

Parkinson's and the snow plough

Andrew and I first skied together as a young couple in Le Mont-Dore in 1971. And once we had our two children, we skied as a family. We skied in the Trois Vallées – Méribel, Val Thorens, Les Menuires. We skied in Val d'Isère and Courchevel. We skied in Colorado too – Arapahoe, Breckenridge, Keystone, Vail.

The most fun for Andrew was hammering down the bumpy mogul fields in the black runs. Nine years ago we were in Tignes with our now-grown children and their children. We were getting off the ski lift at the top of a red run, a routine manoeuvre – tilt the ski tips up, push off. Inexplicably, Andrew's reaction time was slow. He didn't push away fast enough, and the chair swung around and hit him on the side of the head. He recovered and made it down the hill, but that night I noticed for the first time the tremor in his jaw.

That year he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, and he decided skiing was no longer for him. Nine years later he now takes levodopa and other medication on a regular daily schedule. He experiences tremors mainly down his left leg, and his left hand is weakened to the point where he has very little grip. But he has never stopped talking about skiing, and how much he loves it.

Last autumn I came across the charity Ski2Freedom (<http://ski2freedom.com/en>). They encourage Parkinson's sufferers to stay active and go skiing. They can suggest good resorts, hotels and packages, as well as useful contacts in the Ecole de Ski Française (ESF). So we did it! We booked a week at Chinaillon in the Grand Bornand area of the Haute Savoie. We also booked two hours a day with an ESF ski instructor. I insisted on this support, as I wasn't confident that I could handle potential difficulties on my own.

The prospect of going skiing again lifted Andrew's morale and energised us both. With three months to go, we booked a Personal Trainer at our gym. Every day we did squats, lunges and weight lifting. We also started running. We completed the NHS 'Couch to 5K' (<https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/c25k/Pages/get-running-with-couch-to-5k.aspx>). This downloadable app takes you through a 9-week programme. Each week you run a bit longer. At the end of the 9 weeks you should be able to run 5 kilometres. Andrew had mostly lost sensation in his left foot, but in week 5, he noticed that sensation was coming back. His walking and balance started to improve. The running also helped calm his 'restless leg'.

Finally the day arrived and we were actually in 'Le Grand Bo', snowy mountains gleaming in the sunshine. We hired skis, boots and poles. Fitting the boots was a challenge. They are designed to fit snugly – you have to push hard to get your foot in, and snapping the buckles shut is a challenge even if you have strong hands. But Andrew did manage this on his own, every day. It just took longer and needed patience. We wished we'd thought about the poles beforehand. The only ones available for hire were the standard type with a canvas strap you slip your hand through to hold the handle. With his weak grip, these were clumsy to get on and off. The ones with a curved solid frame instead of a canvas loop would have been more manageable (<https://www.scott-sports.com/gb/en/product/scott-strapless-s-ski-pole>).

Day 1 We met Willy, our ESF instructor. Safety is the priority: that means the student must be able to stop, and that means able to do the snow plough – ski tips together, heels wide in a 'V' shape, balanced equally on both skis. You don't go anywhere fast, but you stay in control. Willy had Andrew doing the snow plough over and over. I did snow plough too, hips forward, shins pressed against the front of my boots, moving slowly down the hill. I felt like the masthead of a ship. We wished we'd thought to bring a knapsack to put water in. Andrew can't get his meds down without it. Our pockets weren't big

enough to hold the standard plastic bottles. Willy obligingly sped off to a hillside bistro and came back with a glassful. That first session left Andrew exhausted, and he slept all afternoon.

Day 2 We met Willy, took the ski lift up an easy green run and we did more snow plough. Toward the end of the two hour session Andrew collapsed with debilitating tremors in both legs. He lost all sensation in his legs and couldn't move at all. The mountain rescue service came and took him down the hill in a snow mobile. I was glad we had paid for insurance on the ski passes, as there was no extra charge. Willy suggested that the next day we ski tandem so he could give us a tour of the area. A tandem is like a giant cradle on skis. The passenger gets strapped in and the other person wears the skis and 'drives' with handles. Imagine skiing down a hill pushing a shopping trolley. Andrew nearly said no to this, he didn't want to be treated like an invalid, but then he agreed. He felt his skiing experiment was a failure.

Day 3 Willy arrived with the tandem. Andrew was tucked up in the sleeping bag and strapped in, and off we went. The ski lift operator at the bottom slowed the lift down so the tandem could be slotted onto the seat in the middle, Willy on one side, me on the other. The operator at the top slowed it down again – Willy had to push the tandem off, then run like crazy and catch it to click himself into the skis. They raced me down the mountain. It was just the best fun. I rediscovered my own skiing; all those weeks in the gym were well worth it.

We went up again in another direction, way high up where we could see Mont Blanc in the distance. Andrew was surprised to find that he was experiencing all the sensations of skiing. He could feel every turn and bump, all the weight shifts and balances. He joked that he was skiing but with someone else doing the work.

That afternoon he realised that the problem wasn't his muscles – his calves and thighs were fine after all that time in the gym. The problem was the snow plough, which put constant pressure on his trembling leg with no respite. Normally as you do turns, you lean on one leg, then the other. The tandem skiing reminded him of this. He also remembered a different way to do stops – the side slip.

Day 4 We agreed that two hours was perhaps overambitious and scheduled a one-hour session. Andrew explained to Willy that his left side was weaker. Somehow it hadn't occurred to us to tell him this before. Andrew also demonstrated that he could stop himself with the side slip technique. We hadn't said that Andrew used to ski a lot.

After that, Willy didn't make him do any more snow ploughing. They worked on his parallel turns, shifting the weight from one leg to the other. His left leg held up just fine when it wasn't being put under constant pressure.

Days 5 and 6 Andrew's confidence came back as his turns steadily improved. We still only skied for an hour each morning. The first day we walked the 100 metres from our hotel downhill to the ski lift. This doesn't sound like much, but it was hard work walking in ski boots, carrying skis and poles, balancing on slippery patches of ice along the way. The rest of the week we conserved energy by taking the free ski bus to the lift. We also discovered too late that we could have hired equipment from a shop that provided a free locker service, right at the base of the lift. In the afternoon we slept, went for walks, hung out in the sunshine, ate *tartiflette*, drank mulled wine.

Back home now, we've discovered running and want to continue. We've joined our local Saturday morning parkrun (<http://www.parkrun.org.uk/>). We plan to practice our skiing in one of the indoor snowdomes in the London area, Milton Keynes (<https://www.snozoneuk.com/>) or Hemel Hempstead (<https://www.thesnowcentre.com/>). And as for next winter? Hey! Ski slopes here we come.