

🎵 Cos he's a dedicated follower of functionality, oh yes he is, oh yes he is, oh yes he is, oh yes he is 🎵

When it comes to ski clothing, functionality should over-ride fashion all the time (although if you can combine the two, and afford the cost, then go for it!). This article therefore looks at appropriate clothing for on-snow skiing and offers some thoughts on how to buy what's most important. We'll look at touring, training and racing in this article, but limited to on-track skiing.

The three primary assets of ski clothing are Wee Willie Winky, or the three W's, warmth, water resistance and wicking (bet you won't forget that analogy in a hurry!). We will consider three layers: thermal underwear, mid-wear and outer layer, and we'll also look briefly at hats, gloves and a few essential accessories.

It is rare that snow skiing can be done with just one layer (and you spot anyone very quickly who's out on the tracks in just their thermal underwear), and three layers is probably the baseline, but you can easily adjust the number of layers by adding or removing, in particular, underwear and mid-wear. You might also find that you need a different number of layers for your legs (where I rarely have more than two) and upper body (where I might have four or five).

Thermal underwear

Underwear is the basis of all ensembles, and the two key factors are warmth and wicking. Thermal underwear doesn't have to be expensive (£10-£30) but it does have to be good. It needs to wick sweat away from your skin so that you don't feel damp or get cold when you stop, it should be two-piece and the top should be long enough to fit well over the bottoms, to prevent exposing the lower back. Forget cotton T-shirts, which will simply make you damp! For men, in very cold weather, a pair of thermal boxers will help protect that delicate area.

There are many different materials: merino wool/nylon (pricey), silk (also pricey), polyester or polyester/spandex (budget), merino wool (mid-range) and Damart (now Damartex) Thermolactyl, which is mainly acrylic. If you buy ski-specific underwear, it will likely be more expensive, and I'm not convinced that it's any better. If you do go for Damart, be careful how you wash it, though. I once washed a pair of long johns at too high a temperature, and they shrank to the size that would just about fit an Action Man. Luckily I lied and said that my Mum had washed them and she knew what she was doing, so they gave me a replacement pair free of charge!

Mid-layer

There are various things which can be used as mid-layers: a second set of thermal underwear (make sure it isn't tighter than the first layer), lightweight running tights for the legs (if going for three layers) or bottoms (if going for two), a cycle top for the upper body, etc. Again, none of these need to be expensive; typical cycling tops start at about £20. Wicking is not so important, but pockets can be (nothing worse, and I can attest to this happening, than for the car or apartment keys to pop out of your coat pocket and disappear into the snow!). Again, you can buy ski-specific mid layers, but these are often more expensive. If planning to tour or train in cold conditions, a turtle-neck top can be a very worthwhile buy.



Thermal underwear



Turtleneck mid-layer



Running bottoms

Top layer

We have a clear difference here between touring/training and racing, and we can be talking very serious money! For serious racing we're looking at lightweight, two-piece lycra racing suits, although running tights and lightweight running or cycling top are perfectly viable alternatives. For touring or training it's some sort of coat/jacket and thicker trousers for the legs. Water resistance is probably the key characteristic, but not water tightness; we don't want your underwear to wick away all that sweat, only to have it 'blocked' by a non-breathable jacket.



Two-piece race suit



Jacket & over-trousers



Ladies cycle top

Normal winter coats or padded jackets will usually be too warm; go for something lighter and add mid-layers if needed to provide more warmth. A full-length zip is important; this can be lowered when getting warm (e.g. going uphill), and a few zipped inner and outer pockets are important, for e.g. handkerchiefs outside and wallet/money inside. Outerwear is the one area where vast amounts of money can be saved by buying last year's model; this year's fashion can be costing you £70-£300, last year's might easily be half of this or even cheaper. The outer layer, though, is worth taking some time over; I bought a Bjorn Dahlie jacket and trousers for £40 in December 2004, and they are still serving me very well today. For training, a cycling jacket can be a good, cheap, alternative.

Hat, gloves and accessories

It is a myth, according to the BBC's QI elves, that we lose more heat through our heads than through any other parts of the body. That said, keeping the head, and especially the ears, warm is important, and it's well worth taking time and having various options for different temperatures, to get this right.

At coldest temperatures, a balaclava, long enough to tuck into your coat, is effective, and I have balaclavas which range from thick (only used once, when it was -33 °C!) to thin, and these are worn underneath a hat (again available in different thicknesses). In between comes the buff, an extremely useful and adaptable item which can be worn around the neck or pulled up over the ears and head and worn under a hat. For hats themselves, it's worth considering at least one with ear protection and a range of thicknesses and therefore warmth.



