STORY **Lisa Ballard**
PHOTOS BY **Jack and Lisa Ballard**

Ski Faster!

TIPS TO HELP YOU KEEP UP

MORE INFO

To order a personalized copy of *Ski Faster! Guide to Racing and High Performance Skiing, 2nd Edition* (Rocky Fork Media, 2016) or to ski with Lisa Ballard this winter, go to lisaballardoutdoors.com.

IF YOU LOOK AT THE TITLE OF MY BOOK, *SKI FASTER!*, AND THINK, "BUT I DON'T WANT TO SKI FASTER," YOU'RE NOT ALONE. Everyone has a speed threshold on skis, even the top racers on the World Cup. Go faster than your comfort level, and you feel out of control. On the other hand, you might be annoyed by your slower pace compared to others on the slopes. Good news! With a few adjustments to your technique and a couple of gear considerations, you'll keep up without getting nervous.

TIP: As my skis carve around this fast turn, the outside ski has the most pressure. My uphill ski is pulled under me and tipped on edge the same amount as the downhill ski. My body forms a comma shape with the downhill ski out from under me.

TIP: At the end of the turn, my skis are now across the hill. Check out those ski bases! My skis are nicely on edge. Notice how my torso still has some orientation over my downhill ski. I never fully turn my chest across the hill.

TIP: At the moment I want to start the new turn, I plant my pole, aiming it down the hill, not toward my ski tips.

HOW FAST ARE YOU?

Interested in giving ski racing a try? The Ford K. Sayre Memorial Ski Council coaches kids in the Upper Connecticut River Valley from elementary school through high school. Learn more at www.fordsayre.org.

For adults ages 18-plus looking to give racing a try or to get back into it, New England Masters Skiing holds US Ski and Snowboard-sanctioned races most winter weekends throughout Vermont and New Hampshire. Go to www.nemasters.org for more information.

TIP: In the transition between turns, my feet remain about hip-width apart as they pass under my upper body. I'm looking and facing my torso down the hill, toward the apex of my next turn.

Tuned skis and boots that hold your heel and ankle in place and that support you as you flex forward in them give you more control and confidence as your speed increases.

GEAR

Your anxiety when your speed picks up might not be you. It may be your ski gear. Stability and confidence are directly related to vibration control. The more vibration coming through your legs as you turn, the less stable you feel. One of the big differences between low-end and high-end skis is their ability to give you a smoother ride without sacrificing liveliness or turnability.

Also, consider your bindings. Often, a plate, which is part of the binding system, reduces vibration better than a binding that places your ski boot directly on the ski.

Ski design is another factor. Super-wide, fully rockered skis (over 100mm in the waist) shine in soft powder but rattle your fillings on the hardpack. Skis with some metal in them—usually an alloy called Titanal—make skis feel a little heavier carrying them from the car to the chairlift but lessen the bumps and jolts on the slopes.

Pay attention to your ski boots. If your boots are too loose or too soft, you'll have less control in general and less faith in your ability to stay upright as your speed increases. When your boots are buckled, it's okay to have room around your toes, but your heels and ankles should be held snugly. When you flex forward into the tongues of your boots, they should move a little forward but not collapse. If your ski boots are too soft, your balance and ability to steer will be compromised. More on that below.

Finally, tune 'em up! Sharp, smooth edges allow your skis to grip on firm skiing surfaces. Waxed bases provide better glide. Tuned skis naturally travel faster over the snow, but more importantly, it becomes easier to initiate and release your turns. Have your skis tuned if the edges feel dull or burred, or the ski bases have gouges or look dry.

TECHNIQUE

Skiing at a faster pace requires carving rather than skidding your turns. Carved turns leave arcing railroad tracks in the snow. Skidded turns simply swish the snow around. Carving gives you control and power as your speed increases.

TIP: Mid transition, I'm over both skis. Though my skis look flat in this photo, it's only for a split second as I roll my edges from one turn to the next.

TIP: As I start the new turn, my hips and torso move forward and down the hill toward the new turn, which helps engage the tips of my skis early. You need tip pressure at the start of the turn to carve through it.

