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TRENDS

**Old tricks, new dogs**

■ Nordic jibbing puts a radical twist in the traditionally mellow cross-country vibe.

By Stephen Regenold, Special to The Times

STANDING tall on skinny skis, his gloved hands gripping a short tow rope, Andy Newell careens wildly down an icy road, towed behind a swerving SUV. At the last moment, when it looks as if the SUV is going to crash, the driver peels left, Newell releases his grip and rockets off a ramp to sail high over a parked car.

This oddball scene from the underground film "American Skier" accompanies video clips of Newell skiing in a half-pipe, sliding a rail and back flipping off a large jump.

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The tricks are nothing new, but Newell's choice of equipment — unsupportive low-top boots, free-heel bindings and skinny cross-country skis — is a head-turner.

Instead of using a snowboard or alpine skis, Newell and an increasing number of young skiers now use cross-country skis to jump, rail-slide and show off in specially designed terrain parks.

"I've hit trees, I've ripped muscles in my back, I've coughed up blood," says Newell, a U.S. Ski Team athlete.

"But I've also aired as big as any of the downhill skiers or snowboarders in the park."

Though Newell is an extreme case, the sport of Nordic jibbing has garnered such a following that on Dec. 1 ski manufacturer Fischer Sports USA will introduce a ski made specifically for the sport. And more than 20 cross-country ski

areas in the United States will build terrain parks this season, many for the first time, just for Nordic jibbers.

Nordic jibbing isn't the kind of thing likely to see mass adoption. Indeed, most Nordic jibbers are simply young cross-country skiers tired of skiing endless kilometers on flat trails without ever getting off the ground.

Though proponents like to call attention to the freedom of movement possible while using Nordic equipment for jumping, there are disadvantages. An airborne Nordic jibber, for example, must land in near-perfect balance, as cross-country boots and bindings provide little support. The skis have no metal edges for stopping quickly or turning, and the long, lightweight poles can snap on impact.

Nevertheless, according to Chris Frado, president of the Winchester, N.H.-based Cross Country Ski Areas Assn., resorts are starting to take notice of Nordic jibbers.

A number of the association's member resorts, including four in California, are considering adding parks this season, and several U.S. and Canadian downhill ski resorts that have cross-country facilities will this year, for the first time, allow Nordic skiers to use downhill terrain parks.

Tahoe Donner Cross Country in Truckee, Calif., is aggressively pursuing jibbers. The area's Nordic terrain park, which was introduced last winter, features a large ramp for gaining speed, a half-pipe, a mesa-like "tabletop" jump, rolling mounds of snow and a sharp-edged jump. These features are built close together in a corral, where they are carved and shaped out of immense piles of snow.

Jojo Toepfner, the resort's Nordic director, says the terrain park attracted hundreds of young jibbers last winter and has increased the popularity of the ski area. After skiing laps on the traditional trails for training, the kids keep skiing longer on the jumps, she says.

Toepfner believes the terrain park is good for overall skiing technique, as it improves balance by forcing skiers to adapt to the changing features. Indeed, she thinks it's no coincidence that the local middle-school team, which trains on Tahoe Donner trails and frequents the terrain park, won its regional ski championship meet last year.

Just down the road from Tahoe Donner Cross Country, Northstar-at-Tahoe Resort's cross-country facility has an elaborate Nordic jibbing terrain park as well.

Operated by Tor Brown, an early adopter of the sport and a co-developer of Fischer Sport USA's Jibskate ski, the park has rail-slides, two large tabletop-style jumps, banked curves, obstacles, a half-pipe and several ramps.

Brown, who is also a ski coach, says many of the area's younger cross-country skiers have embraced Northstar-at-Tahoe's terrain park. "It lets the kids get air and wear baggy pants just like the snowboarders and alpine free-skiers," he says.

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Not everyone in the Nordic industry is enthusiastic about the new sport.

Geoff Hurwitch, a product manager for ski manufacturer Rossignol, believes jumping gaps and sliding metal pipes in lightweight skis made for flat ground is a bad idea.

Hurwitch, who coached high school cross-country skiing for several years, says the aggressive, big-air skiing now being promoted has gone overboard.

"Safety will be a major issue," he says, noting that flat landings at cross-country areas can jar the body after a large jump. In addition, Nordic ski poles and other equipment aren't made for the abuse of jumping, he says.

His employer this year discontinued its Evo Free ski, a recreational model introduced in 2001. The ski was popular among Nordic jibbers but never achieved strong sales.

Beyond safety concerns, Nordic jibbing is a sport in its infancy with a lot of growing to do, Frado says. Proponents are working to introduce the sport in the U.S. and Europe, where cross-country skiing has deep cultural roots.

"Cross-country skiing is seen as a very traditional sport," says Newell, a favored Nordic contender for the 2006 Olympic Games in Torino, Italy.

"Nordic jibbing is something new, something that's getting kids to take another look at this sport."

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LOCALES / Area parks

A number of crosscountry ski areas outside California — including Soldier Hollow, Utah; Frisco Nordic Center, Colo.; and Grafton Ponds, Vt. — will build Nordic terrain parks this season, complete with jumps, bumps, rails and half-pipes. But there are also jib parks closer to home. A rundown of four California areas that plan to get in on the action:

#### **Tahoe Donner Cross**

**Country**, Truckee

<http://www.tahoedonner.com> ;

(530) 587-9484

Sequestered in a corral area, the terrain park at Tahoe Donner Cross Country will have a large ramp for picking up speed, a half-pipe, rolling snow features and jumps. The resort plans to expand the park beyond the corral to include more features if there is enough demand.

\*

#### **Northstar-at-Tahoe**

**Resort**, Truckee

<http://www.northstarattahoe.com> ; (800) 466-6784

Operated by Tor Brown, a co-developer of Fischer Sports USA's Jibskate ski, Northstar-at-Tahoe's park has large jumps, rails, tabletops, banked curves and a half-pipe.

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#### **Tahoe Cross Country,**

Tahoe City

<http://www.tahoexc.org> ;

(530) 583-5475

Though not as elaborate as the park at nearby Northstar-at-Tahoe Resort, Tahoe Cross Country plans to build a small terrain park this season with rolling jumps, a ramp, banked turns and possibly a quarter-pipe feature.

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#### **Bear Valley Cross Country,**

Bear Valley (between Lake Tahoe and Yosemite)

<http://www.bearvalleyxc.com> ;

(209) 753-2834

Bear Valley will open its terrain park only for special events and on busy holiday weekends, so be sure to call ahead. When open, the park will include a couple of jumps, a start-off ramp, a tunnel to ski through, a quarter-pipe and a rail slide.

— Stephen Regenold

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