

# Snowshoeing Education 204: Clarifying Snowshoeing Values

By Jim Joque

*“Be all that you can be.” -U.S. Army*

**W**hy do people snowshoe? What values do they hold dear to them when it comes to snowshoeing? Why should we be concerned with values of snowshoers? In response...there are a myriad of reasons why people snowshoe. They all hold differing values when it comes to winter recreation. And it is of concern, because it tells the snowshoeing industry something about the people who participate in the sport.

Last season I surveyed a sample of students at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point where I work. These students had completed my snowshoeing courses. Although small in design, this unscientific survey revealed some interesting results relative to snowshoeing values.

When I asked participants to identify the reason why they snowshoe, results showed that 47 percent of the females and 58 percent of the males preferred snowshoeing for reasons of serenity, silence and appreciation of nature. Also, 41 percent of the females and 24 percent of the males preferred snowshoeing for adventure, exploration and fun; 6 percent of females and 9 percent of males snowshoe for camaraderie, fellowship and sharing experiences; and 6 percent of females and 9 percent of males were for reasons of convenience, inexpensive and easy to master.

So, what are snowshoeing values? My *“Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary,”* defined values as, “that which is desirable or worthy of esteem for its own sake; thing or quality having intrinsic worth.” Snowshoeing values could then be considered those qualities about snowshoeing that provide intrinsic worth...and those things that are desirable to the snowshoer.

## **Liking Winter: A Prerequisite for Snowshoeing**

*“The problem with winter sports is that – follow me closely here – they generally take place in winter.”  
–Dave Barry*

I assume Dave Barry’s statement would indicate he does not meet the prerequisite for the sport of snowshoeing. I have met some people who do not care for winter, but they snowshoe in order to find something active to do in the snow to bide their time waiting for spring.





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But I am sure most snowshoeing enthusiasts enjoy, appreciate and relish the thought of winter and snow. This value brings to mind a mid October day about ten years ago when we had eight inches of snowfall in Wausau, Wis. I was so excited never having gone snowshoeing this early in the season that I strapped on my modified bearpaws and took a hike down the street and back. My snowshoeing values said I like it. I like winter and I like snow...even in October.

### **Health and Fitness as a Common Goal**

*“The first wealth is health” –Ralph Waldo Emerson*

In my survey I did not ask my students if they enjoyed snowshoeing for health and fitness reasons. I will have to add that question in my survey for next time. But, many snowshoers do snowshoe for health and fitness, especially the runners and racers.

Snowshoe racing has gained popularity in recent decades, from community races to national and international races. The United States Snowshoe Association (USSSA) sponsors regional races and an annual national championship event. I would wager that those athletes are not only competitive, but hold fitness as an important value.

### **Environmental Ethic is Essential: Try Leave No Trace on for Size**

*“Those of us with a stake in the future of wilderness must begin to develop an agenda which will place a clear, strong, national focus on the question of the responsibility of the wilderness user to wilderness.” –Paul Petzoldt*

I believe most snowshoe enthusiasts have an inherent regard for our environment. Why would anyone not want to preserve the areas where they snowshoe? Having been in existence since 1994, the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics based in Boulder, Colo., has in its mission statement that it is “an educational, nonprofit organization dedicated to the responsible enjoyment and active stewardship of the outdoors by all people, worldwide.”

How does this tie in with snowshoeing? Quite simply, snowshoers use backcountry and frontcountry trails. It is important that people who snowshoe respect the seven basic principles of Leave No Trace. Those principles include: plan ahead and prepare; travel and camp on durable surfaces; dispose of waste properly; leave what you find; minimize campfire impacts; respect wildlife; and be considerate of other visitors.

A few years ago when I was Education Director of USSSA, I was pleased and excited when our organization announced that they became a “Partner” in Leave No Trace. At that time, the USSSA adopted the values of Leave No Trace and promoted its principles as fundamental values for snowshoeing.

## **Opposite Values Important to Snowshoers**

Besides liking winter, wanting to be healthy, and respecting our environment, other values held by snowshoe enthusiast may fall somewhere on a continuum of opposite values. Here are a few of those polar values.

### **1a. Simplicity**

*“Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity; I say, let our affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a*



*thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen and keep your account on your thumbnail.” –Henry David Thoreau*

Although I often wear my aluminum-frame Northern Lites, I love my wood-framed, Green Mountain modified bearpaw snowshoes. They represent “back-to-basics” for me. They offer a quiet and relaxing trek through snow, and are made of a white ash frame, rawhide decking, and neoprene A-style bindings. Now that’s simplicity.

Sometimes, a snowshoer enjoys the simple pleasures of life, both in the snowshoes they wear and the activities in which they chose to snowshoe.

## **1b. Complexity**

*“Oh, a graduate student, huh? How come you guys can go to the moon but can’t make my shoes smell good?” –Homer Simpson*

The degree of complexity becomes a product of your snowshoe preference. Snowshoe selection has become complex, but it offers a greater variety of options and technology to meet the needs and interest of the snowshoer. In contrast to traditional snowshoes, there are a multitude of modern snowshoe styles.

The modern snowshoe came into existence when Bill and Gene Prater first brought the aluminum frame snowshoe to a Chicago sporting goods show in 1974. Since then there has evolved many snowshoe companies, each producing few to several styles of shoes to meet the market demand for recreational, racing, backcountry, and mountaineering snowshoe activities.

