

## Investing in roller skis? Warning, roller skis can go down as well as up!

Cross-country skiing is a sport which, in order to improve, requires investment in equipment. If you're happy to have one ski holiday a year, or one roller ski session every two weeks or so, using hired equipment, that's fine and there's a lot of fun to be had by doing so. But if you wish to improve your technique and balance, and to be able to ski independently, then at some stage you are going to need to buy equipment and, in the UK, this means roller skis; sadly, this is where things can become tricky!

This article is intended mainly for improving skiers who have already decided that roller skiing is for them (equipment is too expensive to buy before reaching this point) and are wanting to buy their first roller skis. It goes through the various points to consider but, ultimately, everyone needs to make their own decisions based on the factors discussed. The article concentrates mainly on roller skis, but with some brief consideration of boots as well; it doesn't consider off-road or multi-terrain rollers.

### ***Classic, skate or combi roller skis?***

Let's start with the hardest question first, shall we 😊? Roller skis are either specific for classic, specific for skate, or 'combi' which means in principle that they're suitable for either. Typical examples of these three types are below:



It can immediately be seen that classic rollers are longer, they have soft rubber wheels and they have a ratchet to prevent them from rolling backwards. The skate rollers are shorter, have thinner, harder urethane wheels and no ratchet. The combi rollers are the same length as the skates, their wheels are between classics and skates in terms of hardness, and they have ratchets.

Because they have no ratchets, it is not possible to classic ski on skate rollers, because there's no ratchet to push against (actually it is possible, but that's the subject of another article!). Skating is *possible* on classic skis but if this is done for any length of time, the soft rubber wheels will soon wear out; a century ago,

I did a 30 km skate race at Eelmoor near Fleet on Swenor combi skis with soft rubber wheels, and I watched the wheels *disappear* as the race went on! The Marwe combi skis shown above are reasonable for both skate and classic; the wheels do not wear out rapidly, which is good. But they are rather slow for skating to be representative of being on snow and, especially for beginners who are developing their skate technique, the ratchet can be used as a 'cheat' to get forwards motion. Combis are perhaps better for classic than skate but, because of their short length, they are not very representative of snow skiing.

So much for performance aspects; what about price? I hear you say. Ah yes, good point! There can be no doubt that, to progress fully in skiing, one pair each of classic and skate skis are needed, but this will roughly double the investment! The three pairs shown above (which are amongst the best on the market) will cost, respectively and with bindings attached, £290, £330 and £370, although there are wide ranges of prices depending on manufacturer and model (see below). Set against this, though, is that the wheels will last for many years, and the roller skis themselves for even longer so, if we assume 10 years (they should last much longer but this depends on use), we're looking at just £62 a year if you have two pairs versus £37 a pair for combis. But let's now look at some other relevant factors.

### ***Wheel speed, width and type***

Beginners/improvers are sometimes tempted to believe that slower wheels are better (less scary) and that wider wheels are more stable than narrower ones. There is some truth in this, but it's a bit more complicated than that! You're not going anywhere near racing rollers, because these are indeed too fast to develop good technique. Equally, though, you don't want wheels so slow that they don't roll reasonably. As a simple rule of thumb, once you've chosen the right pair of roller skis, go with whatever the default wheels are.

The wider, softer wheels of classic skis will generally feel more stable than thinner, harder skate wheels. When looking at skate or combi rollers, however, there's another factor, known as the 'castor effect', to consider.



**Start skate or combi**



**Marwe skate**

The Start rollers, with wider wheels, have their axle in line with the body, whereas the Marwe rollers have the axle slightly *above* the level of the bar. Because of this, the Marwe rollers should be more stable than the Starts.

Type of wheel can be divided into *soft (rubber)* or *hard (urethane)*. This has an effect on both speed and wear (harder wheels last longer). Classic rollers and combi rollers should in preference have rubber wheels because, otherwise, they are too fast. On combis, the rubber should be harder than on classic rollers. Skate wheels should generally be hard, to provide good wear resistance.



**Two common combi rollers, Swenor Tristar and Start**

Of the two rollers above, both of which are reasonably-priced, the Swenor wheels are too soft for much skating, whereas the Start wheels (not rubber) are a bit too fast for classic skiing.

Finally, don't forget that you're buying roller skis because you're dedicated to the sport and determined to soon become an intermediate and then move from there to advanced! So, unless you want to change roller skis at some stage, you need ones which will take you all the way through your skiing journey.

### **Frame**

Roller ski frames are usually either aluminium, composite, fibre glass or carbon fibre. Aluminium frames are stiff so tend to be a little faster than others, composite and fibre glass frames are slightly heavier than aluminium but offer better flex which is more representative of snow skis. Carbon fibre skis offer similar weight to aluminium but with the better flex of composite/fibre glass. There's little difference in durability and none of them 'wears out' but, in my time, I've broken aluminium and composite frames.



**Similar classic skis from Swenor in aluminium, carbon fibre and fibre glass, the latter probably being the most popular**

## ***Boots and bindings***

Just like roller skis, boots come in skate, combi and classic (these being more like training shoes); skate boots offer the greatest ankle support but are unsuitable for classic skiing, combi boots are adequate for skate skiing and are suitable for classic skiing, and offer more support than classic shoes. Classic shoes provide effectively no ankle support and, in my opinion, are not suitable for roller skiing except for advanced skiers. So the choice comes down to one pair of combi boots for both techniques, or one pair each of skate boots and combis. Combi boots can cost from about £150 up to £500, but there's not necessarily a direct correlation between quality and price. We don't consider the make of boot here, but we might have an article on this in a future Newsletter.

