



M E T H O D

Winter. That special time of year when six-pack abs turn to gallon-jug abs and sculpted shoulders go south with New Year's resolutions. Curling up by the hearth fire may be good for your love life but it's not going to do your physique any good. Time to pour out the last of the eggnog and find a way to beat the mid-winter inertia blues. Cross-country skiing may be just the solution. Less expensive than downhill, cross-country is a great activity on trips as well as at home (if you live in the northern climes). It is a challenging cardiovascular and muscular workout as well.

In addition to the Zen-like quiet beauty of cross-country skiing, you'll also discover it's one of the few forms of cardiovascular exercise that really does work your upper as well as lower body. Much of the forward momentum of cross-country skiing is generated with the poles. Raising the poles requires flexion of the shoulder joint. Propelling oneself forward with the aid of the poles requires powerful extension of the shoulder. This brings into play not only the deltoid muscles but the latissimus dorsi and the teres group of the back. There is even some involvement by the triceps muscles.

The lower body component of skiing consists largely in hip flexion and extension. Pushing the skis forward works the hip flexor group including, at least partially, the quadriceps, which make up the front of the thigh. The more powerful movers in this workout, which push you forward, are the hip extensors: the hamstrings and the gluteal group (the butt muscles).

To get your muscles ready for cross-country skiing you might want to try these simple exercises. Not only will you have greater power and endurance but you'll find you have better balance and stability, helping to reduce the chances of injury. Start this strengthening routine a couple weeks before your skiing trip. After a good warm-up of about five minutes of sustained activity do two or three sets of each exercise. As always, follow your workout with some stretching.

To strengthen your hip flexors do lying leg raises. Lie on your back with your hands tucked just under your butt and lift your legs 12-18 inches above the floor. Alternate the legs so as one is going up the other is coming down and don't let them touch the ground. If this is too easy try adding ankle weights. The goal here is not maximal strength but endurance so don't add a lot of weight, rather go for high repetitions.

The stiff-leg deadlift is a very effective, though advanced, exercise for the hamstrings and the gluteals. Beginners and people with low back problems or extreme inflexibility in the hamstrings should avoid this one. Stand with feet about shoulder width apart and a light weight in hands. Set a natural arch in your back (the lower back should be arched comfortably and held that way throughout the exercise). By bending at the hips (not the waist) slowly lower the weight to about knee level then extend back up to a natural standing position. Your knees should be very slightly flexed but should then remain fixed—no motion here at the knee during the exercise. Be very careful that your lower back never rounds throughout the movement but remains arched.

To bring your quadriceps (front of the thigh) muscles up to speed use the leg extension machine at the gym. A leg press machine would be great as well. Better quadriceps strength will give you better thrusting power (easy there, tiger) and reduce the chances of knee injury.

Get your upper body in shape, too, to help power-up your skiing or just to fight the winter sag. Front shoulder raises closely approximate the act of raising the ski poles. Take light weights in each hand and, with arms straight, raise them to shoulder height or just above. Alternate the arms so that as one arm is going down the other is going up. Use light weight and go for high repetitions.

To help propel yourself forward with the poles you'll need strong back muscles—specifically the lats. Rely mainly on lat pull-downs and rowing motions (either with dumbbells or a rowing machine) at your gym. Here you'll want to go a little heavier and, consequently, do fewer repetitions. The goal here is as much for power in the back muscles as for endurance.

This workout might be just enough to fight off the dreaded mid-winter inertia blues. And with these exercises mastered you'll take your skiing to a new level—as well as all your endeavors of a physical nature. Whether you're going off the beaten trail or beating a trail back to your cozy cabin in the woods you'll be glad you took the time to get in shape for skiing, and so will your skiing partner.

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