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## What It's Like to Get Worse at Something

The crisis over whether I am getting worse at things, and whether I'll ever get better, began in the slushy demilitarized zone between the ski resort's parking lot and the lines for the chairlift.

As the ski blogs recommended, for my first day on the mountain this season, I had signed up for a group class. The slopes teemed with first-timers wrestling with their bindings, and it was hard to find my group.

5 "Excuse me, I'm an intermediate?" I said haughtily to the woman who turned out to be my instructor. "I've skied many times before."

As a kid, I had cruised the bunny slopes<sup>1</sup> of New Mexico in my *Jordache* jeans. As an adult, I've skied seven or eight times, both in the Rockies and on the East Coast, and even once in Europe. I rarely fall, I've never crashed into something, and I stick mostly to the "blue" trails – the ones for intermediate skiers.

10 At first, I didn't think much of it when, during the lesson, my instructor kept calling me aside and giving me little pointers. I was flattered by the extra attention, but surprised she wasn't more impressed by the ski performance of me – an intermediate! Bored of the beginner, "green" slopes we had practiced on during the class, afterward I decided to tackle a blue run, one I had done many times before at that exact resort.

15 When I reached the top of the blue-only chairlift, though, something in the atmosphere shifted. The sky clouded over, making it harder to see pockets of ice and powder. Why did the blues look so ... vertical? Were they always this steep? Why was it so cold? The *chung-chung* of the chairlift started to sound less rhythmic and more ominous. I felt my heart start to race.

20 I picked the most benignly named blue trail – Snow Dancer – and tipped my skis over the edge. That's when the panic really gripped me. It released about 30 minutes later, when I was back at the base, having slowly inched myself down sideways by the edges of my skis. Along the way, a snowboarder stopped to ask if I was okay, and I wasn't sure what to say. "I – I shouldn't be on this trail," I said, accurately.

25 *Why did I get so much worse at skiing?* I wondered this later, while looking up my ski gear online to see if it was somehow broken. Last winter, I had impulse-bought some cheap boots and skis online. Depending on which Luxembourgish<sup>2</sup> boot-size chart you look at, the boots might have been slightly too big for me, but I would snap them onto their tightest setting. Any tighter and I'd struggle to move my toes. I had also purchased skis for tall women who like to go "all mountain," but despite what the ski blogs said, I now thought they might be too long for me. Then I came across a *TikTok* of someone skiing on literal two-by-fours<sup>3</sup>. A poor skier blames her tools.

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<sup>1</sup> *bunny slopes*: ski slopes for beginners

<sup>2</sup> (here) exotic

<sup>3</sup> *two-by-fours*: pieces of lumber approximately 2 by 4 inches

30 It turns out that simply having skied “many times before” didn’t mean I was getting better at it. Instead, like many athletes, musicians, or just humans, I may have been deteriorating over time. My age, my stress levels, and the poor ski techniques I had learned in my 20s might all have been sabotaging me slightly. “There’s a large body of literature showing that practice – or even just doing – doesn’t make us any better at the activity,” says Ulrich Boser, the author of *Learn Better* and the founder of *The Learning Agency*.

35 Several studies have debunked the 10,000-hour rule – the idea that mastery simply requires grueling amounts of practice. In one study, students who solved 1,500 physics problems still didn’t understand the concepts behind math all that well. Elite violinists’ levels of performance couldn’t totally be explained by the amount of practice hours they logged. In sports, a meta-analysis showed that practice accounts for only 18 percent of the difference between two people’s performance. Some people are just better at certain things, and no amount of practice will change that.

40 Throughout my meager practice hours on the ski slopes, age was working against me. Though I’m still a relatively fit 35-year-old, I’m probably not as strong or as fearless as I was in my 20s. Skiing involves cognitive skills too – a constant judging of how sharply to turn and how to dodge fallen snowboarders. Mental acuity, though, peaks in one’s early 20s, around the time I was best at skiing. “And then it’s kind of downhill after that,” says Zach Hambrick, a psychologist at *Michigan State University* who studies  
45 performance. Pun intended, apparently.

