

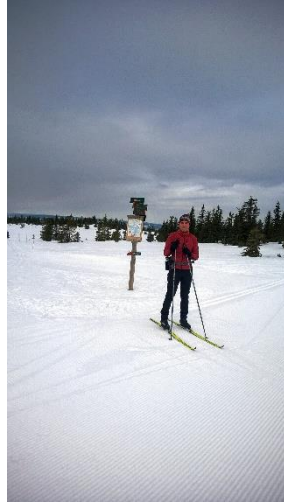
## And I thought mohair was for sharp suits.....

As a cyclist I understand how equipment makes a big difference in sport: bike frames, wheels, shoes and clothing can all count - in the modern parlance - 'marginal gains'. As a relative newcomer to the intricacies of cross country skiing, I was naively ignorant of the complexities of equipment and techniques. It has been a steep learning curve and I'm only part-way up. In terms of technique, under the guidance of the two Martins, Appleby and Roscoe, my eyes have been opened to the apparently infinite elements of classic skiing. Our trip to Sjusjoen in Norway this April showed how important equipment can be as well.

Sarah and I were unable to get away to Sjusjoen to completely coincide with the club's Easter trip, but we managed to start our holiday before everyone returned home. Our first day was used to get our ski legs and find our bearings (and Helen, Martin A, John and Wendy) along the Birkebeiner in the fog, wind and intermittent snow. We felt encouraged that a few months of roller skiing really had improved our technique and, enthused by this, arranged to meet up with the others at Hornsjoen the next day for coffee and cake: they would be skiing via Nordseter and we would head more directly there as a round trip of 30km seemed more than plenty for us. The day dawned brightly, and being a Sunday the locals were out in force. Heading north we were passed by skiers of all ages, shapes and sizes. Now, I acknowledge we have yet to master the art of nordic skiing, but we are both fit and used to long days in the outdoors. However we became more disheartened by the overtaking rate, our apparent lack of ski speed and the worsening weather. Like all poor craftsmen we started blaming our tools, clearly our skis were rubbish. The skis in question were purchased in Scotland a few years ago and to be fair were the cheapest available at the time. As the day went on our increasing frustration, lack of speed and difficulties in route-finding conspired against us and we missed the get-together. The long haul home confirmed our decision to get new skis.

That night we met up with the others, sharing experiences of the day and our decision to get new skis. We heard a range of views about the benefits or otherwise of waxing versus waxless in the current quite mild conditions (they had suffered various waxing challenges that day) and even about the recent development of mohair inserts. Armed with this often conflicting advice we went to the local branch of Sport 1. The guy in the shop could not have been more helpful and between us we thought that mohair technology skis might best suit our needs. He suggested we tried some out before making a decision, so with nothing more than my mobile number he let us each take a pair of brand new skis for the day. Sarah was given a pair of Madshus Terrasonic Classic IntelliGrip skis, whilst I was on a pair of Fischer Twin Skins.

Both pairs of skis have a mohair insert built into their base, which the makers' say delivers "a whole new level of performance" by ensuring grip without sacrificing glide. The difference they made was immediate, being narrower and far stiffer than our old skis - and although they needed more focused effort to make them grip, they glided superbly. We were also aided by the new Rottefella Xcelerator bindings that allow their position to be adjusted, moving the binding forward for better grip and towards the back for better glide. After some experimentation I moved my bindings forward one click using the simple tool supplied, and the improvement in grip was instant. Within 10 minutes it was clear we were going to buy the skis, with the added bonus they were heavily discounted as it was the end of the season.



So for the rest of the week we enjoyed exploring the huge ski area, again aided by technology in the form of a smart phone app, Skiporet, that gave real time updates on the condition of the loipe and when it was last pisted, including live GPS tracking of the piste machines - cool. Although we knew when the local machine was out as it parked opposite our apartment and woke us up at 6am each morning.

In summary, the new skis were a revelation: they are lightweight, stiff and fast, with the bonus of low maintenance, all-condition performance. They not only helped improve our average speed, the control they offered gave us confidence on the down-hills, though in my case best described as over-confidence given the number of occasions I ended up in snowdrifts. We can't wait to try them this winter, although they will be saved for "best", using our old skis in the variable conditions of the British winter - fingers crossed we get a good one this year.

By Simon Foy