

## Bell to Bell

SOMETIMES MORE IS BETTER. CONSIDER THIS A REMINDER. *By Devon O'Neil*

The clock read 4:36 p.m. when I collapsed onto a barstool and ordered a beer. "You're not even going to unbuckle your boots?" the 50-something ski instructor next to me asked, as if I were breaking the cardinal barstool rule. "Not yet," I replied. "Maybe after this beer."

I was so tired that I'd almost skipped the après session but then veered into the bar at the last second. It had been a full Wednesday, and I wanted it to continue. An early-December storm had brought eight inches of light powder to northern Colorado overnight, and snow continued falling through the day. That morning, without a deadline to tether me to my desk, I figured I might as well maximize the skiing. I boarded my first lift when my home resort of Breckenridge opened at 9 a.m. sharp, and my last at 3:59 p.m., just before it closed. Let's round it up to seven hours of skiing.

The crowds were gone by the time I stood atop my final run at 4:15. I lingered for a few minutes, listening to the silence and admiring the snow-caked evergreens and shimmering crystals that hung in the two-degree air. My quads and back ached. My blinking phone reminded me I had ever-increasing strings of e-mails to answer and projects to complete. My mouth was frozen. Yet it took all I had to push off down the powdery mountain. I knew that once I reached the bottom, my day would be reduced to the same status as the thousands that came before it—a memory. And days like this deserve to last.

I rarely ski from bell to bell, even though it's one of my favorite things to do. Usually it requires a special occasion—closing day, for instance, or someone special in town visiting. But every so often, conditions



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on and off the hill converge on a random winter day. I eat a huge breakfast, pack a snack in my jacket (today it was almonds, pistachios, and dried pineapple), and ignore the rest of life until after the lifts close.

Skiing from first chair to last has always struck me as old-school—a return to the sport's hardy, wool-sweater-and-pants roots. I'm not sure why. Maybe modern skiers are getting soft. Despite day tickets' swelling to triple-digit prices, season

passes cost less, thanks to corporate competition. Maybe we don't feel we have to get our money's worth as urgently as we once did. It's easier to rationalize spending an hour—or a lot more—inside for lunch breaks, too, what with half-pound certified Angus gourmet burgers and grilled salmon on the menu instead of the thin, floppy patties our parents and grandparents grew up eating in the lodge.

For me, it's more about the vibe. Actually *skiing* from open to close has a way of dissolving all the tension I feel when my time is limited. I don't get angry if I miss a rope drop or first run down a big bowl of powder, because I know the crowds will depart soon enough, and I'll have plenty more time in the fluff to myself. On spring days, I like to stash a picnic lunch and maybe even a canned beer to enjoy on a sunny knoll in the trees. I find that I stop and take

in the scenery more often when I'm skiing all day. It puts me in a happier state.

There's something else too about bell-to-bell skiing and why it resonates. Back at this same après bar last December, I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen since summer. He told me a sobering story: At 36, he'd just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was optimistic about his fight, but the odds were not on his side. The ski instructor next to us leaned in and quietly said that he'd lost a daughter to cancer when she was eight.

Skiing can be a metaphor for life, and their tales struck me. In a world where lives end without warning, sliding on snow and breathing fresh mountain air while grinning like a boy is about as smart a way as I can imagine to spend my time. So I might as well maximize it. ●