Bindings come in two and a half types, and I'm only considering modern designs! Salomon, which fits with boots having the Salomon sole pattern, New Nordic Norm (NNN), which fits with boots having the NNN sole pattern and, luckily, Salomon Prolink, compatible with *both* boots with the Salomon and NNN sole patterns.



**Salomon Prolink**



**Rottefella NNN binding**

Prolink bindings come in classic, skate or combi version, and racing, classic or skate (these latter being more expensive). Unless you're certain that you'll stick with either the Salomon or NNN system, go for the normal Prolink of the type suitable for your roller skis. You don't need to worry about fitting the bindings, because roller ski suppliers will fit them for you.

Be a little wary of the binding on the right above. If you look closely, these bind only with two metal hooks at either end of the bar on the boots, which can lead to the bar wearing prematurely, after which the boots start moving from side to side and have to be replaced. Prolink, and most other bindings, bind along the whole length of the bar, so don't cause this problem.

### ***Cheaper or more expensive?***

Unless you can find second hand rollers, which is a valid source as long as you can be relatively certain that they're in good condition, you're looking at paying from about £100 to about £400 per pair of roller skis.

The cheapest rollers currently available on the UK market are supplied by Decathlon, Inovik, and these are available as skate or classic models.



**Inovik skate, £90**



**Inovik classic, £110**

These are very reasonably-priced, and replacement wheels are cheap. But I have a few doubts about overall build quality, and they have the Rottefella bindings which can cause wear as mentioned above (replacing the bindings would cost about £50 per pair).

Next up in price come the Start and Swenor Tristar combis at around £200-£220. Again, reasonably-priced but with the limitations mentioned above. If we come towards the top of the quality scale, dedicated classic roller skis are around the £300-£350 mark, dedicated skate skis £250-£330, and combi skis (excluding the Swenor Tristar and Start) £300-£380.

To this, you need to add boots (£120-£200) and poles, £80 upwards. Adjustable poles allow you to have only one pair of poles suitable for both skate and classic, but be sure to buy poles with tungsten carbide tips.

***So come on, then, smart arse, tell us what to do!***

If it were that simple, trust me (I am a doctor 😊), I would have done so, rather than writing this long and rather tedious article. But there are several factors which need to be taken into account, not to mention that, these days, a pair of roller skis can easily cost you more than half of what I paid for my first *apartment*, in Scotland back in 1984. But let's see whether, concentrating just on roller skis, we can come up with some general rules and then some specific recommendations, as follow:

- 1) Firstly, never buy anything until you're certain that skiing is for you and that you want to take it further. Instead, come to LRNSC coaching events and use rented equipment until the desire truly seizes you!
- 2) Next, think about your expectations and objectives, and how much time you will be able to devote to them. For example, are you wanting to become an intermediate skier in 6 months and aspire to become an advanced skier? Do you hope to enter races at some stage? How much time, outside of Club sessions, do you plan to devote to roller skiing: two or more times per week,

once a fortnight, or less than this. Be honest and realistic here, to avoid investing in something which gets thrown in the cupboard under the stairs (other storage spaces are available), never to see the light of day.

- 3) Decide whether you have a preferred style (skate or classic), allowing you to buy only one pair of roller skis to practice technique and balance on, and continue to use Club rollers for the other style.
- 4) Once you have the answers to 2) and 3), talk to other Club members to get their experience and advice, and speak to suppliers for their recommendations. Then ignore much of this and come to your own conclusions!

Now we'll look at a few different options, and hopefully you can interpolate between these to find a situation relevant for you:

- 1) If you have a limited budget, don't plan to ski very regularly, and don't plan to race, you might well opt for the Inovik roller skis (£110 classic/£90 skate, all prices here include bindings) from Decathlon (but change the bindings, another £50 per pair). This, and all other options, allow you to practice technique and balance.
- 2) If you have a reasonable budget, you plan to ski two or three times a week, don't plan to race and you can only afford one pair of roller skis, go for something like the Marwe 590A combi ski (£345). These are high quality, durable rollers suitable for practicing both styles (as long as you don't cheat and use the ratchets when skating). We use them for Club sessions, but they're too slow for racing.
- 3) If you have a reasonable budget, you plan to ski regularly and you're thinking of racing at some point, you might consider the Swenor Tristar combi roller (£220) but use this exclusively for classic skiing and the Start combi (£230 but in its skate version, i.e. no ratchet) and use these uniquely for skate skiing. In addition to technique and balance, these rollers are suitable for beginners' racing.
- 4) If you have a large budget, you want to ski frequently, you're hoping to advance in your skiing career and you want to race, go for high-quality, dedicated classic and thin-wheeled skate skis, of which the Swenor fibreglass classis (£290)/Swenor Alutech (£270) and the Marwe 610A (£330)/Marwe 620A (£415) will allow you to do everything you want, including racing, and should last for the whole of your ski career.

So there we are, some thoughts and ideas which hopefully you find useful.

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