



## The Constant Beginner

*I grew up in the Midwestern United States – an area famed for its cornfields, tornadoes, and endless horizons. So no matter how hard I try, I just can't seem to ski like a Swiss.*

By Chantal Panozzo | When people think of skiing in Switzerland, they usually think of sleek skiers cascading effortlessly down the Alps. They are unlikely to imagine an American expatriate sitting mid-trail in a mismatched snowsuit – 5 year-olds swooping past her as if she were a mere tree in the path – while she addresses the pain in her tailbone and tends her wounded pride.

So far, since moving to Switzerland in 2006, the only thing I've really been able to improve about my skiing is my ski outfit. Following three years of pretending not to care about impersonating a ragamuffin, I look really professional now, sporting a fancy, two-layered ski coat and matching accessories that don't actually look like I grabbed them out of my mother's box of winter rejects.

The problem with looking good is that it

makes your bad skiing look all the worse. It's easy to excuse a person wearing an oversized Land's End turquoise snow outfit from 1988. But put on a brand new black, white, and blue Spyder ski suit, and you're just setting yourself up for complete and utter failure.

Because I grew up in the Chicago suburbs, I can make lots of excuses for being a downhill skiing disaster. "Well, these people grew up on an incline," I tell myself, as groups of Swiss retirees maneuver skillfully past, while I try to pretend I am actually in control of my 31-year-old body when it's at a 45-degree angle.

"I am a child of the corn," I repeat to myself as groups of Swiss 4-year olds wait patiently for me to move after I am knocked down by the old T-bar – a plastic handle on the cable meant to bring me back up the bunny hill.

By last winter, though, I was fed up with being a downhill disaster. After living as an expat in Switzerland for three years, I wanted to put all of that in the past and show the Swiss some of my real skills. My strategy: to do skiing the way I knew best— on flat land. After all, I grew up cross-country skiing in a forest preserve in suburban Chicago. If anyone should be the master on land of endless horizons, it should be me.

So I went to Einsiedeln, a town about an hour outside of Zurich known for its cross-country trails, ready to take on the Swiss. First, I went to the ski shop to rent some skis.

"Beginner," said the woman running the place, eyeing my brand new Spyder snowsuit, as she handed me what she deemed to be my proper set of cross-country skis.

I wanted to protest, to tell her that unlike downhill skiing, I had been doing this cross-country thing since I was a kid. But as my German wasn't that advanced, I figured I'd just prove it to her by making myself a blur outside her window.

After five minutes on the course, I realized that the problem with cross-country skiing in Switzerland is that what the Swiss consider as flat land, I consider mountainous. So as a retiree lapped me for the second time on the 10-kilometer loop, I slipped, slid, and panted my way up the Illinois-sized mountain –not even trying to keep up. “The way down will be easier,” I told myself, but this wasn't true. I was at the top of a mountain in cross-country skis and there was something wrong about that. I paused, took a deep breath and tried to comfort myself in the fact that at least there was a pre-made track. But just because there's a trail for my skis does not mean my skis stay in it.

As I crashed halfway down, the “Swiss Family Robinson” zoomed around me, leaving me buried under a pile of powder. As I sat there, cold, wet, and wondering how the heck to get up, I realized the only place I'd probably ever conquer as a skier was a forest preserve located 5,000 miles away in Warrenville, Illinois.

Just like my German-language skills, no matter how hard I try, my skiing ability will probably never advance much beyond that of a Swiss two-year-old. But even though I don't like feeling like a two-year old all the time, I'm sort of enjoying the part about being a kid. Especially when the sun shines on a stretch of actual flat land and I can pretend for a moment that I'm effortlessly racing through my own Alpine playground.