



## On a Clear Day You Can Ski Forever

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### South Navarre Peak from Cooper Mountain Road

It was one of those ideas that takes your breath away when you conceive of it – maybe akin to what Albert Einstein felt when he realized space and time were not immutable qualities. The particular revelation of which I write occurred to me one winter day several years ago as I stood at the intersection of Echo Ridge Ski Area’s North Junction and the Cooper Mountain Road. On that day I noticed that the snow-covered road had been recently groomed to a perfect corduroy surface. I was informed by the Forest Service, the intended recipients of this grooming were snowmobilers, not skate skiers like me. I wondered, however, if a skier might commandeer, for his own purposes, a section of the snowmobilers’ road.

Knowing that the Cooper Mountain Road joins with the Grade Creek Road to make a 46-mile loop back to Antillon Lake near Manson, I momentarily dared to hope that the grooming might grace the loop’s entire length. If so, that loop would be a skate skier’s dream. The Cooper Mountain Road follows the ridge between the Chelan and Methow valleys at an elevation of 5000 to 6000 feet, yielding spectacular views on both sides. To the right, the Methow. To the left, 4000 feet below, glacially-carved Lake Chelan.



loop in *one day*.

As I imagined what it would be like to whisk in perfect solitude on mile after mile of that wild and scenic route, I trembled with anticipation – 46 miles of untrammled, gorgeous trail through rugged mountains! My heart skipped a beat with the further realization that the right guy on the right skis could do that

Think of it -- 46 miles in one day! It might sound too far to anyone unfamiliar with skate skis, but I knew it could be done. The double-marathon length and remoteness of this concept added to its lure; I resolved then and there to look into the feasibility of such a trek.

A phone call to the Chelan Ranger District of the Forest Service ascertained that the entire loop was indeed groomed about once a week during winter for snowmobilers. (For those interested, check: (<http://parks.wa.gov/winter/parks/motorparks.asp?Region=2>)). Welcome news – the essential first condition had been met. I figured if a guy were able to get on that trail before the snowmobilers tore it up, if the weather were fair, and if the skier had a ride to and from the different trailheads involved, there was nothing but 46 miles separating him from success.

I could never align those variables that winter nor the next, but I kept the idea filed away. Finally, this year, on Thursday, January 17 it looked as if my stars would finally all be in a row – the trail would be freshly groomed, the weather forecast called for zero chance of new snow, and my son Nicholas was home from college and willing to perform the drop off and pick up.

I knew it would be nice to ski the loop with a companion in case of an emergency—there was, after all, a good chance I would not encounter another human along the entire route. The thought of being marooned at 6000 feet, twenty-five miles from civilization in winter with a broken leg or broken ski was scary enough to give pause. After considerable thought, however, no one with the requisite skill and desire came to mind. So, I waived aside my concern and hoped that cell phone reception would be available along the way if I encountered unforeseen problems.

While I thought I could finish the route in one day, I was not *certain*. Spending the night high in the mountains without proper protection would be excruciatingly uncomfortable, so I decided to ski with a pack containing a warm sleeping bag, mattress, and fire-making materials as well as sufficient food to fuel me for several days. Walking the line between maximum protection and minimum weight, I settled on a 30-degree bag, a bivy sack and space blanket, a closed-cell foam mattress, four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, four power bars, and one quart of Gatorade. I had originally planned to carry two quarts of Gatorade but the pack's weight made me uncomfortably top-heavy. I decided to make up for the missing liquid by eating snow if necessary.

Nick and I rode our snowmobile to the Black Canyon/Cooper Mt. Road junction in the dark. We arrived with sun still below the eastern horizon. The trail had been recently groomed though it had several snowmobile tracks on it. So far, so good. I was getting the early start I needed.



**At the Black Canyon/Cooper Mt. Rd. junction where my trek began.**

I said goodbye to Nick, promising him that I would check in via cell phone periodically during the day. I started down the road at a modest pace, trying to adjust my gait to accommodate my pack – a burden I rarely ski with. I checked my wristwatch/altimeter and noticed that the road had

dropped to 4800 ft from the 5500 ft crest four miles earlier. Elevation lost has to be paid for with precious exertion.

The debt came due soon enough as the road climbed a thousand feet in the next few miles. I did notice that my skiing was considerably less energetic than I would have expected that early in the journey. I chalked it up to pre-race jitters – the same jitters that had rendered me a mediocre cross-country runner in high school.

The road meandered back and forth from the east to the west side of the ridge. To either side I could look across the wide valleys at distant, frozen peaks. The snow glistened as the sun rose in the sky. Rabbit tracks crossed the road from time to time. Whenever I stopped to take a picture or adjust my pack I couldn't help but notice the utter silence that surrounded me. The isolation was intoxicating.

I had driven the Cooper Mountain Road numerous times over the years. My memory of it was that there were no significant hills in the nineteen miles from Black Canyon to South Navarre. Well, let me tell you, "significant hills" are different in a car than on skis. There was very little of the flat terrain I expected in that first nineteen miles. It seemed I was always going up or down. There was one short descent ten miles into the trip that was so steep that it reminded me of the artificial hills that Olympic ski jumpers launch off – I removed my skis and walked it.

