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So long, skiing: Mid-life's slippery slope may find some boomers making a big switch

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Illustrations: Photo: Special to Times Colonist / Suzanne Morphet gets some snowboard instruction from Katharina Collishaw.

Photo: Special to Times Colonist / Suzanne Morphet practises balancing during snowboarding lessons at Sun Peaks.

Photo: Special to Times Colonist / Sitting down is the easiest way to snap your free foot into the binding of your snowboard.

Snowboarding is not something I ever imagined trying. Until this winter, I saw snowboarders as a nuisance, if not a downright menace -- like the time one smashed into my daughter, then nine, knocking her to the ground and sending her skis flying off her feet.

If snowboarders aren't sitting on their butts and half-blocking a ski run, they're flying out of treed areas with no warning, or so I thought. "Obnoxious" would have described most of them. I could understand why four resorts in the U.S. ban snowboards, with Taos even boasting that it is "100 per cent snowboard free."

But at some point during my six days at Sun Peaks Resort in B.C.'s interior, I began to see the beauty in boarding. The more I watched the boarders perform their gravity-defying, age-defying balancing act as they swooshed down the hills, the more I wanted to do the same thing. Skiing suddenly seemed boring.

"Snowboarders are proud people, so we keep our heads up high and don't look at our feet," says Katharina Collishaw, my instructor, as she demonstrates the proper snowboard position to me and another middle-aged woman, Deanne, on my last afternoon at Sun Peaks. The three of us are an unlikely snowboarding trio: I'm 47, Deanne looks at least that and Katharina is 39. None of us sports a nose ring or even baggy pants.

Instead, I'm decked out in as much armour as I could acquire at the rental shop: a helmet and wrist guards. I would gladly have stuffed some hockey padding into my pants, but the shop didn't supply it. I have heard too many stories about novice snowboarders suffering broken wrists and bruised buttocks to take any chances.

However, one of the things I'm most looking forward to is something I don't have to wear: heavy, clunky downhill ski boots that are torturous to walk in. Snowboarder boots are soft and comfortable, like big puffy slippers. Katharina shows us how to lock one foot into the binding, then encourages us to walk around on the flat ground at the bottom of the bunny hill. I feel a bit like an inmate in ankle chains -- perhaps worse, since my left foot is at a 30-degree angle on the board and I have to drag it and the board behind my free foot. Still, it's better than downhill ski boots.

Katharina observes that I'm a "regular" -- that is, my left foot is at the front of the board and my right foot is at the back. The other way around and I would have been "goofy." No kidding!

Next we practise pushing the board with the free foot, then, once we pick up some speed, putting it on top of the board and gliding, with our arms stretched out for balance and our knees bent.

After getting comfortable moving on flat ground, we're ready to step onto the "magic carpet" and get whisked up the bunny hill. However, getting onto this moving rubber mat is not as easy as it sounds. Deanne tries first, loses her balance and falls down. "Lean forward," Katharina tells me when it's my turn, and I manage to stay upright.

Once we're at the top, I learn why snowboarders sit on their butts so much: It's the easiest way to snap your free foot into the binding. It's also the only way to take a rest break. Standing still on a snowboard on a hill is about as easy as standing still on a surfboard in the water. You can't do it for long without losing your balance and this sport is all about motion and balance.

Now, for the motion part. Katharina explains that we're going to face uphill while sliding straight backwards down the hill. Sounds dicey, but at least we won't be able to see where we're going. Now that we're locked into our boards, even the bunny hill looks intimidating.

By moving our toes up and down on the board, we learn to stop and go. Part way down the hill, I find myself falling straight backwards with no way of recovering. Without poles and with both feet attached to the same board, I don't have a second chance, as I would have on skis. Remarkably, I'm not hurt and get right back up and try again.

About halfway down the hill, I'm catching on to this movement, but now my calf muscles are screaming in pain from being overextended. Katharina reminds me to stand up straight, but also to keep my knees bent. This seems contradictory, but I'm in too much pain to think it through.

On our next descent, we face downhill and this time it's our thigh muscles that are stressed. I had heard all about broken bones from snowboarding, but no one

warned me about the intense muscle pain. Mercifully, after a couple of more descents, we're ready to try "the pendulum," which involves moving in one direction, then another, zigzagging back and forth across the hill, with no one muscle taxed exclusively.

We look and point in the direction we want to go, and magically, our boards respond. Snowboarding is surprisingly intuitive.

This is when I decide I like snowboarding, maybe even love it. The pendulum is also known as the "falling leaf" -- the movement has the same light, airy quality about it as a leaf gently falling to the ground. It's carefree and graceful. There are no hard edges or sharp movements. I feel like I'm doing tai chi on a moving platform.

It occurs to me that if more middle-aged Canadians discovered snowboarding, it might halt or even reverse the shrinking customer base at many ski resorts across the country. While the last few years have been some of the best ever, with more than 18 million skier/snowboarder visits to resorts across the country, the number of individuals who ski or snowboard in a given season has dropped by about five per cent on average across the country since 2001/2002.

The decline is due to a number of factors, including aging, changes in the weather, increasing obesity and a greater percentage of Canadians coming from countries where skiing and snowboarding are not popular.

According to a report produced for the Canadian Ski Council last July, what has kept the industry growing is an increase in the number of days that skiers and boarders practise their sports: From an average of 5.5 days per season in 2001/2002 to 6.2 days in 2004/2005.

The industry knows it can't rely on this trend continuing, however. In fact, if more Canadians don't take up snow sports, the number of "domestic visits" to resorts could plunge 22 per cent by 2017, according to the council's Model for Growth overview. The number of people from other countries who come to Canada to ski or board has also been declining since 2001/02.

Perhaps the most surprising information to come out of the council's research is that only 18 per cent of people who try skiing or snowboarding continue with the sports. Council president Colin Chedore says the industry must "figure out ways to stop the bleed and get that retention rate higher."

One of the strategies it has implemented this year is designating a number of resorts across Canada as test sites for making the beginner experience more positive. They include Mount Washington, Whistler, Sun Peaks, Ontario's Blue Mountain and Quebec's Mont Ste. Anne and Mount Tremblant. Chedore says the council has sent each of these resorts "a cookbook of ideas," starting with changing how beginners are greeted.

It seems I've barely begun my first attempt at snowboarding when my two-hour lesson is over. Even though it has gone fast, I've reached several conclusions: Learning to snowboard is easier than learning to ski.

That's not just my perception, but a feeling shared by instructors; it's common for snowboarders to progress from bunny hills to black-diamond runs in one season, something that's unheard-of in skiing.

I've also decided that snowboarding is probably easier on my middle-aged body than skiing, since my weight is evenly distributed and my feet can't go out from under me in opposite directions, as they can on skis.

Snowboard instructor James Clark puts it this way: "In snowboarding your body is more relaxed because it's a more natural motion. In skiing, there's more tension in your body, and your lower body is moving in a different direction than your upper body."

Finally, and perhaps most important, I've realized that snowboarding makes me feel youthful, whereas skiing makes me feel my age. It's not that I find skiing difficult. I just feel as if I've been doing it forever.

The only problem, of course, is that many others my age don't appreciate snowboarding. They think all boarders are a nuisance, if not a downright menace. When I told my friend Brian that I had taken a snowboarding lesson, he asked, "Did they teach you to be obnoxious as well?"

Some people just can't understand why any middle-aged, intelligent person would want to take up snowboarding. But now, at least I do.

And if the industry knows what's good for it, it'll try and find a lot more baby boomers like me.