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Boot and binding systems for powder surfers

By Mary Catherine O' Connor

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WHETHER you're a freerider jonesing for the steep and deep, or a freestyler wired for terrain-park jibbing, the gear question is the same: "Should I go with step-in bindings or straps?" The short answer is that there is no short answer: Both systems have been so highly refined that it's no longer as much a question of performance as it is personal preference. Strap bindings require novices to sit down at the top of the lift to attach the rear foot to the board; step-ins (obviously) don't. Not a big deal either way, of course, but there you have it. Herewith, the best step-in and strap setups for all-mountain riders and the park-and-pipe crowd.

Freeriding Step-In

K2 Magma HB Bindings (\$200)
and **T1 Boots** (\$240)
(800-972-4038;
www.k2snowboarding.com)

The Binding: Freeriding's ultimate expression takes place in the backcountry. That's why, coupled with K2 ascent skis or Clicker-compatible Verts snowshoes (see page 86), the Clicker binding system crosses in and out of bounds fluidly. Rather than building heel-side stiffness into the boot (which would make it awkward to hike in), K2 equips the Magma HB binding with an external high-back (HB). You'll need to fine-tune the high-back's forward lean with a screwdriver for customized performance, and the Magma step-in does takes a little stomping oomph to engage, but once you're locked into the binding you'll forget about all that fiddling.

The Boot: The T1 Boot packs a wallop, in both stiffness and, unfortunately, weight (8 lb. a pair). The upside? These qualities translate into superior support and impressive stability when the powder turns to chunky crust. The heel cup holds your foot in place nicely, and the ankle strap gives



remarkable over-the-top foot support. A rigid plastic spine along the outside of the boot provides extra heel-side power when raiing high-speed turns.

Freestyle Step-In



Switch Standard X-type Bindings (\$150) and **Vans Klutch Boots** (\$290)
(800-826-7800;
www.switchbindings.com
/ www.vans.com)

The Binding: The Switch cleats engage on the inside of the dual-density plastic base, ensuring that snow doesn't muck up the works. The design lends itself to lateral support. It's a more robust system than your average step-in, with four points of boot-

to-binding contact boosting energy-transfer efficiency. A soft-touch forward-lean adjustment with a quick-release lever is user-friendly for those wearing gloves, and because you can actually see the Switch mechanism—as opposed to having a disk hidden beneath your foot—it's a no-brainer to step in.

The Boot: The Klutch boot is soft enough to tweak out your backside method and stiff enough to keep you from noodling at speed. But the real story here is the Boa lacing system. The brainchild of a former medical-supply engineer (who designed a similar gadget for use in coronary angioplasty procedures) the Boa is a wire-and-reel device that tightens with the turn of a dial and loosens just by pushing a button. Gone are the days of looping the rabbit through the hole with cold fingers and ice-caked laces.

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