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What We Can Learn About Skiing from the French

When I moved to France from the U.S., I quickly realized Americans could learn a thing or two from the French's approach to ski culture

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(Photo: Abigail Wise)



Kristy Alpert Follow

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Utah's Brighton Ski Resort, I understood that, in the U.S., skiing was a sport, and mountains were for conquering.

I've since skied with instructors across the country—and in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, where the goal was *also* to get down as quickly as possible just to do it all again. But it wasn't until I got my first taste of skiing *à la française* that I realized I may have been going about things all wrong.

I arrived solo in the south part of France's Les Trois Vallées—the world's largest interconnected ski area—just a few months after settling my family in Paris. Here, I hired a guide from École du Ski Français (ESF), a French ski school that operates in ski resorts across the country, to help me navigate the seven resorts.

What I didn't anticipate was how that 68-year-old Frenchman would soon change near everything about how—and why—I ski.



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First tracks at Les Menuires (Photo: Courtesy Association Les 3 Vallée)

I met Gilles at the base of the resort Les Menuires, my bindings locked in and ready to go. Gilles, on the other hand, hadn't finished his *bonjours*. In schools and offices throughout France, the day doesn't begin until every person has been greeted individually; a head nod won't suffice. Gilles had just entered his "office" and apparently knew everyone. He introduced me to colleagues he'd known for decades, and we waved to his son on his way to a ski competition. Immediately, the mountain felt more like a community than any resort I had skied before, and, instead of frustration toward the lack of start, I felt...let in.

The conditions worsened as we rode higher in the enclosed gondola, and, despite my innate American urge to mention the weather or ask about his boots, Gilles' interest in me and what brought me to Les Trois Vallées drove the conversation. A few more *bonjours* at the top, and we were off, my mental checklist in motion as I made sure I looked the part while he observed my skiing from behind. Arms positioned. Check. Ankles flexed. Check. Chest squared. Check.

I raced down to our meeting point, hoping he'd see I was a strong enough skier to take on lesser-known runs, but instead he just smiled and offered me a small piece of chocolate he'd been storing in his jacket.

No tweaks.

“In America, we ski with protein bars,” I laughed and popped the chocolate into my mouth. “Then we don’t have to stop for lunch.”

“Why don’t you eat lunch?” Gilles asked, genuinely concerned that anyone would miss out on the pleasure of a long meal.

I tried to explain how some people stop for a quick burger or chowder, but most American skiers I knew go hard for as long as possible, and then go just as hard for just as long during après. I changed the subject and asked if he had any pointers for me, remembering he had skied competitively and taught lessons.

“I would say, try not to be so stiff,” he offered. “Lower your arms and relax a bit, then just feel the mountain beneath you. Enjoy its spirit.”

My surprise was visible. I was used to words like “engage,” “tighten,” and “flex,” but...“relax?” “Spirit?!”

He introduced me to edging, where just the tiniest pressure from my foot could change my direction if I let myself move *with* the snow and not force myself *through* it.

I accepted another piece of chocolate and let it melt in my mouth while he launched first for the next run. His style was striking. His turns were tight, but he moved with a natural confidence that just made it all seem so effortless. Also, he genuinely seemed to be having a blast.

“Feel the mountain,” I replayed in my head, deciding to give his advice a shot. I lowered my arms and let the packed snow beneath me determine my turns. Then an amazing thing happened. It worked. I felt relaxed yet completely in control. I let my skis guide me as I took in the mountain instead of rushing down it, breathing in the sweet smell of

would get me where I needed to go, and, after just a short morning with Gilles, I realize it was a joint effort: form *and* mountain.



The author in France (Photo: Kristy Alpert)

“*Quel plaisir!*” [What a pleasure!] Gilles sighed as we popped our bindings off and made our way to the nearby Au Torè restaurant in Saint-Martin-de-Belleville for lunch.

And that’s when it hit me. In France, skiing isn’t just a sport; it’s the entire mountain experience. The snow, the relationships, the scenery, the wine, the chocolate, the “spirit of the mountain.” All of it, a *plaisir*.

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visited all seven continents—paid rent on three—and is a certified yoga instructor and rookie surfer. Although she’s trekked through the Himalayas, hiked in Uganda’s Impenetrable Forest, and swam with sharks in open water, her greatest adventure has been becoming a mom. Follow her on Instagram or get your copy of her children’s road trip book here.

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I forgot I had Bootcaps on until I realized my toes weren't cold in 5-degree weather and I was ready for more mountain. (Photo: Jakob Schiller)



Jakob Schiller Follow

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When we got off the Jackson Hole tram in late January, the temperature was hovering around zero degrees and steady winds were blowing in our faces. I was skiing with a group that included two guides, three brand reps, and another ski journalist, so there was no dallying around. We immediately skirted by Corbet's Couloir and ripped down Rendezvous Bowl. There were a few stops to regroup, but mostly we flew down 4,000 feet of vert at 20-30 miles per hour.

