FRISBEE® SKIING

by Bob Mohl

As far as I know Frisbee® skiing is at least three years old because that's when I started doing it. So it's high time for an article to be written, and if no one else will do the honors . . .

Frisbee skiing, to set the record straight, is the activity of combining Frisbee moves with downhill skiing technique. To paraphrase Stancil Johnson, it joins man's greatest source of clumsiness, his feet, with his greatest nightmare, falling.

The appeal of this combination is the appeal that these two sports have in common — the execution of smooth gliding motions (at comparable velocities) with graceful curves and turns. When I think of the words I would use to describe the ecstacy of that perfect sun-lit morning run, floating down a mountainside through untracked powder a foot deep, they are the same words which come to mind in describing that memorable "longest throw", the disc hanging and hanging in interminable descent as it wafts on the crest of a Colorado chinook wind.

The idea occured to me in a dream. I had a vision of cruising down a slope tailing a formation of five flying discs spaced evenly behind each other in a line, as nice as could be, descending down along the fall line at a constant height of five feet off the ground. I would ski up along side the last one, proceed wing on wing with it for a while, then pick it out of the air and sail it into the number one position. I'd approach the next floating disc and do the same thing. I would continue juggling my five magic discs as I wended my way back to the lift line.

"Sure, it sounds great," you say, "but it's just a dream." Well, yes and no. I've never put five disc into a stable formation, but I was able to juggle three for several hundred yards after a few hours practice. Since then I've been turned on by so many possibilities with just a single disc that I haven't even gotten to the point of perfecting multi-disc variations. Briefly, here are some of the things I've come up with (They've all been tried but not necessarily mastered).

AIR BRUSHING. An obvious candidate. But there are a couple of nice extras — you don't need wind because you're in the same frame of reference as the disc so there's always plenty of air speed. Also you don't get near out of breath running your dogs off. The biggest problem is the attack angle. A small amount of error becomes critical because you're going downhill and if the disc gains too much altitude it is going uphill relative to you. It's best to keep a slight negative angle unless you want to practice herringbones back up the slopes.

T.S.&C. Throw, ski and catch. Two hundred yards is nothing to write home about, but the sensation is. I snagged one at that distance fluttering around in the air like a dead duck. It seemed to be doing four rpm . . . and in the entire flight it was never more than fifteen feet off the snow.

TUNNELING. Can you imagine tossing a disc through half a dozen arm tunnels? . . only there are just two arms, and they're both yours! You can just cruise alongside the disc dancing your hands around it in the mysterious choreography of some secret ritual.

KNEE CATCHES. Standing atop the in run of a small jump, you toss the disc so it sails down across the lip and over the out run. You shoot down after it and catch it between your knees in the air. The beauty of this one is that after you land you can just keep right on going because you're supposed to ski with your knees together anyway. The trick here, aside from placing the disc on the right trajectory, is timing the correct moment to start your jump. It's usually tempting to start too soon. My first attempt consisted of three collisions in sequence — the disc, the lip, the slope.

TIP TIPS. Toe tricks are out but you can make nice saves with your ski tips. If your coming up short of a descending disc you may be able to shove a leg forward and use the ski tip to tip it up for a catch. Or if you're really late and it's a roller, it's usually easy to flip it up once you get it to roll across your skis.

OTHER TRICKS. Many standard tricks can be applied — behind the back, between the legs, follow catches. The ones that seem least feasible are nail delays and tipping. This list is surely not exhaustive, but my imagination has grown increasingly feeble from the wipeouts which always seem to accompany my jump catch attempts.

Most of the maneuvers described here can be performed by yourself. As such, you can trick your own throws. You always get the throw you want, and have no one else to blame when you don't. But, as with many things, doing it by yourself is nowhere near as exciting as doing it with someone else. Aside from feeling less foolish (than you might as the lone stranger) you come to appreciate in a big, big way having a partner uphill, who is always able to pick up an errant toss or dropped catch. You can only appreciate this after you try unsuccessfully to snatch a disc off the snow while doing 30 mph and now have to hike halfway up Everest to retrieve it.

The secret to Frisbee®skiing is having the appropriate viewpoint. A lot of things become relative. The fall line of the slope has to become your horizon. A toss which in reality is horizontal will be a hundred feet above the slope in a few seconds.

> "It may fade left and it may fade right,
> But you know full well it will land
> out of sight."
>
> — anonymous

Or more specifically:

> "Murphy's Law has absolutely
> guaranteed it'll bury in powder under
> the trees."
>
> — anonymous

So usually you want to aim a little down instead of up, and it takes a while to get used to the idea. You want the disc to drop-you just don't want it to drop faster than the slope does. The other thing that's relative is experienced in the frame of references of the thrower and the thrower (i.e., the disc). When you are stationary, the two frames have the customary relationship we're all used to — but when you can throw and catch a disc without ever being separated from it by more than thirty feet and still cover a hundred yards in the process, it affects your sensibilities. You have to start thinking in terms of the relative speeds of the two frames. You begin to understand the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle of Frisbee skiing:

> "I can be going the same speed as the
> disc or I can be at the same place as
> the disc but I'll be damned if I can be
> going at the same speed in the same
> place."

The real stickler is that the disc is always decelerating because of air resistance. This means you have to learn to adjust your speed accordingly — snow plow to decelerate, tuck and weight back to accelerate. Any time you succeed in stepping into the frame of reference of the flying disc, it's magical. A tenuous string exists between you and the disc as you both go whizzing down the mountainside.

If you've already done some Frisbee skiing, I'd be interested in hearing your comments. If you haven't, you may be interested in a few suggestions:

1. **Don't throw white discs. If the reason is not already obvious, it will be the first time you go looking for a lost one.**
2. **Wear comfortable boots, avoid long skis, and stay on smooth slopes. With your eyes on the disc most of the time, your legs take a beating as they are the first to discover changes in terrain. It's not unusual to be skiing in for an easy chest high catch only to have the disc suddenly be out of reach over your head as you drop down the back side of a mogul. What it does to your humility (in front of a chairlift audience) is bad enough, but what it does to your feet is murder. Beginner slopes serve fine to get the hang of it, and I don't see the need of ever going more difficult than the intermediate slopes.**
3. **Play on warm days.**
4. **Avoid crowded slopes if possible. We should be concerned how ski area operators view Frisbee skiing. So far, they and other skiers seem to get a kick out of it. But the first time a beginners ski school class gets flattened by a downhill Ultimate game, attitudes may change.**