

Skiing Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Andrea Przybysz** (March 7, 2024)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

When I'm not practicing law, I love to ski. I also love to daydream about skiing, talk about skiing, teach people to ski, plan ski trips and buy ski gear.

I really love to buy ski gear. But I love to ski even more.

Growing up, the only thing that could get me out of bed before 10 a.m. was a ski trip. But I grew up in southeastern Michigan, which meant that such a trip would almost certainly involve a frigid outing to an old landfill or a rolling golf course converted into a slope of sorts.



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While not under the most ideal conditions, I learned to ski just fine. And, to this day, some of my friends lovingly refer to me as the best garbage-dump skier they've ever seen. More importantly, though, I learned that whoever is having the most fun is winning.

Skiing, with its ever-changing slopes, may seem worlds apart from the meticulous, detail-oriented world of law. But beneath the surface, the two pursuits share common threads that intertwine to shape a better lawyer out of the ski enthusiast. That's because skiing is as much about understanding the people you're skiing with and adapting to their different skill levels as it is about mastering technique.

As a young associate, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to ski Winter Park, Colorado, with a partner in the firm's office in the state. A partner visiting from Cleveland joined us. But when, at the last minute, the Colorado-based partner bailed, I was left alone to show our guest around the mountain.

Since he seemed to be having a blast, and, as I mentioned, I actually enjoy teaching people to ski, the day went mostly fine until I could see him starting to tire. And not only was he tiring, he was starting to fall. Not small, minor blips but spectacular yard sales with his gear and skis scattered across the run.

Unsure what to do and unwilling to return to the office with the baggage of being the associate on the scene when a partner broke his legs, I forced a hot chocolate break and was able to convince him that our day was over because, unfortunately, I was too tired to continue.

Here, it was important for me to assess the situation, manage expectations and make the decision on the fly to prioritize safety over fun without offending my boss. That kind of decision making translates directly to client services and the courtroom, where lawyers

must often navigate unexpected twists while working to ensure the best outcomes and maintaining relationships.

Through other experiences, I've seen time and again that skiing, whether it be a brief lift ride or a group ski, offers ample opportunities for networking and relationship-building — skills essential for any successful lawyer.

Whether striking up conversations on chairlifts or bonding over shared experiences on the slopes, skiers frequently find themselves connecting with individuals from diverse backgrounds and professions. For me, these chance encounters have led to valuable connections and insights that enrich both our personal and professional lives.

For example, around the same time that I took that partner skiing, my spouse — who is now a very good skier — learned to ski. And, by many accounts, our first day out together was tragic for reasons beyond my making, but for which I, of course, was blamed.

The day started out well enough, with both my and my brother's spouses in lessons. We agreed to meet at the top of the gondola for drinks at the end of the day. But winds picked up and shut the gondola down such that my family was stuck at the top of the mountain having to ski down, and I was stuck in the bar at the base of the hill.

It took my brother nearly three hours to figure out how to ski two beginners down the mountain. During that window of time, while my family repeatedly hung up on me instead of updating me on their progress (or lack of it), I managed to hit it off with two part-time ski instructors and — coincidentally — patent attorneys, with whom I remain friends to this day. So, by my account, despite some cold shoulders, it was a blast.

Skiing also embodies the spirit of exploration and adventure — a mindset that complements the dynamic nature of legal practice. For me, this spirit of adventure extends beyond the slopes and encourages me to seek out new experiences and challenges that enrich my professional life. It has also taught me when you should take a leap of faith and when to get out while you still can.

When my family moved from Colorado to Illinois in 2016, we watched a handful of old Warren Miller movies, and from those movies, we made a bucket list of ski destinations to visit while away from the mountains. So far, outside of the U.S., we've made it to Whistler, Revelstoke and Banff in Canada; Nagano and Hakuba in Japan; and Chamonix in France. Although the mountain cuisine has more than made up for the lack of snowfall on those trips, they weren't always rosy.

The first day I skied Whistler, it literally felt like one of those beautiful old movies. It was sunny and warm, and the views were otherworldly.

There were also things I hadn't noticed before while skiing — signs that read "be prepared to camp" and that nearly everyone was carrying a whistle. While I hadn't planned to ski a second day, the first one inspired me so much that I returned on my own. But that second day was different — damp and foggy — and it slowly became so foggy that I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.

Without anyone around, I skied the same line for hours trying to figure out where the right turnoff was to get back to the base. In those long hours, I came to understand the signage and the whistles. After I left voicemails for my family telling them I loved them and anticipating that I'd have to sleep outside, I found another skier. Luckily, he was a local

wearing a bright yellow jacket and volunteered to ski me down one turn at a time. I had no option but to stay close.

Despite that the challenges on the slope — a too-steep run, moguls or, yes, even fog — can be physically and mentally demanding, each completed adventure fuels my passion for fun, exploration and discovery. Similarly, in the legal realm, embracing challenges with a spirit of adventure allows lawyers to push boundaries, expand their capabilities and ultimately excel in their careers.

Wishing you all overnight storms and bluebird days.

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