After about two hours of screaming down steep and fresh corduroy groomers, the temperature had only risen to five degrees. Waiting for the next tram, I stood in line trying to assess my overall comfort. My hands were starting to get cold, my nose was frozen, but my toes were fine. On a bitterly cold day my toes often went first, but this time they weren't even on the edge of being uncomfortable.

Looking down, I remembered that I had a new piece of gear strapped to my boots. The day before, a brand rep had updated my Atomics with something called a Bootcap: a piece of custom-molded closed-cell foam that sits on the outside of the boot and wraps the entire front of the toe. When he first pulled them out, I thought the caps were a bunch of hooey, but had agreed to try them as a favor to the rep whom I've known for many years, and who has always steered me toward smart new gear. Turns out he was right again. Thanks to this seemingly insignificant toe cap, my feet were happy and I was ready to keep going.

Bootcaps



(Photo: Courtesy Bootcaps)

\$60 at evo

A Bootfitter's Inspiration

Back home, I called Bootcap co-founder Mike Thorpe, and he told me one of the best product development stories I've heard in a long time.

A bootfitter in Salt Lake City for the past 30 years, Thorpe had long ago noticed that anytime he used a high-end, closed-cell foam boot liner, his feet stayed warmer. He knew most people would never splurge for a liner that can run north of \$200, but he thought there might be a way to bring that kind of technology to the masses. For years, he kept the idea in the back of his mind until, in 2017, he finally tried strapping high-end foam to the outside of the boot. To create that first prototype, he took a \$250 liner, cut off the toe, and glued it to the outside of his own boot.

The toe is always the coldest part of the foot because that's what hits the wind first. An skiers were only complaining more at his shop because the plastic around the toe was getting thinner to save weight. At the same time, boot fitters like Thorpe often had to

He first tested the prototype Bootcap at Snowbird, where he skied for four hours with only his left toe covered to see if he could feel a difference. Riding the tram, he said his right foot was frozen, but the left foot with the covering felt fine. Worried he was just falling victim to the placebo effect, he kept skiing and tried to reassess. Driving home, he said his right foot ached in the car, but his left foot was toasty.

“At that point, after a full day of testing, I knew I was onto something,” he said. “I wasn’t lying to myself.”

Thorpe’s next step was to bring in his friend Nate Ries, whom Thorpe had talked to about starting a company for years. Ries, who brought design skills, saw potential, so they both threw down \$25,000 and started the company.

During the rounds and rounds of development and testing, Thorpe went back up to Snowbird regularly. One time, he rigged his ski boots with digital thermometers between the plastic shell and the liner to try to avoid interference from his feet, and taped a temperature readout device to his thigh. After four hours of skiing, the boot with the cap was 20 degrees warmer, further verifying that he wasn’t crazy.

Obsessing the Details

By then, Thorpe said he was all in. He and Ries went deep, trying to figure out the perfect material, shape, and adhesive. High-end foam was the obvious material choice because it did the best job beating back the cold and retaining any heat coming off the boot. As for shape, luckily, all the toe pieces on adult ski boots need to fit into universal bindings. This allowed Thorpe to come up with a one-shape-fits-all cap. They thought about Velcro as an adhesive but realized it would allow air to seep between the cap and the boot, so they eventually landed on a strong glue.

Finally, during the 23/24 winter, six years after Thorpe's first prototype, the company officially launched as Bootcap and began selling the product online and in select retail stores.

“Nate and I are obsessive, so it took a long time, but we didn't want to put a bad product on the market,” Thorpe said.

Thorpe still works as a boot fitter 10 hours a week because he has clients who want his years of experience. But the rest of his time is spent growing the company. They're launching caps for kids' ski boots next year and also expanding partnerships. They already have a collab Bootcap with the film company TGR, and have been approached by several other companies asking for something similar. The goal is to expand but stay true to the original idea of providing a simple product that makes skiing easier and more fun.

“The whole reason Nate and I got into the ski industry was because we love product development and we love style,” Thorpe said. “We want Bootcaps to be useful, but we also want people to love the brand and feel great about wearing our product on their gear.”

Testing Verdict: Gimick or Essential Equipment?

Today, Bootcap is on its third design. Ries went back to the drawing room and created a new clay mold for an improved Bootcap that the company launched this past December. Thanks to small but important tweaks, Thorpe said the cap now fits better and is easier to put on—something I saw firsthand.

It's simple to peel off the paper covering the glue and fit the caps snugly onto the toe. The adhesive works at room temperature, but sticks even better when the glue is heated up with a hair dryer. An easy-to-use jig enables you to correctly position the caps so that they never interfere with your binding.

foam, but my testing has convinced me it's a small price to pay for dependably warm toes.

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