Hat with ear protection



Lycra hat for racing



**LRNSC buff, a snip at
£7.99 + P&P**

Gloves, too, are important and can be expensive! Forget thick Alpine gloves, which don't allow you to hold the poles correctly, and forget normal woollen gloves, too (which will quickly wear out); we're talking here about relatively lightweight, flexible but durable gloves designed specifically for cross-country skiing (sometimes Decathlon stock suitable, non-XC-specific, gloves which are reasonably-priced (other sportswear stores are available)).

Three further bits of advice might be helpful here.

1. Gloves can be sold as “small”, “medium”, “large”, etc., but this doesn’t mean that all gloves in a particular category will be the same (and a snug fit here is important). Gloves are sometimes also sold by size, 7, 8, 9 etc. and these do not vary. So if you can find your size, you will get a much better fit than by the more general categorisation.
2. Look for the design of the glove between the thumb and the body. This is where the greatest wear will occur, so there should be a continuous piece of material of sufficient durability (not a seam or thin, weak, material) in this area.
3. It’s worth having several pairs of gloves, both of exactly the same design (to allow one pair to dry while you’re out skiing wearing the second pair) and of different design to respond to different temperatures (thin when it’s warm, through to lobster (two fingers together) or mittens (all fingers together) for very cold conditions).



Good-quality mid-range gloves with thumb-joint strengthening



Heavier-weight gloves for colder conditions



Mitts for the coldest conditions

As far as ‘accessories’ are concerned, probably the two most important are a rucksack (although not for racing) and a drinks bottle if you’re out for any length of time. The rucksack gives you great ‘flexibility’ as far as clothing is concerned; you can carry spare layers or remove layers as conditions change, and you can also carry food, drink, spare waxes, mobile phone, etc. It follows, though, that the rucksack should be as light as possible to hold everything you want to put into it, and there’s little point in carrying things you are never likely to use or having a huge, mountaineering rucksack which is only ever a quarter full.

A drinks bottle, in a belt or in the rucksack, is important for any trip over about an hour. This is not, strictly speaking, “clothing”, but even mild dehydration can lead to significant loss of performance (watch skiers in races above an hour or so and they’re almost all drinking roughly every 20 minutes). It can be a struggle to get home after dehydration has set in if you still have a long way to go!

The final accessory is eye protection (or a visor), and eye protection can serve three different purposes: protection from sunburn to the eyes, which is horrible; protection against snow, rain or wind getting into the eyes (again not pleasant – a visor can help protect against rain and snow without affecting visibility); and ‘visibility’ in tricky light conditions (e.g. with the sun in your eyes, in ‘flat’ light conditions or when your eye protection fogs up or is covered with rain or snow), when you might have difficulty seeing the track.

Putting it all together

Only you can decide for yourself whether you’re a ‘radiator’ or a ‘lizard’, i.e. what *you* need to wear to keep yourself warm and comfortable throughout your skiing trip, and this decision can only be reached by personal experience, not when standing in a shop clutching your wallet! But the first rule, before splashing out vast amounts of cash on the best-available kit, is to know what sort of skiing you’re likely to do, and when. That thin racing suit might look cool in the shop, and it becomes very cool when it’s -5 °C and you’re standing stock-still waiting for the queue in the first loppet you ever do to move forwards!

There are a lot of factors to consider as to what is appropriate for any particular activity, even after you’ve decided what, in general, is appropriate for you. Being too cold is miserable and potentially dangerous, especially if it leads to frost nip or even frost bite, but being too hot (with all that sweating and steaming up of eyewear) isn’t much fun, either.

Factors to be taken into account include:

- length of activity,
- number of stops (e.g. skiing alone or in a group),
- difficulty of terrain,
- level of activity (e.g. race pace or slow tour), and
- weather conditions (not only temperature but potential wind chill and/or the effects of snow or rain) and likely changes in weather conditions.

There are a couple of additional simple ‘rules’ which will help you here: if you’re feeling warm before you start the activity, there’s a good chance that you will overheat once you do start – you should be ‘comfortably cool’ before you start skiing. Be punctual and prepared if skiing with others – there’s nothing worse than you being comfortably cool and then having to wait for your companions to get themselves sorted out (by which time you’re cold)!

A rucksack gives you a lot of flexibility while you're learning what works for you in what circumstances. But, with experience gained, learned, remembered and then put into practice, there's no reason why you shouldn't be able to ski comfortably for as long as you want, or at least comfortably all morning and then again comfortably all afternoon!

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Addendum

If you're looking for sports eyewear, particularly prescription glasses or goggles, [Rx Sport](#) is an online supplier which has a good selection and lots of advice on their website.