Shortly after the "ski jump" hill my luck changed for the better. Forest Service Road 4330 branched off to the right down the Gold Creek drainage into the Methow Valley. The snowmobilers who had chewed up the track to this point had turned off in that direction. That left virgin corduroy ahead of me to South Navarre. Let me emphasize here that I harbor no resentment toward the snowmobilers who preceded me. After all, it was their licensing fees I am



### Virgin Corduroy

told, which pay for the grooming on which I was utterly dependent. But man oh man was it nice to ski on that corduroy!

After a blessed mile or two of flat corduroy, the road began to climb again. The expected resurgence of energy had not come to pass. I called Nick from a ridge to report my location but said nothing of my

fatigue. I didn't want to alarm anyone. Still, my torpor was puzzling. Hadn't I just the day before completed ten miles of Echo Ridge trails at a torrid pace? Perhaps that was the problem – I had depleted my energy reserves at that time.

Oh well, I thought, I'd just have to make the best of a less-than-perfect situation. I stopped and ate one of my PBJ sandwiches. It was all I could do to choke it down. No appetite, no energy – strange indeed.

If my energy reserves were problematic, the weather certainly wasn't. It was cold, but the sun was brilliant. No wind. The snow surface under my skis became faster and faster as the sun rose and my skis proved to have been waxed perfectly for the conditions. The trail climbed to 6700 ft as I rounded a large, jutting ridge before the Summer Blossom Trailhead. My wife, Nick, and I had departed from here for a hike to Stehekin in September. I stopped to take a photo of the trailhead, only the very top of the sign now visible above the snow.

A little before 1 p.m., I reached the South Navarre Campground. I had long since shed my jacket but with the solar radiation bombarding me from all sides in the still air I was warm enough to briefly consider removing even my T-shirt (I didn't.) I choked down an energy bar and drained the last of my Gatorade. Roadside mouthfuls of snow would have to hydrate me after that and, believe me, that's doin' it the hard way. It takes about a hundred of them to equal a glass of water. I had covered nineteen miles and had twenty-seven left to go.

Had I considered the naked arithmetic of my situation at that point I probably would have been discouraged. The day was more than half over and I was far short of the halfway point. But I knew something those numbers didn't reveal. From South Navarre the road drops precipitously for five winding miles and, after that, levels off – a welcome break. With my arms hanging limply at my sides and my ski poles dragging in the snow behind me I was perfectly relaxed and fervently hoping that my energy reserves could at last recharge themselves as I descended.



At an elevation of 3500 feet, I reached the bottom of the hill. The road was at last flat and perfect for skate skiing. Mile after mile, the flatness continued as I assumed that easy side-to-side rhythm of skating. I estimated I was moving along at least 10 mph. Now this was well worth the price of admission!

Lake Chelan was often in sight on my right, several thousand feet below. I came to a sign: Antillon Lake nineteen miles ahead. It was now 3 p.m. Nineteen miles is an entire day's hike for a backpacker I noted with alarm. I have to tell you, I didn't relish the idea of spending the night in the snow, but it was looking like it might come to that. The gear in my pack would ensure my survival but, even if I were reasonably warm, the darkness would last a full fourteen hours. Even my bed at home isn't comfortable for that long.

The road stayed fairly flat for the next two hours. I was tired but on flat ground and good snow a skate skier doesn't use a lot of energy to move along at 8 to 10 mph. This was the ace-in-the-hole I had counted on to make this trip possible. I adopted an extremely relaxed, easy gait. So relaxed that I noticed my lips were hanging loosely and swinging from side to side on my bowed head. It may not have been pretty, but it was getting me home.

With the sun barely above the mountains to the west, I came to the junction with the Oss Peak Road. A sign showed only eight miles to Antillon Lake. Here was the proof that I had averaged 10 mph over the previous hour. Imbued with hope about reaching trail's end I called Nick. I told him to meet me at Antillon in another hour. I was confident now I could make it.



**Navarre Heights Looking South**

The closeness of Antillon proved to be illusory. The other side of Mitchell Creek, which looked to be little more than a mile from my vantage point when I called Nick was many times that. I had forgotten that the old bridge I remembered from the 70's had been washed out in a flood. The new crossing had been re-routed miles upstream. Worse yet, the road

leading there was a roller coaster affair that was the last thing I needed in my condition.

Darkness fell. A piercing cold descended. I was beyond tired now, but knowing that Nick would be waiting and the unpleasant prospect of fourteen hours in a cold bag propelled me onward.

I had seen not a single person on that road all day. I was miles up the Mitchell Creek drainage. A gibbous moon illuminated the snow. A handful of the larger stars studded the purplish-black sky. The night was perfectly quiet. I was simultaneously experiencing extreme fatigue and stirring beauty. Both my mind and my body were having trouble coping. The trail surface along Mitchell Creek was no longer my cherished corduroy. A considerable number of snowmobiles had churned it into an icy jumble. I clumsily hopped on rubbery legs to avoid deep ruts and ridges in the dark. An ice-covered Antillon Lake came and went in the pale moonlight. How many miles past the lake was that darn snow park anyway?

Finally, at about 6 p.m., I saw the reflection of a Nissan's tail lights in the narrowly focused beam of my headlamp. Nick was waiting in the darkened, deserted snow park. I had begun the day weak and I had finished it exhausted, but I had skied forty-six miles in one day.