WRONG!

In this photo, the skier's shins are not against the boot tongues. He's sitting back, which always feels a little scary as your speed picks up.

Skidding sets off your internal speed alarm, forcing you to ski slowly.

To carve your turns, the most important thing to remember is that skiing is dynamic, not static. Instead of holding a single body position, you should move through the phases of a turn. The transition between turns is also important, and if you do it right, you'll find your turns are connected and that they create a flow down the mountain rather than an abrupt, slower change of direction. Here's how to do it:

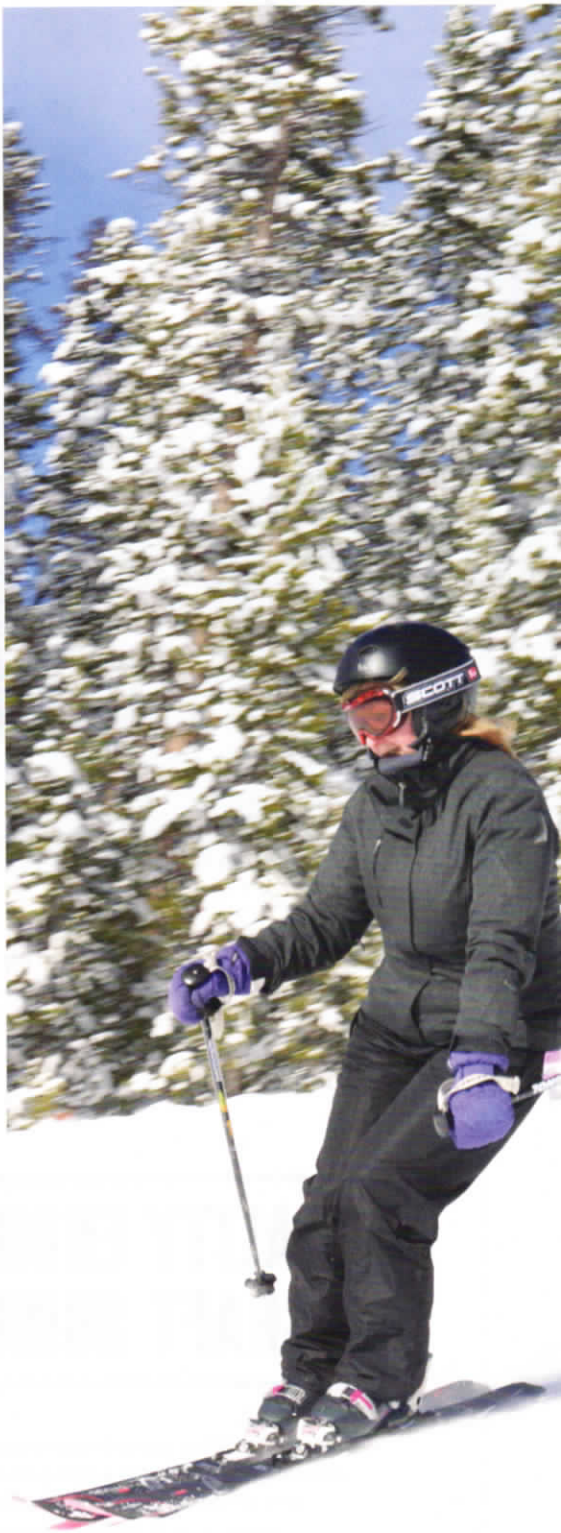
1. Keep your feet at least hip-width apart. Your stance is the foundation of your skiing. In a basic skiing stance on flat terrain, there should be about six inches between your ski boots, similar to how you stand in your street shoes. As the terrain gets steeper and your turns get faster and wider in radii, your feet move farther apart, more vertically than horizontally, as each turn progresses.

2. Keep your shins against the tongues of your boots 100 percent of the time. If you feel your shins against your boot tongues, you're likely centered over your skis. Your weight should be over the balls of your feet, not your heels. As soon as your shins leave your boot tongues, you're effectively sitting back, an unstable position. The pressure against your boot tongues varies depending on where you are in the arc of the turn and how aggressive the turn is, but some pressure should always be on them.

