it.

**Pole plant:** The pole plant triggers the turn, and marks where it is going to happen. The right spot to plant your pole is a matter of feel and practice, depending on your speed and the size of turn you want to make. Don't worry overly about getting it perfect. Look downhill to where you expect the turn to finish. Plant your downhill pole with the participation of both hands, both shoulders and your head. Your downhill hand and arm do the work, but the rest of your body "agrees." This begins to move your weight, and your mind, in the right direction for the turn.

**The "ready hand:"** As soon as you have planted your pole, raise your uphill hand (the "ready hand" in German ski teaching) and shoulder strongly upwards, and project them forward in the direction of the fall-line. This lifts the weight of your torso, which lifts your legs, which makes your skis light and able to begin turning.

(The "ready hand" replaces the old direction to "unweight," which tends to cause people to try to hop into the air to get their skis turning. In most kinds of snow, hopping to begin a turn makes for stiff, awkward skiing. A good turn is fluid and easy.)

**Steer your skis into the turn:** While your body is light and tall (having followed your "ready hand" upwards), steer your skis into the turn with your feet. Concentrate on your toes. Thinking about your toes will keep your weight over the "sweet spot," and make your skis pivot around their centers, rather than being levered around from their tails.

**Carve:** When your skis have begun to turn through the fall-line, and your weight has begun to return to Earth, sink onto your skis (into a balanced, active crouch) and feel them carve an arc in the snow. Feel the twist of your torso and hips as your upper body naturally turns downhill in response to the motion of your skis. (Feel your legs burn if the snow is heavy; holding the carving position can call for strength.)

**Power your turn completion:** As you carve the second half of your turn, tighten its radius by driving your inside hand and shoulder forward as you continue to steer the skis with your toes. Do the twist, either a little or a lot, as you require. This should leave you in a solid traverse position, even if momentarily, and ready to strengthen your (new) uphill, leg, plant your (new) downhill pole, and begin a new turn in the other direction.

If you have projected properly into the first half of the turn, and powered through the second half with your inside hand and upper body, your inside ski (now your uphill ski) should finish the turn slightly forward of your outside ski. This will leave you in the traverse position, ready for your next turn. Sometimes you have to make a conscious effort to advance your inside ski as you turn. (Heavy snow will drag it back.) This is important, because if your inside ski is not advanced, it is difficult to tighten your turn radius when you want to (and an inside ski too far back likes to cross over the outside ski).

*Voila!*

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Weight on one or both skis? In powder, both skis carry your weight evenly throughout the turn. There is an instant when you strengthen your uphill leg as you plant your pole, which might sound as though the uphill ski is being weighted more heavily, but it usually is not, at least in soft snow. The “strengthening” trick really just compensates for a natural tendency for the uphill ski to be too weakly weighted at the moment you reach downhill for the pole plant.

On very hard snow, your weight can be entirely on the outside ski. You can even move your weight strongly onto the “new” outside ski just as you plant your pole - the hard snow equivalent of the soft snow “strengthening” trick - and keep it there through the new turn. (This is what instructors call “early weight transfer.” To check that you are doing it right, try lifting your inside ski completely off the snow during the turn.)

In heavy soft snow, you can weight your outside ski a bit more than the inside one, to make it carve harder and tighten your turn. This is particularly useful with super-fat skis, which will comfortably ski soft snow with more uneven weighting than traditional skis will accept.

Extra lift for heavy snow: Instead of trying to hop (the classic, and difficult, “jump turn”), simply say “Up” as you raise your “ready hand.” This seems to inspire most people to project upwards just the little bit more that is needed to get the skis out of the junk.

Extra punch for crust: begin the turn as usual, but as you descend to carve, say “Stomp!” This should make you strengthen your feet and legs, and hit the snow with enough force to crunch your skis into a carving arc. It should also make you land with your weight a little lower, which is a good posture for control when things get tricky. If you are sufficiently aggressive, you will feel your skis rebound out of the “stomp” and into the air, making it easier to project into, and “stomp,” the next turn. (Try that from a snowplow!)

Control in uneven, tricky snow: Concentrate on *strengthening your feet*. This requires tightening the muscles that control your feet and ankles. Often, it gives you the added contact with your skis that is needed to keep lumpy snow from pushing them all over the place.

Ski steeps with spirit: The turn works just the same on steeps as on cruiser terrain, except: a) your legs extend and retract more fully, which actually causes less leg strain and “burn;” and b) you need to steer your skis through the beginning of the turn more aggressively - which is easier because the steepness itself helps get your skis clear of the snow. Strengthening your uphill leg as you plant your pole helps to prevent leaning (and then falling) into the hill. Project your “ready hand” strongly into the turn. Timidity is not your friend on steeps. Go for it! But finish each turn into a complete traverse position (drive your inside hand through), for speed control. Going for it is not the same as running out of control.

Basics check: You should not feel the backs of your boots bumping into your calves. If you are banging the backs of your boots, your weight is too far back, and you will end up levering your skis around instead of floating them effortlessly. You should also not feel excessive pressure on your shins. Modern skis turn best when ridden perfectly centered (and soft snow will punish you for anything else, with either a face-plant or a refusal to allow the turn).

Control your skis with your feet and ankles, not just the stiffness of your boots; the stiffness of your boots is there to assist, not to replace active bones and muscles. Go back to the basics, and practice the balanced feel and active stance.

Don't practice bad habits. If you feel you are "losing it," stop, feel your feet, get centered, give yourself a mental ski lesson, then ski on slowly and lightly- a suite of turns at a time, with pauses to enjoy how the turns worked. If you were doing well, and your skiing seems to be breaking down, your muscles (and perhaps your brain) are tired. Take a break, or come back tomorrow.