



McLEANINGS

GGR: THE GOOD GEAR REVOLUTION

Trustworthy gear is essential to the safety and enjoyment of backcountry skiing, and if you don't trust your gear, you might as well give the sport up. Before an early Grand Teton outing, I tried out a new brand of bindings and, after cranking them down to Grand Pucker mode, stepped in. The heelpiece exploded into a thousand pieces of shrapnel, and left just a metal stud sticking up. I switched back to my tried-and-true bindings, happy to have discovered the failure on my living room carpet rather than on the summit. But memories of the metal stud stay with me to this day, and although I trust my gear, I try to go easy on it and test it out before a big trip. I also ski with a bit in reserve so that if something does break, I can recover from it.

Gear failures aren't nearly as common as they used to be. When I first got into AT skiing, the main question was "You trust that stuff?" I entered the sport at the dawn of the Age of Reliability, so I never knew anything but bomber gear. Still, it wasn't always that way. At one point, carrying a spare ski tip in the repair kit was mandatory. Nowadays, my First-Aid kit and repair kit are one in the same: tape, wire, glue, a Leatherman and Advil. The Advil won't do much for a broken boot, but major reconstructive field surgery can be performed with J-B Weld glue. After whipping 300 feet from the top of Gorra Blanca, guide Bean Bowers rebuilt his binding toe plate with J-B Weld and a Leatherman file. The fix was good enough to last another three weeks on the Southern Patagonia Ice Cap, if not forever.

Part of the good gear revolution has to do with the instant feedback and product reviews that are now commonplace. Instead of vague rumors of

broken bindings, if three skiers in different parts of the world have the same issue, it becomes an instant internet crisis with people demanding action, or more likely, bashing the product. It's much harder to foist crappy gear nowadays. Consumers are far more educated and expect reliability, and thus good quality gear has become the norm.

Most gear failures are easily avoidable anyway, with a little common sense. When I was working as a gear designer, the worst gear destroyers I saw were the Scout troops. If it can be broken or misused, they are the ones to do it. Camming devices used as hammers; tent poles for prying boulders; ski boots for fire walking. Scouts are a force of nature when it comes to breaking gear. A close second was the end of the season "Just Skiing Around" (JSA) ski returns. These skis usually had vise marks or tire tracks on them and broke while "just skiing around" right before the warranty expired. Snapped tent poles were also common, and my advice is simple: as with many things in life, if it seems too tight, you probably have it in the wrong hole.

Weight is an important factor for backcountry ski gear, but it often comes at the expense of either durability or cost. It's generally understood that lightweight backcountry gear is not as durable as alpine gear. Stomping big cliffs on a pair of ultralight skis and/or bindings will have the same predictable "snap, crackle, pop" that results from prying rocks with tent poles.

But if your gear does fail, try repeating perennial adventurer Ray Jardine's ultralight backpacking mantra, "If I need it and don't have it, then I don't need it." And start walking.



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Andrew McLean lives in Park City, Utah with his trophy wife, two red-headed daughters, one good dog, and one bad dog. He's racked up first descents all over the world and laid arcs on all seven continents. In a past life he was an outdoor gear designer, and his current favorite color is Crayola Atomic Tangerine. Photo: Adam Clark