Hambrick has found that being conscientious, a personality trait linked with precision and regimentation, can actually work against you when a situation evolves or when something unexpected happens. I am extremely conscientious, and perhaps the changing weather was enough to throw me off mentally. Here I sympathized with Mikaela Shiffrin, an Olympic skier so consistent, she’s referred to as a  
50 “metronome.” Instead of skiing to gold in Beijing<sup>4</sup> recently, she balked. Other reliable stars, such as the figure skater Kamila Valieva and the snowboarder Shaun White, similarly floundered when the circumstances weren’t right.

A little bit of stress can help performance, but a lot of stress – the amount you might feel during an important competition or, if you’re me, just on a slightly difficult trail – hijacks the brain’s frontal lobe,  
55 which is where planning takes place. “Once your frontal lobe is taken over by stress, you have no more capacity for anything else,” says Lisa Son, a psychologist at *Barnard College*. “You’re probably less likely to focus on how you’re going to move your skis and how you’re going to move your body and your poles.” Or, as in my case, you might not be able to move at all.

The weekend after my recent ski disaster, I drove to some farther-away mountains that get natural snow. I  
60 clicked on my giantess skis and breathed in the 13-degree<sup>5</sup> air. Mostly, I had the same problem: As 7-year-olds swished past me at 60 miles an hour, I kept flinching on anything steeper than an anthill, twisting my hips and ankles to keep from going too fast.

Getting better, or learning, requires switching between different types of related tasks, rather than

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<sup>4</sup> *The Winter Olympics* were held in Beijing in 2022

<sup>5</sup> 13-degrees Fahrenheit. Equals minus 10.6-degrees Celsius

65 rehearsing the same thing repeatedly, Boser told me. Someone studying for a test might run through flash cards with a friend, then study alone, then recite the material out loud to someone else. With skiing, “rather than just doing that same blue over and over again, you’d be better off going to the bunny hill, then going to another hill that was icy,” he said. The joy of getting better sometimes necessitates the pain of getting worse.

70 Hambrick recommended that I get help from another ski instructor – the best I could afford. Though I won’t ski-school my way into the Olympics, practicing skiing might make me marginally better. Even if I never become an expert, trained teachers can point out failures in technique that I might be missing.

I soon got my chance. One afternoon, I took a chairlift with a retired ski instructor named Bob, who spent the ride talking about the “camber” and “rocker”<sup>6</sup> of skis from the ’70s. When I told him I was struggling, he offered to watch me take an easy slope and diagnose what I was doing wrong. He told me to do a J turn –  
75 where you ski in a J shape – and then slide a little down the mountain, like a falling leaf.

I had practiced this drill before, but for some reason I now couldn’t do it. Rather than staying parallel, my uphill leg kept locking into an embarrassing wedge shape, the one they teach complete newbies. The wedge brought me to an awkward stop instead of a smooth, professional-looking glide. “Why is your leg doing that?” Bob asked. I had no idea.

80 Son, the *Barnard* psychologist, reminded me that the learning process is rarely one of constant improvement. Often, it looks a lot like backsliding. When toddlers first learn to talk, they do it by copying adults. They’ll sometimes say correct-sounding things like, “We went to the library today.” Then, as they learn that most past-tense verbs are created by adding an *-ed* to the end of a word, they might say something like, “We goed to the library today.” Because that’s grammatically incorrect, it may seem like  
85 regression. But it’s not: The toddler progressed from mere mimicry to deploying one of the rules of grammar, a more advanced technique. Adults, too, sometimes seem like we’re losing ground, but we’re actually unlocking a new skill.

This means that when you’re trying to develop a new hobby, or a new role at your job or in life, there are going to be moments that look like failure. But an awkward stumble or a botched attempt is often a sign  
90 that, under the surface, you’re learning.

Bob skied with me a bit more, until I had completed enough turns to make him feel like his volunteer-instructor time hadn’t been wasted.

“You’re skiing better already!” he hollered at me.

“Thank you!” I yelled back.

95 Then I skied a few more feet and fell.

(2022)

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<sup>6</sup> “camber” and “rocker”: names for the side profiles and curves of skis