3. Flex your ankles. While your knees should be bent and your joints should feel supple, don't tell yourself to bend your knees. Instead, flex your ankles! If your ankles are absorbing variations in terrain, your knees automatically bend, and the rest of you moves more athletically. At the beginning of a turn, your ankles should always flex forward enough to keep your shins against your boot tongues. As a turn progresses, your ankle flex increases. The quicker the turns, the more aggressively your ankles flex.

TIP: About a third of the way through the turn, as my skis enter the fall line (start to head directly down the hill), I'm flexing into the front of my boots as my weight goes to my outside ski.

TIP: As my skis continue to carve through the middle of the turn, I'm balanced on the outside ski, with my ankles flexing forward. I look down the hill, already planning my next turn.



WRONG!

This skier's shins are not against her boot tongues, and her hands are low, so she's sitting back. Also, she keeps her feet tight together no matter what part of the turn she's in, which makes it hard to roll them on edge and grip.

4. Move your body mass toward the new turn. To start a turn, your weight must be forward, creating pressure on the tips of your skis. The tips engage first, and then the rest of the skis follow. You need to trust gravity and move your body toward the belly of the new turn, normally about 45 degrees to the fall line (the path a snowball takes when it rolls down the slope). Your skis naturally seek the new turn if you combine early tip pressure and moving your mass down the hill into the new turn.

5. Steer your skis. After your ski tips engage, you need to roll your skis on edge more and more, and steer your skis to make them carve around an arc. Press against the inside corner of the boot tongue of your outside ski boot and along the arch and metatarsal area of your outside foot. The inside ski matches the increasing edge-angle you create with the outside ski. If you do it correctly, another skier standing down the slope should see the bases of your skis more and more as a turn progresses.

6. Keep your weight on the outside ski. Though there are times when the inside ski gets weight, in general, you want all of your weight on the outside ski. If you concentrate your weight on the outside ski, your skis will stay on edge, and the edges will grip, giving you control even at faster speeds. That said, the inside ski is not inactive. You have to direct it, keeping it under you (not too far forward) and matching its edge angle to the outside ski so it's available if you need it.

7. Lean down the hill more and more through the second half of the turn. Perhaps the least intuitive part of skiing is leaning down the slope during the second half of the turn. Commonly referred to as "angulation" or "upper and lower body separation," leaning down the hill puts your weight, and thus more pressure, over the downhill ski. It also allows the higher edge-angles required for higher performance turns. Leaning down the hill is certainly a key to faster skiing on the groomers, but it's also the crux of what

makes a big-mountain skier able to handle a 45-degree headwall. As you pass the midpoint of the turn, you should feel your hip and rib cage get closer over your outside ski.

8. Plant your pole at the end of the turn. The pole plant is the cue to start the next turn. It helps recenter you between turns and gives your skiing rhythm. Don't flick your pole toward your ski tips! A correct pole plant happens about halfway between your bindings and your ski tips. Touch the tip of your pole down the hill, not forward. The steeper the slope, the farther you need to reach down the hill.

9. Keep your hands forward. When not planting a pole, your hands should be level with your belly button and slightly wider than your hips. Your elbows should be slightly bent and not touching your sides, and your wrists should be cocked back so your ski pole tips don't drag. Like the rest of your body, your hands should not be fixed stiffly in one position. They move within a range as you plant your poles from turn to turn. The key is preventing them from dropping by your hips or moving around wildly. And if you lose your balance, fighting to get your hands forward gives you the best chance of a recovery.

Racers want to ski faster on purpose, but skiing faster is also part of skiing better, no matter where you ski. Instead of fighting gravity, expert skiers embrace it. You can too if you keep these concepts in mind.

A former member of the US Ski Team and the Dartmouth Ski Team (Class of 1983), Lisa Ballard is one of the top masters racers in the world. Last winter, she became the first American woman to win an FIS Masters Cup Super G title. She is certified by both US Ski & Snowboard and the Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA) and hosts ski camps and women's ski clinics throughout the United States. See lisaballardoutdoors.com for more information.