

# Ripping Into the Skin Game

Ascenders are your best friend in the backcountry

by T. Hamish Tear

AT \$80 TO \$100 A PAIR, climbing skins seem to some like diamonds on the soles of their skis. Some backcountry skiers feel that as those who literally *have* to buy them, they're being unfairly gouged—even ripped off. But, like no other piece of backcountry hardware, skins deliver a big bang for your buck. Consider their longevity: A reasonably hard user of skins, I purchased my first pair in 1979. Ten years later—when the mohair began to thin in places like a well-loved teddy bear—I replaced them, but

strap-on skins make the most sense as last-resort spares.

“Strap-on skins account for about 10 percent of the market,” explains Paul Hebert president of Ascension Enterprises, a Ridgeway, Colorado, company who make nylon plush glue- and strap-on skins. “They always work, and for specific uses, such as ‘yo-yo’ skiing, wet climates, or novice backcountry skiers, the no-worries, quick-on-off, and no-water-absorption aspects of glueless skins are major pluses.” Some strap-on skins have plastic-rubber bristles that stand up when the skin is stretched over the base of the ski and then are flattened by forward movement. Strap-ons, however, can also be a pain: Snow gets between the skin and the

their skin), however, it wears out sooner and absorbs more water than nylon. Water absorption leads to impossible balling-up of snow on the plush. This can be deterred by applying a coat of glide-wax to the mohair before encountering melt-freeze conditions. On the other hand, nylon isn't completely immune to water absorption, and some versions glide a whole lot better than others. Climate and typical snow conditions (i.e., temperature and water content of snow) have a lot to do with choice. Do your research before buying and think about when/where you use them most. It's not completely improbable to consider separate mid-winter and spring-touring skins.

Most glue-on skins attach by being hooked over the ski tip in some way. Most commonly, skins are cut off two inches short of the tail (with a nice rounded end). Some glue-ons have an additional tail attachment as a precaution against the tail of the skin starting to peel. Once that starts, like a banana peel, it can roll off the base of the ski unnoticed, causing the glue to become hopelessly contaminated by snow. In the “Euro-fix” attachment system, a rubber strap at the tip provides tension for a clip at the tail to fit into a groove on the back edge of the ski.

Another point of concern is that not all glues are equal. Hebert's view is that straps are required at the tail of the skin if a less effective adhesive is being used. Just make sure that the tails of the skins stay properly glued at all times and that the manufacturer's maintenance recommendations are followed. To prevent tail-peeling don't plunge the tails of your skis in the snow to stand them up, and if you have to step backward, pick up your feet; don't shuffle. For winter camping and more serious expeditioning—where tail-peeling is harder to prevent and a bigger disaster when it happens—the Euro-fix system makes more sense. Duct tape wrapped around the tail can help here (ever wondered why you see annoying little bits of duct tape lying on the trail?), or there's an instant pack-sized emergency glue: aerosol. Usually you're better off getting out the spares rather than messing with those that won't stay stuck. ❄

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ski, the “connection” to the ski is loose, there is zero glide, the straps compromise edging performance, and the ski edges may actually cut through them. Hebert stresses that time spent perfecting climbing technique with strap-ons can mollify these problems.

The reality, however, is that glue-ons are likely the skins you own, or will end up using, so learning how to optimize their performance is perhaps more important. The fit of your skins is critical: The width of the skin should be that of your ski at its waist, leaving a fair margin for the edges over the rest of the base. Each extra millimeter of width along the length of a ski amounts to quite a bit of traction, but it also amounts to less glide for downhill sections; you don't want to plod down at the same speed you plodded up. You'll also want some glide when using skins as a braking tool when descents get gnarly.

The choice of mohair or nylon plush—and which nylon plush—depends largely on where you ski and the manufacturer. Generally, mohair gives a smoother glide (don't worry—mos aren't slaughtered for



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I still use the old ones as spares.

The primary qualities of modern skins are their intrinsic simplicity and that they do what they do extremely well. With a reusable adhesive on one side and an amazingly effective plush on the other, you can stick 'em on and rip 'em off with greater ease than ever. There is a dark side to glue-on skins, however, one that a little human diligence can guard against for the most part. Complete failure of the glue as a result of irregular maintenance (cleaning and regluing—which we won't go into here) or contamination with snow, touring waxes, or dirt, can render your skins virtually useless—and turn them into your backcountry enemy. Time and energy wasted in trying to climb without skins can be dangerous, and the danger is amplified the farther out you are. It's wise to pack spare skins whenever you go on a long tour. Remembering that these, too, can become snow-contaminated, many find glueless,