



DROPPING IN

LEARNING TO SKI. AGAIN

BY INGRID WATT

▶ Every autumn for more than 50 years I've pined for colder days. Will we be skiing early this year? Will there be snow by Christmas? Should I buy new boots, replace the skis? Then, invariably, the snow starts to fall and my excitement builds as we approach the first day of skiing. I never dreamed this ritual, this annual dedication to a lifelong activity, would ever cease. My plan was to ski on into my '70s or '80s, just as my parents had done.

Now, I'm not so sure.

In the world of lifelong skiers, I started late—my first ski lessons came in Ontario at the age of seven. I had no choice, it was the thing my parents did. And whether I liked it or not, early every weekend morning I was sent out on the hill. But I came to love the sport and everything associated with it: making friends, developing new skills, pushing limits. For decades, I was completely vested: junior racing, university racing, masters' racing. I introduced my twin daughters to the sport and now they're

coaches. I loved the freedom. I loved winter.

But all that changed in a heartbeat.

At age 50 I found myself facing the hardest challenge I could imagine. Due to an illness, I became an amputee: below the knee on the right leg, partial foot on the left. A long road to recovery followed, with months of physical therapy, working with specialists to find the right prosthetics. Yes, it was tough, incredibly so. I was facing the mental and physical struggles of becoming an amputee in middle age, of re-learning the basics of mobility—walking, climbing stairs, getting out of chairs. As

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for skiing? That was another struggle entirely.

I didn't know where to start, or even if I wanted to try and ski again. If I couldn't get my left foot into a ski boot and was still dealing with phantom pain on both sides, how in the world was I supposed to ski?

Eventually, my desire to ski with my daughters became the driving force. I was introduced to certified instructors with Canadian Adaptive Snowsports Ontario (CADSOntario), a tireless group dedicated to working with people living with disabilities. They took me under their wing and I started to see what

was possible. Learning alongside other individuals whose challenges were far more complex than mine empowered me to stop saying *Why bother?* and start asking *What's the solution?*

Starting with sit skiing, working valiantly to learn how, I was making progress...until a nasty crash made me think twice. I now have the utmost respect for sit skiers—incredibly determined individuals, so courageous to be flying down hills while strapped into a sit ski. But it wasn't for me. Knowing I'd have to endure pain in my left foot, I had to prove to myself that I could ski standing up. If I couldn't withstand the pain, then perhaps my days of skiing would be over. But I had to try.

So, two years ago, I re-learned to ski from scratch. I started with moving across the flats, looking like a deer on ice. I learned again how to ride the magic carpet, how to snowplow, how to accept being passed on the hill by a four-year-old. But my years of skiing and racing began to pay off. After only three days out, I made my first parallel turn in more than six years, eventually graduating to riding the chair—it was the most exhilarating feeling.

Over the past two seasons I've continued to build my strength. I'm figuring out what needs to be adjusted to ski varying conditions (I am now an early-morning skier, keen on the groomers). Last year I took on the mountains. Skiing with my daughters in Banff wasn't graceful, I was forced to stick to the greens and blues, but it was so satisfying. I don't ski as fast as I used to but that's okay. I'm just thrilled to be outdoors, on skis.

I'm not saying it's easy. For me, skiing remains an ultimate challenge. Gone are the days that I can “jump into my boots and go for a few runs.” For one thing, it takes a lot just to get from the parking lot to the lodge. My boot bag is twice the size, containing tools for switching out feet, adjusting my prosthetic to set proper angles, a silicone sleeve to prevent my prosthetic from slipping off while riding a chair, and foam pieces to fill in gaps in my ski boots. Plus, a lot of patience.

But when I think of the joy I felt on the day I was finally able to re-join my daughters out there on the ski hill, it makes it all bearable, doable. I'm pining for colder days again. ❄️