No longer are we looking at wood frame, deck, and bindings alone. We are now looking at a variety of frame styles and materials such as anodized aluminum, titanium, and injection-molded plastic. Solid hypalon decking, front, rear and lateral traction devices, technical free and fixed rotation systems, and a myriad of binding styles go into making snowshoe selection quite complex. The choice of a simple or complex snowshoe is a part of your snowshoe value system.

## **2a. Serenity**

*“For, as the mind and body relax, a welcome serenity quietly replaces the strained and brittle patchwork of today’s conflict and disorder. If there were only an accurate measure of these satisfactions, snowshoeing would likely outrank the most potent tranquilizer and thoughtful doctors might prescribe snowshoes in place of elaborate and costly laboratory compounds.” –William Osgood & Leslie Hurley*

Silence, peace, quiet, tranquil, calm, serene...call it what you will, there are many who snowshoe for the sheer pleasure of these descriptors. Osgood and Hurley’s first edition of *“The Snowshoe Book”* published in 1971 captured the true essence of serenity when they wrote that snowshoeing is “a welcome serenity.” They added that snowshoeing is “purely and simply to get into sympathetic oneness with the winter landscape.”



Forty years later, many who snowshoe still hold the same value. As the majority of my survey respondents reported why they snowshoe, it was because they preferred snowshoeing for reasons of “serenity, silence and appreciation of nature.”

## 2b. Excitement

*“But as the fact of our success thrust itself more clearly into my mind, I felt a quiet glow of satisfaction spread through my body – a satisfaction less vociferous but more powerful than I had ever felt on a mountain top before” –Sir Edmund Hillary*

By snowshoeing excitement, I refer to someone who snowshoes on the edge. It is someone who always looks for high adventure such as snowshoeing on mountain slopes, running on rolling hills, traveling long distances in a short time, and racing in competitive events. This is the snowshoer who is not too concerned with the aesthetics of nature around them, but rather craves the challenge, exerts the adrenalin, and seeks the adventure.

## 3a. Solitude

*“I have had my share of solitude and know whereof I speak. It is beautiful to me, for it brings back perspective and the sense of timelessness.” – Sigurd Olson*

Snowshoeing offers both solitude and interactive recreation opportunities. You have the choice of heading out alone for a hike on a backcountry trail, or joining in a community snowshoeing activity.



Although I rate as an “extrovert” on the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator, I am mostly an “introvert” when spending a day on snowshoes. Most often I prefer to shoe alone. Snowshoeing can be a moment for introspection, a time to be alone with nature and look inward at who you are and how you fit into this wilderness.

A favorite location near my home that offers me solitude is the shoreline of the Eau Pleine Flowage of central Wisconsin. I can hike for an hour or half the afternoon along this scenic flowage surrounded by a mixed hardwood forest and a few scattered homes. One day while being the only creature out there, an eagle swooped down from a tree to check me out. Seeing I was a little bigger than most of its prey, it decided to pass me by as meal of the day. I delighted

in watching that short interaction with nature while snowshoeing. How I enjoyed the solitude that day.

### 3b. Camaraderie

*“Don’t be deluded into thinking it’s the fashionable clothing you wear or the speed of your over-snow travel device that provides the pleasure. It isn’t. The outstanding part of your outing, the part that is memorable and enduring is the back country and the good companions who accompany you.”*

*–Gene Prater*

Sometimes I enjoy the company of a couple good friends or family while snowshoeing. I watched a video this past holiday of me snowshoeing with my daughter, son-in-law, and two granddaughters. The girls are 10 and 14 years old now. In the video, they were ages 3 and 7. I smiled when I saw the younger one heading up a steep hill. I laughed at the next scene when she was slung over her mother’s shoulder with snowshoes in the air and a gleeful grin on her face implying she now has a free ride. How I love those memories of snowshoeing with my family.

There are times when I also appreciate the interactions of a community coming together for an enjoyable snowshoeing event. At our annual candlelight snowshoe hike on Rib Mountain in central Wisconsin, a few hundred candles dot three miles of trails that come off the side of this large hill. About 100 to 200 snowshoe enthusiasts join in the fun of a night hike following glowing lights through the forest.



## A Snowshoeing Philosophy

*“Keep close to Nature’s heart...and break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean.” –John Muir*

Your values, your interest and attitude toward snowshoeing, and all that is associated with it shape your personal snowshoeing philosophy. Your philosophy can be defined in your own way and include those values that are important to you, as well as the degree of importance snowshoeing is to you.

For me, I love winter, I like to stay healthy, and I respect my environment. I prefer snowshoeing alone or with a few friends and family, and I appreciate the solitude that nature offers me. I also enjoy simplicity in my snowshoes, but rely on technical shoes to guide me through tough terrain. What about you?

And finally, I see snowshoeing as a recreation that can be enjoyed at almost any age, as long as you are mobile and can walk outside in winter. Comedian George Burns once wrote, *“Old-timers don’t have to come in first. They get credit for just showing up. And if they’re out there making a real effort, they’ve got everyone pulling for them.”*

I turned 61 this year. I plan to snowshoe to 100. And if there is snow in heaven, I plan to find a snowshoe maker up there somewhere. This in itself can define my snowshoeing philosophy.





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