

The Toeside Problem

By Jack Michaud

After we learn how to carve turns on our snowboards with regularity and some confidence, an interesting transformation typically occurs. Most carvers start with a preference for toeside carves. But as we progress, at some point our strength switches to heelside for many people, almost overnight. Henceforth, the balance between heelside and toeside is commonly never achieved, and toeside carves perpetually lag behind heelside in terms of power and confidence. The disparity can just be a niggling flaw, or a perplexing handicap. It doesn't have to be this way.

If you have not reached the point where your heelside outcarves your toeside, take this article as a preventative measure.

The early toeside preference is probably related to the fact that on toeside, it is easier to tilt a board up on edge high enough to really make an aggressive carve happen at lower speeds. The alpine hook is usually set on a beginner's first successful toeside carve. However, eventually we learn how to tilt that board up high on heelside edge too. This allows us to go faster. Additionally, it is easier to angulate and inclinate on heelside at higher speed. Ironically, we are then able to reach speeds where bad toeside habits come back to haunt us, and then suddenly the heelside edge feels like the security blanket.

The reason heelside can feel like the stronger carve for many of us may have a simple explanation: the structure of the body naturally makes it easier to put our center of gravity (our hips or thereabouts) in just the right spot on heelside, but not so easy on toeside. It also makes it easier to angulate and "stack" our upper body on top of our center of gravity. On heelside, you probably just fall into this position naturally without even thinking about it. On toeside, it is common for people to want to turn slightly and face the toeside edge and the hill, and bend at the waist. We also tend to put that back hand down for a comforting sense of safety or as an expression of style.

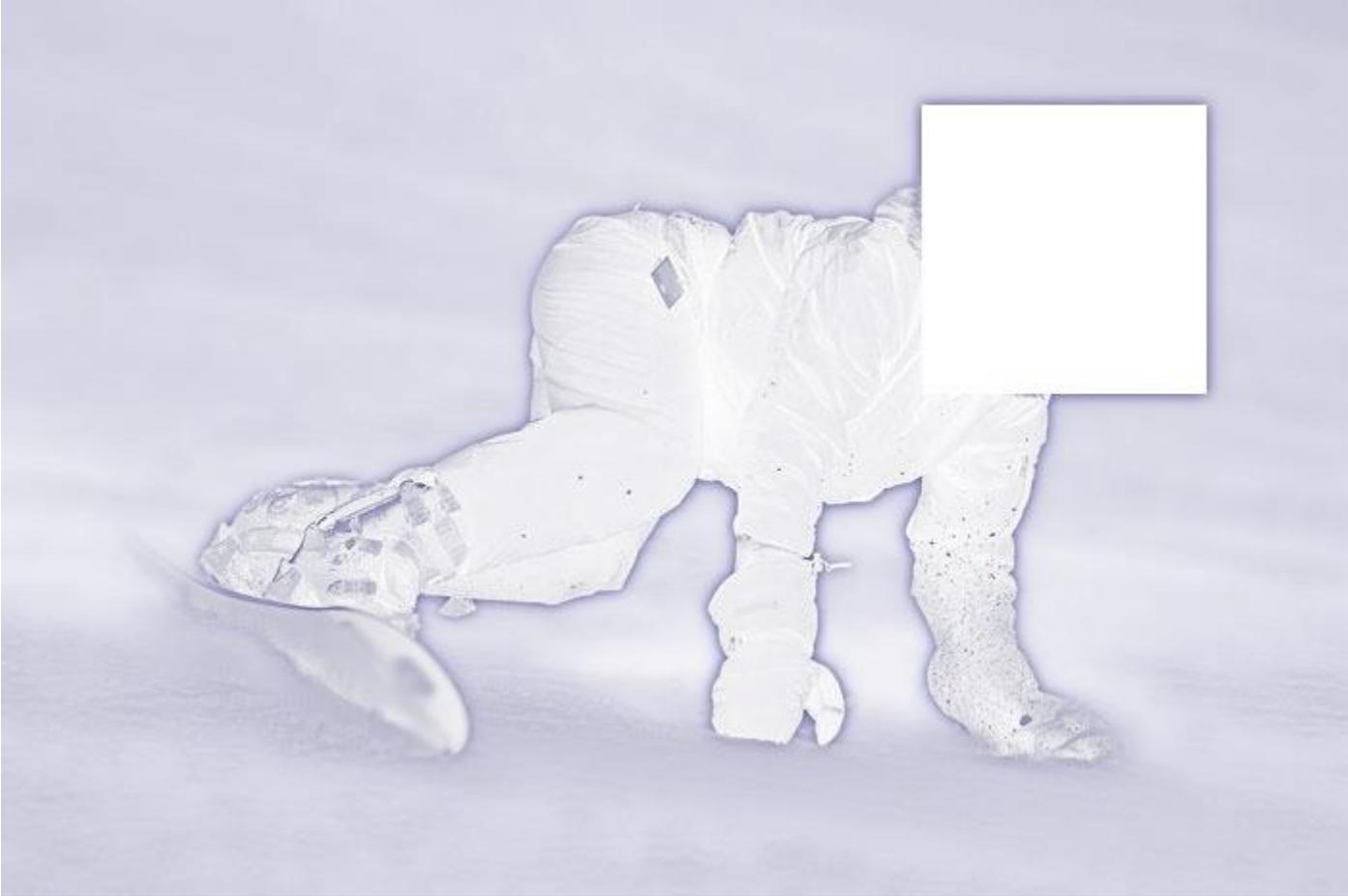
This subconscious desire to quickly and cheaply get closer to the snow on toeside results in something that will prevent our toeside carves from ever matching our heelsides: sticking your ass in the air, and reaching for the snow.

