



**SOUTHERN SNOW: The New Guide to Winter Sports from Maryland to the Southern Appalachians**, by Randy Johnson. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C. 2019. \$27 paperback, \$19.99 e-book, also available on Amazon.

Reviewed by Tom Dillon, January 25, 2020

Special to The Skier

Look in the dictionary under the word “optimist,” and you might well find the synonym, “southern skier.” We hold true to the creed even if our ski seasons may be shorter than those out west and our bases sometimes skimpier. We always expect snow.

Look for the most optimistic of southern skiers, and you might well come across Randy Johnson of Watauga County, author and longtime skier, both downhill and cross country. It was Johnson who managed for years the backcountry

trails at Grandfather Mountain, creating a fee system that kept the trails open when they might otherwise have closed.

He’s promoted skiing and outdoor sports far and wide, in the South and beyond, crossing paths with everyone from Stein Eriksen to Sepp Kober, one-time leader at the Homestead in Virginia, who might well be called the father of southern skiing. Of course, there are several candidates for that role.

And it was Johnson who, 32 years ago, wrote “Southern Snow,” the first guide to skiing and winter sports in the South. That was a time when some major publications referred to us derisively as the “banana belt” of skiing. Who would go south to ski?

But as Johnson pointed out in that book, “elevation overcomes location.” The South’s mountain summits, the highest east of the Mississippi, often hold onto snow when farther north, lower slopes don’t. More often than not, our lift-served seasons last through March. And it’s not uncommon to have skiable x-c snow even later on such summits as Roan and Mitchell.

Some may have scoffed back then, but Johnson has long since been proved right. Skiing has long been a profitable endeavor for the high country in North Carolina and the Virginias. Places like Appalachian, Beech, Sugar, Snowshoe and Canaan Valley thrive on it. There’s no question about the matter, climate change or no climate change.

And for that region, it made sense for Johnson to release, late last year, his updated and expanded guide to winter sports in the South. It's newly out, and it's a keeper, an extensive and vastly updated introduction to winter recreation in the South.

How different is this? Well, the old book was 369 pages, and this one is 446 pages. It's not a coffee-table thing, but it's a bigger book all the way around. Good reading, but don't expect to stick it in your jacket pocket. The backpack, it will probably fit.

Johnson makes a lot of references to his earlier guide here, but he's clearly done an awful lot of new research, remembering the one-time ski areas that have closed, the new ones that have opened and the vast list of characters who have made southern skiing what it is over the past half-century and more. They're all here, from Sepp Kober to Doc Brigham to Bob Ash to Gunther Jochl and beyond.

The organization is pretty much the same. The first half of the book is the story of southern skiing, from climate matters to winter driving to snowmaking to the history of skiing in the South – which for the record goes back a lot farther than the resorts do. For instance, note that a carpentry class at Lees McRae College was turning out its own skis in the 1930s.

After that, there's a complete listing and critique of downhill ski areas, and then a separate section listing cross-country ski areas, good places for winter hiking and mountaineering, and even a little bit on ice climbing.

All this is marked with Randy Johnson's infectious optimism, enthusiasm and often self-deprecating humor, like the time he nearly got lost in a snowstorm on Mount Mitchell and the time he nearly set his boots on fire. Oh, and don't forget all the Subarus he's owned through the years. He's sold on them, or at least on the need for vehicles that can handle snowy roads.

There is a difference or two. The old guide was subtitled "The Winter Guide to Dixie," and that reference as disappeared, sacrificed on the altar of political correctness. But that's a minor thing. The big point is that this book will teach you things you did not know about winter in the South and how to enjoy it. As I said, it's a keeper.

*Tom Dillon is a long-time skier and ski club member.*