



Gently does it: Warren Smith makes sure Abi is as relaxed and comfortable as possible during her comeback

A mountain to climb

Abigail Butcher gets expert help in her battle to get back on the slopes after a biking accident

Warren Smith makes no bones about it. “Keep both skis on the ground while you turn!” the ski coach bellows, as I make my first tentative loops down a Swiss piste.

I haven’t skied for two years since my cycling accident. A few complications during my recovery left me with muscle wastage in my injured left leg, and a kneecap that slid horizontally instead of vertically.

Fast forward 12 months, and I’ve joined a ‘return-from-injury’ ski clinic in Verbier run jointly by the Warren Smith Ski Academy and London’s Wimbledon Clinics, which specialise in sports injuries.

An orthopaedic consultant and leading knee surgeon, Jonathan Bell, and a consultant physiotherapist, Claire Robertson, from Wimbledon Clinics, are here to supervise their patients’ return to skiing.

Despite the mix of skis, speed and steep hills, injuries in skiing are not as common as one might think — recent research in Scotland points to 2.38 injuries per 1000 skier days. But many skiers, like me, injure themselves off the slopes, and six out of eight of my Verbier group have

had some type of sports-related accident within the past three years.

On the slopes, knees generally take the biggest hits, particularly the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), a phenomenon that has developed since the improvement in ski bindings - getting rid of leg breaks - and performance-enhancing carving skis. As Warren Smith explains: “Carving skis help you onto your edges and get you carving earlier than old-school skis which is a great thing.

“You do however need to be aware of the need to stay on top of them, and avoid sitting back with the carving acceleration” says Smith, whose courses can be tailored all year round to rehabilitate injured skiers.

“If your balance is slightly back, your knees are wide open to injury,” explains Bell.

My week began with physiotherapy on the piste. While everyone stretches to warm up their muscles, Claire massaged the heavy scar over my kneecap to loosen it — explaining that scar tissue becomes tighter in the cold.

For the past three months, I’ve been working hard at the ski-specific exercises

she gave me after an initial assessment in Wimbledon. I’d strengthened the muscles around my knee, and increased my general level of fitness in line with her careful pre-clinic instructions. Key to my preparation was improving the reaction between my muscles and brain (proprioception), which I did by standing on one leg with my eyes shut!

In December I’d paid a visit to the orthotics specialists Profeet for some custom-made ski boots to ensure my knee was held in the correct position over my foot, but I’m not skiing with a brace. Jonathan Bell believes such false support would be detrimental to rehabilitating my knee.

Back on the slopes, Warren works on improving my technique to put my knee in the strongest position possible to prevent re-injury. As I learn to use my thighs to steer round the turns, keep my weight forward and my poles out in front of my body, my confidence improves, hand in hand with performance. My knee stiffens at night, but I have no real problems, thanks to Claire’s on-slope care.

But it’s not all plain sailing. Everyone has a stronger side while skiing, and

mine, ironically, is my injured left. At times I struggle mentally to commit myself to letting my body ‘fall’ down the slope. By Day Three I am simply exhausted, both mentally and physically, and become quite downhearted.

But Bell, himself a keen skier, gives me a pep talk, explaining how the third day is always toughest, because of the delayed onset of muscle fatigue from unfamiliar exercise.

“You can only do so much pre-ski training in the gym,” he says. “Nothing will really prepare your muscles for skiing bumpy snow.”

He suggests I lower my performance expectations and stop earlier, explaining that post-3pm on Day Three brings the highest risk of injury.

Smith adds: “If you have to ask yourself whether you should do that last run, the answer is always no.”

Five days on, and although I’ve tweaked some muscles in my left leg, my skiing is more confident, thanks to the mixture of



Melody-Sky

coaching, medical supervision and video analysis in the evenings.

“It’s easy to underestimate how much can be done to get back to skiing and minimise the risk of re-injury” says Bell. “Most people just give it a go and wait to see what happens.”

This level of rehabilitation is akin to that available for elite athletes, but it is affordable, interesting and great fun -

I feel incredibly fortunate to have been given a second chance.

For more information, visit www.wintersportsclinic.co.uk
Rehab Course Info:
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My ice curtain

Christoph Schrahe, a winter sports consultant and ski author is once again making snow in his back garden (altitude approx 46m) in Cologne. While some appreciate it, he says, others do not.



More than 20 years after the fall of the iron curtain, Germany has a curtain again - an icy one. Last year, first-graders at Diesterwegstrasse Primary School had

a first-hand glimpse of snowmaking. Just before school began in the morning, they had a look at a particular garden along their regular way to school - mine. It was sporting the only snow in Cologne. When they told their parents, some thought they were telling porkies.

This winter, my garden remains the only regular white spot in wintery Cologne. With one exception: one of my son’s

classmates lives in a nearby children’s home. When we paid her a visit, we came across the perfect sledding hill in their extensive grounds. Since I could no longer use my older snow-making machine because it was so noisy, I took it to the children’s home and created a bob-sleigh run. It was fantastic to be doing this without being afraid that somebody would complain. Nobody was bothered by the noise, the children loved it. And the staff were only too pleased that the children were able to let off steam outdoors.

While some people were pleased with the unexpected arrival of winter, it was one lot of neighbours who tried to put a stop to the fun. They called the police. While I’d been able to reduce the noise level dramatically with a completely new

snowgun, the neighbours to our right complained about snow getting on their terrace. Admittedly, this can be slippery, but I’d offered to clear the terrace, and even the lawn. But that wasn’t enough. And besides, they didn’t want anyone running about in their garden with a broom.

Because of the narrow layout, it’s next to impossible to avoid some snowdrifts building up in our neighbour’s garden - at least if one still wants to have snow in one’s own garden. So during the summer, I came up with a solution. I’m installing a large sheet, like a giant shower curtain between our house and the swing. This should prevent the snow drifting next door where it’s not wanted. And now I can make snow to my heart’s content.