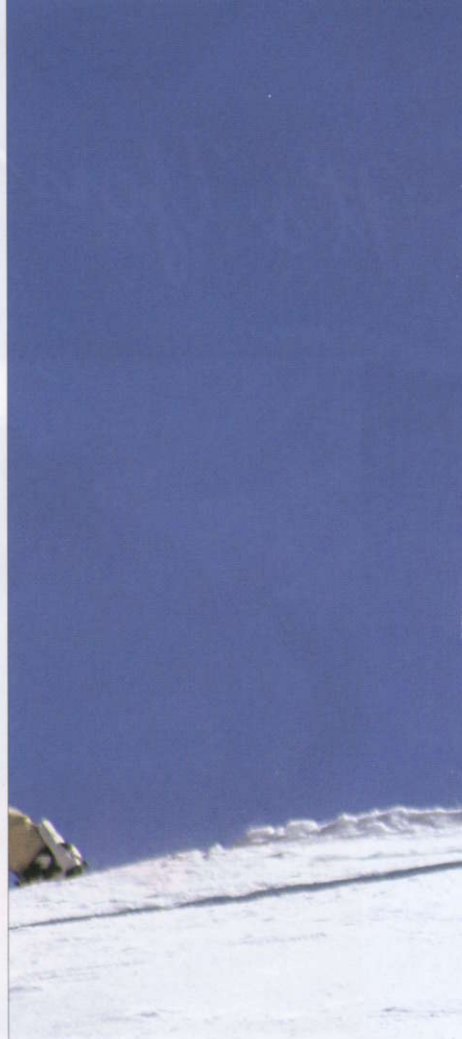


Ski like a girl

One women's program was never going to be enough for RACHAEL OAKES-ASH. So she decided to do two.

PICTURES BY
CHRIS HOCKING

I shunned the ski bunnies at school with their panda tans and their world of family snowball fights after breakfast, marshmallows toasted for lunch and snow angels before dinner. My parents thought piste was a dirty word and I was sent to my room if I mentioned it. Twenty years later I got bitten, bad. A week on the slopes near Queenstown turned into a week at Thredbo followed by two more weeks across the Tasman and two in the Alps. Green became blue became black. Double diamonds were no longer matching earrings.





Diamonds - becoming a girl's best friend.

L'Oreal Visible Results Women's Week – Hotham

My mother told me never to lie and I should have listened. It's a white out at Hotham and I'm surrounded by four mountain women wearing crash helmets. This doesn't bode well. Embellishment of skills got me in this mess and I'm begging Nick at rentals for a helmet.

Now is not the time to tell the top group I find myself in that, just a season ago, carve was something I did to a slab of lamb come Sunday night, turn was

something I'd do when things didn't go my way and schuss was how I did my hair when my man came a calling.

Hotham is a serious mountain, even more so when you can't see it. I tearfully beg our fearless leader, Lisa Kilpatrick, to let me return to the groups below. "Feel your way" is her response as she explains the cause and effect of one's feet position in relation to one's body balance.

I lose my grip and fall on my face; the

group exhales in relief that I am the first, but though thankfully not the only.

Lisa is a fellow late bloomer. She took to skiing in her 20s, spending time crying down the mountain on an instructor-level program in Canada to quell her fears.

It worked; she's now a qualified top-level instructor and the co-ordinator of Mt Hotham's Women's Week. Now I know why my tears didn't work, I am a Lisa in training.

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Women ski differently to men. It's all in the Q Angle, which is Lisa-speak for hips. We're born to give birth which means we're naturally knock kneed.

Men are born to hunt and must outrun their prey which is why they care more

about getting to the bottom first and winning than how they look getting there. Mixed ski lessons traditionally work with the common denominator. Males tend to do more snow sports than women so the group will take on male speak and the women will struggle to keep up with their brute ways.

Women plateau at intermediate or drop out all together while men think they're advanced because they got down the cliff alive, even if their technique was questionable.

Hence the need for women to teach women the finer points of pole plants, slalom, bumps and the like.

We respond to positive encouragement in a safe environment of fellow women with their natural nurturing (unless you're in my group, then you just ski for your life). The day starts at 10am with two hours of tuition and video analysis followed by lunch on the mountain then another two hours before après school bonding with L'Oreal pampering and bubbly.

Optional, but enjoyable was the de-stressing table dancing at The General Store where at 3am, my Mountain Fear disappeared into my beer.

I am seriously tested when there's a break in the weather on day four, and I am invited for a ski with Winter Olympian Marcus Lovett.

It's that embellishment again, talking myself up over cocktails at The White Room. Come daylight, my knock-knees have returned and this time around they're really knocking.

On the edge of a vertical drop, Marcus executes a perfect telemark turn. I feel the snow. It's crusty on top and questionable underneath.

Here's where I can draw on my Kilpatrick training: "pole plant and jump turn, don't stop, just do. Feel the whole foot on the downhill ski, big toe on left, little toe on right with the turn, switch on the core with a body of steel, move nothing above the thighs." I am skiing, not falling. I get

Don't stop - just do.



down by relying on technique and I wonder where I left my fear? For the first time in four days, it's gone.

Of course, Marcus is at the bottom, munching on snacks as if he had time to boil a pot of tea and let it brew.

By the final day, we are all far more relaxed. Whether it's because we made it through alive or because the sun has appeared is irrelevant.

We've bonded in a way that sharing vulnerability can do and our skiing has improved because of it.

We vow to return the following year; I won't need to embellish, but I will need to beat Marcus.

Rock solid



The Mim Sodegren Women's Program – Falls Creek

It's Sunday night at Falls Creek and Virginia Vindin-Price is hosting cocktails for 28 women. Dressed in a fetching knee length silver fox, she pours champagne with one hand and dispenses party packs with the other.

A Falls Creek winter local, Virginia has been co-ordinating the Mim Sodegren

Women's Program (and her matching outfits) for four years. A turn around the room and I discover half the women have done this before.

It's worth it for the party pack of fetching free powder blue t-shirt and selection of teas.

Come Monday morning, the women

meet at Cloud Nine, subconsciously forming a bonding circle around the instructors there to grade us.

No entry forms here to embellish, just five turns down the mountain and we're sorted into packs. My competitive nature gets the better of me and I hustle my way into the helmeted group when no one's

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looking, dragging Virginia along with me for the glamour factor.

Jessie Pitt is our instructor. She's been on the mountain since she was a little tacker and teaches racing to the kids in Austria during the northern winter (I feel like a kid but I don't want to race).



Share and shop.

We remain goal focused with Jessie on our way down the mountain and social focused on the chairlift back up, chatting up a storm about each other's lives.

Day one is spent doing javelin turns, lifting our uphill legs and turning the ski mid air over the top of the one remaining foot attached to the mountain.

On day two, we progress to short turns and dare to ski some black terrain in full view of the chairlift.

Day three and its more quality time on the black runs, trawling the unroomed

regions till the weather stops play and we retire for cocktails.

Day four and more short turns are in order, working on balance and confidence in powder, but it was the final day when we applauded each other's improvements as we picked up speed and the men on the mountain stopped to watch, secretly envious of our skill.

Andrea Binning we are not, but try telling us that with our new found confidence. It's only a matter of time before Warren Miller comes a calling. **AS**

STYLE NOTES

Work the web for more on women's weeks

– for Falls Creek, go to www.falls creek.com.au/skischool/special.asp

and for Hotham, check out www.hotham.com.au/index.php?pid=1299