

STOP STRAVA-ING YOUR BACKCOUNTRY LINES

by Megan Michelson

If you use Strava, you know this feeling: You're sipping your morning coffee and checking the avy report when you absentmindedly open the app and see that a friend has already logged 2,500 vertical feet before sunrise. Sure, all social media is toxic, but Strava might be the worst. Nothing makes you feel more inadequate and left out than seeing that your friends are out recreating together without you.

Hear me out. I'm not anti-Strava because it's FOMO inducing (although it is). I regularly use Strava to track and record trail runs and mountain bike rides in the summer and Nordic skiing in the winter. On a good day, I'm inspired by how active my friends are, and the app can motivate me to push myself to go farther or faster. But I'm a firm believer we shouldn't use Strava in backcountry skiing.

For activities like running or cycling, Strava has its place, since pace and distance can be an integral part of those experiences, especially if you're training for a big objective or an upcoming race. But if you're out backcountry skiing to set a record pace to the summit or log more vert than the other guy, I feel like you're missing the point. And, yeah, maybe you're training for a big backcountry traverse or skimo race and Strava is tracking your tours, but I would argue you might want to think otherwise or make those entries private. Worst case, those go-bigger intentions could interfere with safe decision-making and terrain choices for you and your followers.

For example, if someone posted a backcountry slope they skied earlier that day: Does that mean it's safe for you to ski now? (You know this already, but the answer is a clear no.) There are enough human factors at play in choosing appropriate terrain to ski in the backcountry. The influence of a fitness-tracking app should not be among them.

I go backcountry skiing to be outside, to be with friends and to ski untracked snow. Exercise is certainly a positive side effect of a day of touring, but it is never my main objective. I need to be willing to turn around at the first sign of a red flag—like instability in the snowpack, incoming weather or a group member who's



not feeling well—without my desire for a workout getting in the way of smart decision-making. Using Strava while backcountry skiing makes it seem like the whole point of the experience is to reach a destination, be it a summit or a cool line. Maybe that's what you're in it for. If that's the case, I will probably unfollow you.

I also love backcountry skiing for the exploration. You don't have to follow a set skin-track. You can make your own choices. You can ski whatever line down the mountain looks best to you. It's a blank canvas, and you're the artist. But Strava

shows me exactly where someone else climbed and what they skied. It takes some of the mystery out of finding your own zone.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all about swapping information among backcountry partners I know and trust—I'm not advocating for gatekeeping or keeping stashes private for a select few. I think sharing about backcountry zones and current snow and avalanche conditions is in everyone's best interest. But Strava doesn't share vital information. It tells me how many miles you skied in a certain area and how much elevation you climbed in exactly how much time. Not helpful.

I have one friend who regularly posts her backcountry tours to Strava. Sometimes, they're titled simply, "Afternoon workout," making the backcountry her outdoor gym. Occasionally, she'll offer a slice of information: "North facing aspect was great" or "Snow was awful." If I was planning to head into the same area, I'd be thankful for those tiny slivers of beta.

So, here's what I propose. If you insist on using Strava to track your backcountry ski laps, so be it. At the very least though, share some useful information while you're busy piling up vert. Give us a conditions report: How was the snow? Any signs of instability? Post a photo or write a quick blurb on what you saw and then it'll actually be useful—not just FOMO-inducing—to the rest of us.

Megan Michelson is a writer, backcountry skier and trail runner based in Tahoe City, California. And, yes, she knows she could just quit Strava and stop complaining about other people using it the "wrong" way. But she likes looking at her friends' stats while drinking coffee far too much.