



Pippa Middleton sport&social

Who needs the slopes to train? A river path will do...

Inspired by Sochi, I'm dreaming of snow – and training with roller-skis on the unforgiving Berkshire tarmac is a pretty good preparation for the real thing

Like millions of people, I've been glued to the Sochi Winter Olympics. I love snow sports but this year I'm yet to hit the slopes. Instead, I'm making do with the next best thing when there is no snow – roller-skiing. My brother James and I are enthusiastic fans.

The idea is that you learn the basic techniques of cross-country skiing on tarmac instead of snow. In fact, it is how professional Nordic skiers train in the summer. You wear small blades (roller skis), about half a metre long with a wheel at each end, which are designed to effectively mimic the technique of langlauffing (cross-country skiing). The ski poles you propel yourself along with are about the height of your armpit.

I got into roller-skiing two and a half years ago when James, some friends and I signed up for the Vasaloppet, the longest and largest cross-country ski race in the world. It takes place annually in Sweden, involves 16,000 competitors and is a whopping 56 miles long. It was an ambitious venture given that I'd never tried cross-country skiing before.

My salvation came in the form of our Russian coach, Ekaterina Rachel, an U16 North West Russian Regional Champion and a trainer with the British Nordic Ski Team. For four months in the run up to the race in March 2012 we trained on the banks of Dorney Lake in Berkshire, the London 2012 rowing venue. Katya took no prisoners as we Bambi-like Brits got to grips with our oversized poles and the odd contraptions on our feet. She mocked us relentlessly over our lack of balance, core body strength and co-ordination while she took us through the basic roller-ski techniques step by step.

In one of our first drills, she got us to stand with our feet together, holding our poles in each hand and then lobbing them as far as we could in a parallel motion, using our body weight as the driving force. This was to familiarise us with the driving forward movement required on cross-country skis. Other exercises for novices included wearing one ski and using the other foot to skate along (whilst keeping your head up to aid balance and posture) to get us used to the feeling of gliding. We had to work on keeping our hips facing forwards and in line with knees and toes – crucial for efficient skiing.

We learnt the classic cross-country ski style we'd need in the Vasaloppet. In this, the skis remain parallel as you slide one leg forward after another (on the snow, you follow parallel tracks cut by a snow machine). The roller ski wheels have a clutch mechanism that only allows forward rotation, so instead of sliding backwards you use the grip to kick off and glide forwards.

You can vary this technique according to the terrain or the speed required. When going uphill you need the basic diagonal stride: a similar arm and leg movement to walking. To maintain speed on the flat or gentle downhill, you use the double pole kick: a single kick followed by a double pole push. To move fastest, up small hills, over flat terrain or when going downhill, you keep your legs together and use a double pole push.

Two weeks after the Vasaloppet, I took part in the 26.2 mile Engadin ski marathon in St Moritz, Switzerland, which attracts around 12,000 competitors. For this I had to use a different technique, one that was more akin to ice-skating. Introduced to the sport in the 1980s, it involves skiing from side to side so you rise and fall with the motion of your skis.

When learning this back at Dorney Lake the clutch mechanism was removed from our rollers, freeing our wheels to run both forwards and backwards. The skating method is faster than the classic style and you will see it used by competitors in the Sochi Olympic Biathlon (cross-country skiing and rifle shooting). Neither technique is easy to pick up, however, and I still have scars from my falls on Dorney's hard paths.

One of the major difficulties in learning to roller-ski is that there are no brakes. Many was the time during training when I'd launch myself



Pippa's Picks 5 (skiing-related) to try...

1. Roll with it: [Rollerski.co.uk](http://rollerski.co.uk) is a great website for cross-country skiing enthusiasts. It's also the only club in London that runs weekly lessons for beginners as well as intermediate and advance instruction.

2. Kit: Craft (Swedish) and Swix (Norwegian) make brilliant performance-enhancing equipment and I also like Odlo's Norwegian clothing and thermals. craft.se; swixsport.com; odlo.com

3. Tunes: an iPod Nano loaded with upbeat songs picks me up when I'm exhausted and gets me into a good rhythm when training. My current favourites are *Greyhound* by Swedish House Mafia, *The Bongo Song* by Safri Duo and *White Noise* by Disclosure.

4. Support: cheer on our British Nordic Ski Team as they face their last few events out in Sochi via their Facebook page. facebook.com/Britishnordic

5. Give: snow hounds will love Murray Ward's silver ski boot and helmet cufflinks and necklaces. murrayward.com

onto the nearby grass in an attempt to stop myself speeding towards a mother with a pram or a dog walker. I learned to avoid steep downhills, cracked tarmac and potholes and never to stop abruptly if I could help it. When you are first learning to roller-ski, knee and elbow pads plus a helmet are essential.

