

HISTORY

Cross-country or nordic is the oldest form of skiing. There is evidence that primitive skis were used in Norway over 5,000 years ago. As early as the 10th century, cross-country skiing was basic transportation. Vikings in Northern Europe got around on skis when traversing relatively flat landscapes. Ski competitions started in Norway in the 19th century. Norway's famous Holmenkollen ski festival began in 1892. At first the main focus at nordic festivals was the combined event of cross-country skiing and ski jumping. In 1900, a separate cross-country race was held at the Holmenkollen. Cross-country competition was added to the Winter Olympics at Chamonix in 1924 and has been part of competition since that time. The events held at the first cross-country competition were the 15km and the 50km. A women's cross-country event, the 10km, was added to the program in 1952.

Classical

In the classical technique, movement is smooth and efficient, using alternate movements of the arms and legs, as in walking, but with a more elongated stride. The equipment is lightweight with "skinny skis" and boots that look much like running shoes. In competitions, the skis remain parallel on flat ground. When going up hills, the skis are pointed outward in the shape of a "V." The bottom of the skis are waxed for better traction.

Freestyle

In freestyle competitions, the skier can choose any style. The most common technique is skating, which is faster, more dynamic, and more physically demanding than the classical technique. Skating also requires more strength. The skis for skating are shorter and the poles longer than those used in classical competitions. Skating requires a compact surface in order to glide.

GETTING IN SHAPE FOR CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

Watching Olympic athletes often motivates people to want to try their hand at a new sport or reclaim a sport from the past. The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports encourages participation in a wide variety of activities, including the sports of the Winter Olympics, to enhance health and fitness. Since there are risks involved with sports, before starting to cross-country ski, be sure to consult these links, which offer basic information about getting in shape and protecting yourself from cold-related stress and illness:

WEARING THE RIGHT CLOTHING

Wearing the right clothing is extremely important when participating in cold weather sports. Dress in layers, wearing warm, waterproof/resistant clothing. Clothing for cross-country skiing should protect the participant from cold, wind, and precipitation and should also provide ventilation — be “breathable.” To reduce wind resistance, the clothing should fit snugly to the body. Pay special attention to protecting feet, hands, face and head. Up to 40 percent of body heat can be lost when the head is exposed. Footgear should be insulated to protect against cold and dampness.

Wearing multiple layers of varying thickness allows you to regulate your body temperature. You should flexibly layer the clothing and use proper materials so you will stay warm and still not restrict your movement. Many peel off layers when cross-country skiing, and replace those layers when stopping to rest and rehydrate.

Wear at least three layers of clothing

! A water-resistant outer layer to break the wind and allow some ventilation (nylon or other water-resistant synthetic fabric).

! A middle layer of wool or wool-like synthetic fabric to absorb sweat and retain insulation.

! An inner layer close to the skin. It's important to keep moisture away from your skin — avoid cotton, which clings to perspiration. Synthetic materials such as supplex and coolmax are ideal because they keep you warm and dry.

EQUIPMENT

! Cross-country skis suitable for the site (track, off-track, or back country) and suitable for the technique (light-weight or “skinny skis” for classical, shorter skis for skating). Back country or wilderness cross-country trips require wider skis.

! Cross-country boots (they allow your heels to come off the skis); sturdier boots are required for back country skiing.

! Poles for balance (poles for skating are longer than poles for the classical technique).

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING GLOSSARY

Classical technique. The traditional ski racing technique. Athletes use a diagonal stride in which both skis stay parallel to each other and do not deviate from prepared parallel tracks. The power of the stride propels the skier.

Freestyle technique. The skating — or freestyle — technique, which was developed in the 1970s, closely resembles the motions of ice skating. Athletes do not keep their skis within narrow tracks but instead push off with both legs to surge forward and propel their bodies. It usually is faster than classical technique.

Glide wax. Wax used to decrease the friction between the skis and the snow. It is applied to the entire ski in freestyle races, but only to the front and rear tips of the skis in classical races.

Kick wax. Also known as grip wax, it increases the friction between the skis and snow to improve traction. It is applied to the middle part of the skis for classical races.