



Stand Up to the Snow

Shoveling in a different direction can save your back.

by Paul Bacon, for *The Bulletin Special Projects*
Photos by Kevin Prieto

A standup paddle and a snow shovel have a lot in common. In addition to looking similar, they help you do essentially the same thing — move large quantities of H₂O. You can't dig out from a big winter storm using a paddle, but applying standup paddling technique to snow shoveling can make it a much safer activity.

For many people raised in the snowy reaches of Central Oregon, shoveling technique is second nature. However, some people can develop bad habits, causing long-lasting damage to their joints that doesn't become apparent until it's too late.

And for people coming here from warmer areas such as Southern California, digging out of their first blizzard can be a major shock to their bodies.

Barrett Ford, owner of Step & Spine Physical Therapy in Bend, said snow shoveling can lead to serious back, neck and shoulder injuries if proper technique is not used. He believes one way to help avoid injuries is to alternate shoveling methods, which reduces strain on overused muscle groups by letting other muscle groups take part of the burden.

"It just makes sense to change things up," he said.

FORWARD SCOOP

Ford said most people only use the "forward scoop" when shoveling, perhaps not realizing there are other efficient ways to move snow by hand. It's natural to bend at the hips to pick something up, he said, noting that older people, whose leg strength tends to be less reliable, are even more likely to bend at the hips than at the knees, which in turn puts them at greater risk of back injury.

When done correctly, the forward scoop enables precise shovel work and careful heavy lifting while also offering an efficient way to clear large areas of

snow. However this motion leaves you open to a variety of injuries because when you scoop forward, you tend to flex your spine, curving it forward as you would when sitting. This is the spine's most vulnerable position, so loading it up with weight while curved must be done with care.

The damage caused to the spine by too much sitting — which usually builds for years before slowly revealing its effects — can be suddenly unleashed during a forward scooping motion. When you lift a shovel full of snow at arm's length while your spine is flexed, you can easily overload your back muscles. You can also apply up to six times the normal pressure or more on the spine's delicate system of shock absorbers, or "discs." Back strain, herniated discs and other complications can result.

The hazards of the forward scoop may be somewhat reduced by using an ergonomically designed shovel. And Ford suggests that whenever possible, you should incorporate a different method of snow removal.

"Shoveling can be your own little cross-training exercise," he said.

BACKWARD SCOOP, a.k.a. STANDUP PADDLE METHOD

Throwing snow backward instead of forward may take a few minutes to get used to, but it can pay huge dividends. The benefit comes from the backward scooping motion similar to the action of standup paddling. With this motion, the body remains in a more upright, stable position. And the spine is extended, which has the opposite effect of flexing it, equalizing the forces on the discs. Spinal extension is achieved with one of the most elementary yoga postures,

bhujangasana, or "cobra" position, also known as the "back bend."

Ford said there are even more substantial benefits to the standup paddle (SUP) method.

"You keep your arms closer to your body, which decreases the torque applied to your joints. And you benefit from, engage, and improve the strength of your core muscles."

Incorporating the SUP method, Ford emphasized, can help save you from injury.

The SUP method is also better for your elbows. During the forward scoop, you stress the tendons used in elbow extension. These are the tendons which, if damaged, give way to lateral epicondylitis (LE), also known as "tennis elbow," a term which Ford said is a bit of a misnomer.

Most people with LE get it not from playing tennis, but from more mundane activities such as heavy lifting or typing on a keyboard. It's also possible to get LE from gardening, landscaping, chopping food, even writing with a pen or pencil, Ford advised, adding that a large percentage of people who overdo these activities will experience LE at some point. For them, the SUP method is especially helpful because its backward motion gives the elbow extensors a break by shifting the load to the elbow flexors, shoulder extensors and scapular stabilizers.

Other tips for safe shoveling include warming up your muscles beforehand and keeping your knees bent and hands apart when picking up snow. Fluid motions which take advantage of your shoveling momentum are better than a series of starts and stops. And Ford says to "be wary of mornings" because your back is most susceptible to soreness and injury in the first hour or two after getting out of bed.

The SUP Method

CHOOSE YOUR SIDE:

Instead of facing the snow you want to remove, turn to the side. Choose which side based on where you want the snow to end up after you complete your backward scoop.

GRAB:

Hold the shovel with the handle pointing up and the blade pointing down, similar to the proper orientation of an SUP paddle. Place your other hand on the shaft above the blade.

GO:

Bending slightly at the knees, reach up and out, then scoop backwards, lifting and expelling the snow. Do a few more backward scoops, then switch to the forward scoop, and so on. Alternate between methods and sides throughout your shoveling session, taking frequent rest breaks to extend the spine and prevent general overexertion.



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