Uphills aren't the easiest, either, and you need really good upper body strength to build the momentum to propel yourself. But when at last you get the chance to advance from tarmac onto snow, it's a lot more enjoyable. There's something wonderfully therapeutic and peaceful about gracefully (or not) gliding and sliding through the mountains under the shade of pine trees.

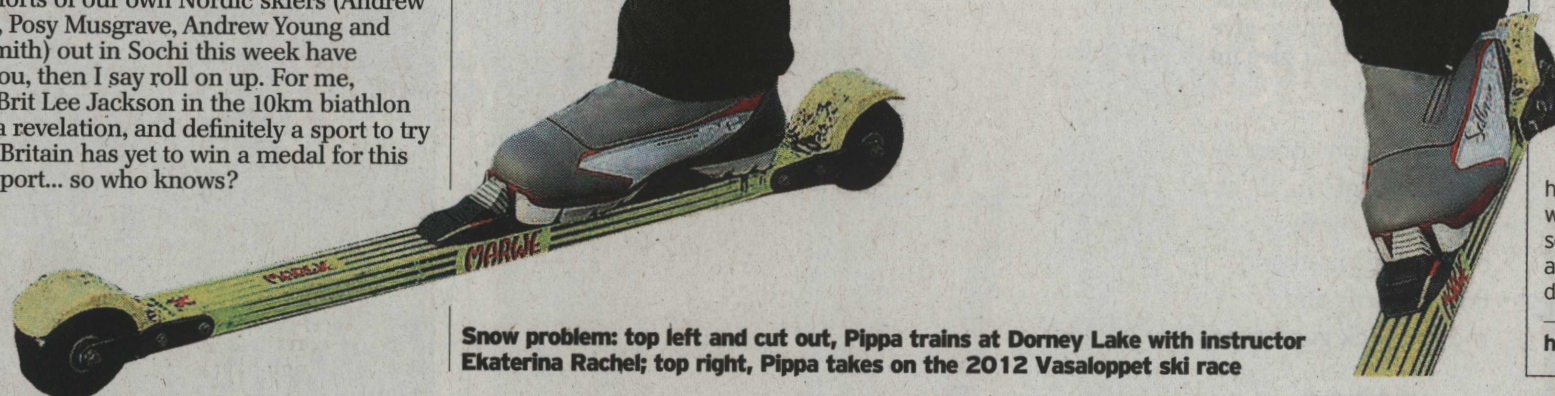
In a race, however, it is survival of the fittest. Skinny cross-country skis, which measure from 190 to 210cm long, are just 4.5cm wide, and weigh around 1kg – basically it's like skiing on a pair of elongated rulers, which you need to handle boldly if you want to be in with a chance of a good place.

There are two major challenges during a race, and the first is overtaking: using the classic technique you must sidestep from one set of grooved tracks to another and ditto if someone falls over in front of you, that or fall over yourself to avoid hitting them.

The second challenge is the steep downhill slopes. I count myself a proficient and brave downhill skier, but when it comes to cross-country downhill, on skis that have no edge, it's truly terrifying.

Don't let this put you off roller-skiing, though. Felicity Bertram, who took part in the 2011 British Cross-Country Ski Championships and is now an instructor, wants more people to consider the sport. "It is great for anyone aged 3–73 or even older," she says. The health benefits are also a plus: roller-skiing is low-impact on the joints and engages your whole body, giving you a better workout than either running or cycling. It has all the benefits of cross-country skiing on snow, which is well-known for being one of the best aerobic workouts there is, burning over 500 calories per hour.

If the efforts of our own Nordic skiers (Andrew Musgrave, Posy Musgrave, Andrew Young and Callum Smith) out in Sochi this week have inspired you, then I say roll on up. For me, watching Brit Lee Jackson in the 10km biathlon has been a revelation, and definitely a sport to try next year. Britain has yet to win a medal for this Olympic sport... so who knows?



Snow problem: top left and cut out, Pippa trains at Dorney Lake with instructor Ekaterina Rachel; top right, Pippa takes on the 2012 Vasaloppet ski race

CLARA MOLDEN; AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Energy Hit Recipe

Bircher Muesli

This is one of my favourite breakfasts before a cross-country ski training session. It's packed with energy-giving oats and dried fruits, and it always reminds me of skiing breakfasts when I was little. This gluten-free recipe is by Natasha Corrett of the brilliant Honestly Healthy blog and cookbooks.

Serves 3

Ingredients

160g gluten-free rolled oats
1/2 tsp ground cinnamon
20g coconut shavings
2 tbsp sunflower seeds
40g raisins (or substitute chopped dried figs, dates or apricots)
480ml warm water

Method

- Mix all the dry ingredients together in a bowl.
- Simply add the warm water to the dry ingredients and give the mixture another good stir. Leave to soak for a couple of hours or overnight in the fridge.
- If it's really sticky after 2 hours, add a splash of extra water to loosen up the muesli; some oats are super-absorbent and others aren't, so it'll depend on the type you use.

honestlyhealthyfood.com

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