

Life lessons on a ski hill

How a 50 year old went up a mountain, and came down in ‘semblance of grace’

ANNE BOKMA

Is 50 too old to learn to ski? Perched at the top of a blue run in Panorama Mountain Village in B.C., there's no place to go but down. Way down. Somehow on this first day of a week-long ski trip in the Canadian Rockies I get swept up in a more advanced group. I'm terrified. Nick Veres, the mountain guide, leads us over Panorama's vast expanse — 1,200 trails, 2,800 acres of terrain. He says to take it slow. My skis tip over the edge and I fly along the powder for five minutes before I fall. A few minutes later, I fall again. And again. I'm aware of holding the others back. And that's when it hits me just how foolhardy, potentially dangerous and bloody embarrassing this whole ski adventure might prove to be.

I've only skied a handful of times and gave up years ago after a particularly mortifying experience when I fell off a chair lift, broke my glasses and spent the rest of the day with a batch of masking tape stuck to the bridge of my nose.

Yet the freedom and grace of the sport have always compelled me. So I'm giving it another shot by signing up with the Burlington Cedar Springs Ski Club, which has a 75-year history in the area and boasts 500 members, the majority of whom are midlifers like me. The club charters buses for day trips to places like Kissing Bridge and Collingwood, and also organizes excursions to far-flung destinations such as Austria and the Canadian Rockies. There are 50 of us in Panorama and I'm the worst skier by far. My hope is that a week of

full immersion will fast-track me into a better skier or I'll have to give up and head for the curling rink.

On Days 2 and 3 I split from the group and hire an instructor for one-on-one guidance on proper form. Just when I think I'm getting the hang of it, I go all wobbly. Worse, I can't help but let out a Tarzan-type wail when I go too fast and feel like I'm losing control.

In the mornings I wake up bruised and sore. Unlike others in the club — some of whom are closing in on 70 — I don't have the stamina to ski all day, and decide to pamper myself with a shoulder rubdown at Pure Massage, a yoga class in the village, some fine dining at the elegant hillside Grey's Restaurant and the requisite end-of-day communal soak in one of several hot tubs on the property.

By Day 4 I'm feeling more limber and hopeful. For the first time my feet are consistently parallel when I take my turns. I'm leaning forward, my shins kissing my boots as I take in the satisfying sound of my skis crunching hard into the side of the hill. Instead of staring in terror at the ground ahead, I lift my chin and take in the vista of the snow-capped mountains that multiply as far as the eye can see.

On Day 5 I find my ski legs. Nick, my mountain guide, tells me I'm ready for the summit. We travel 4,000 vertical feet up on three separate chair lifts, to one of the highest ski hills in North America. There's a hut at the top where the pros congregate. The air is a little thinner here because of the altitude and yellow hazard signs warn of the potential for avalanche. Gliding off the lift, it's as though I'm sailing into the inner circle. Impressed as I was with the views down below, now that I'm at the top I see the whole picture, with a thousand peaks poking through the landscape. Before it was as though I caught only a glimpse of Mona Lisa's smile. Now I get the full effect as I take in her entire countenance.



PHOTO COURTESY ANNE BOKMA

Hamilton skier Anne Bokma took on the slopes in Panorama, B.C. 'You've got to face your fears.'

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Nick accompanies me on the easiest route down — it's a full 30 minutes of meandering corduroy cruising on winding narrow terrain. I can literally reach out and touch rock face and I'm level with the clouds. I take a fall, but so does Nick. I laugh and ask him if he did that just to make me feel better. "Everybody falls," he says.

At week's end I'm still the worst but I've

lost the Tarzan yell and can make it down the mountain with some semblance of grace. With skiing — you've got to face your fears, manage the ups and downs, get up quickly if you fall, and if you don't get it perfect, just enjoy the ride. It's a lot like growing up, but instead you're heading down.

We're never too old to learn those lessons. Special to The Hamilton Spectator