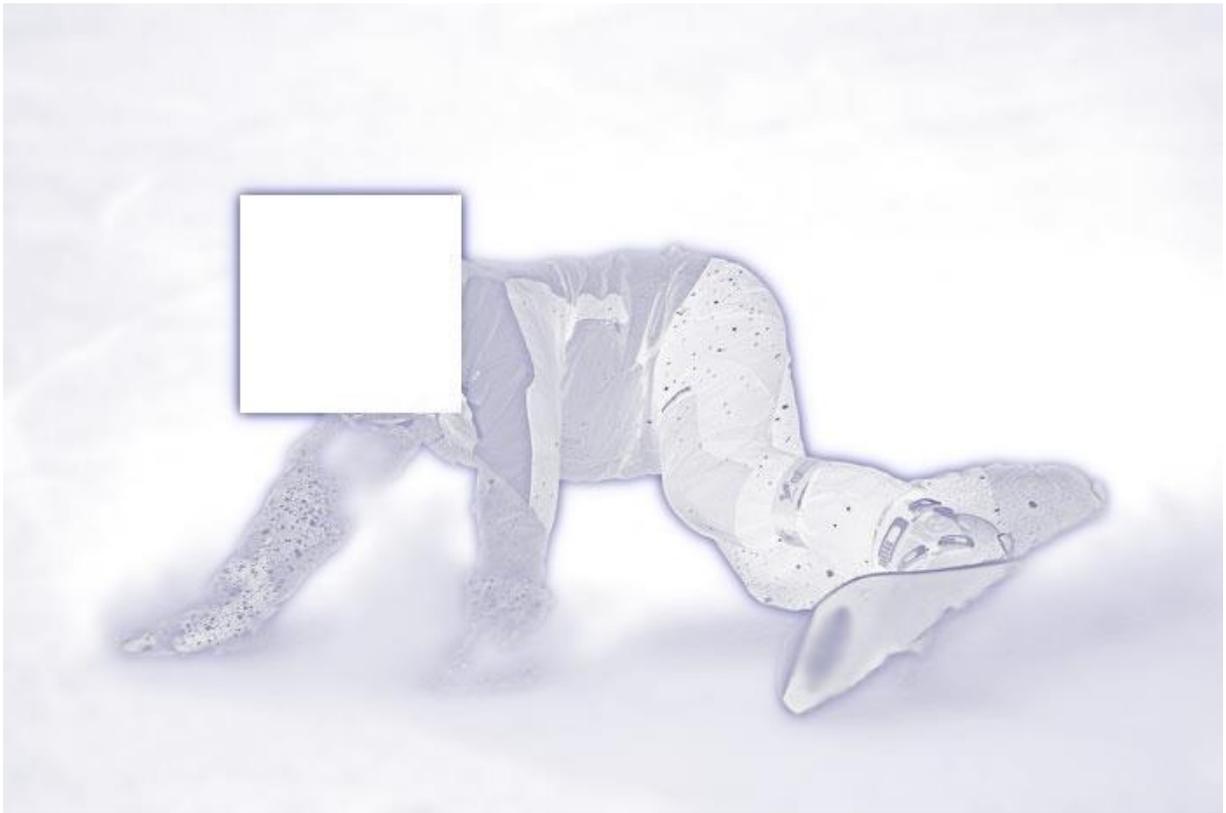
Heelside carves are stronger because your center of gravity automatically goes *down and in*. Notice the positioning of the hips in these heelside carves, and the position of the upper body relative to the hips:

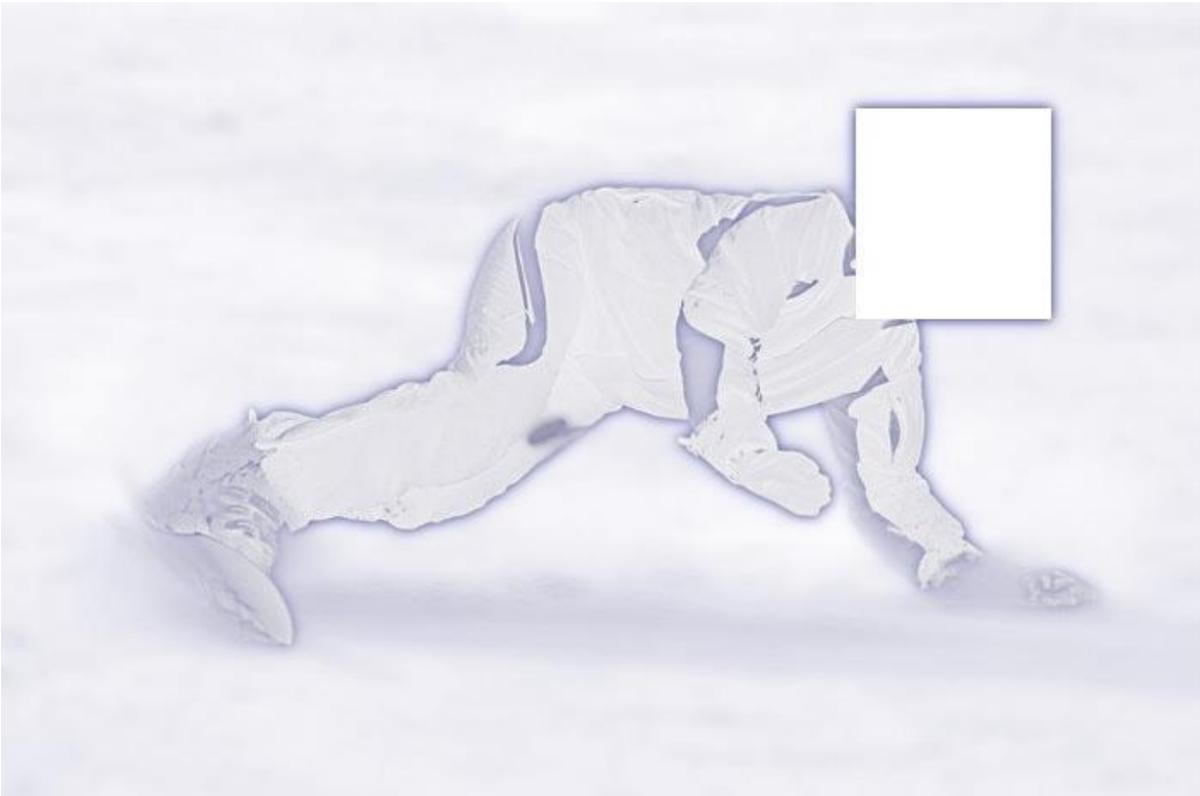
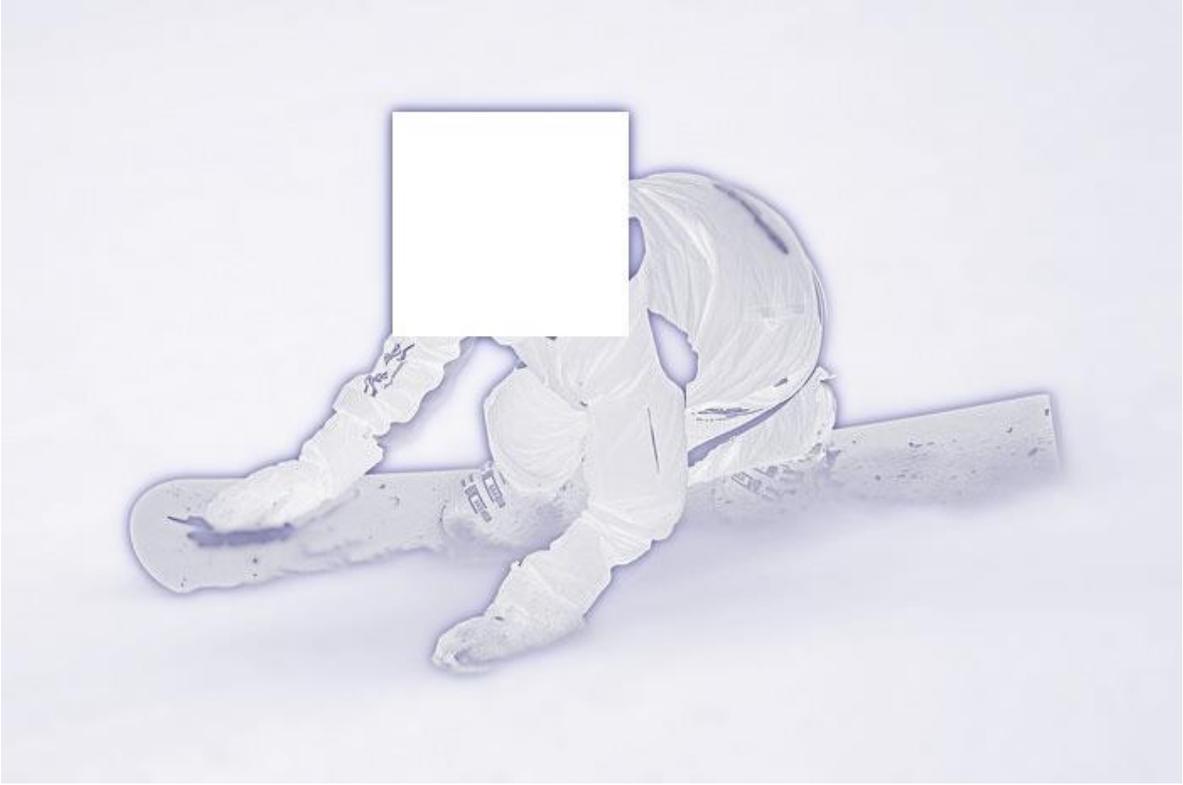




The hips are down and in the carve, the upper body is stacked on top of them. This is a strong, balanced position. It is natural and relatively easy to "drop" the hips into a heelside carve. Now, compare the above pictures with these toeside carves and notice the distinct difference in the position of the hips, and the relative position of the upper body. Let's call this the "A" group:







The hips are *up and out*. This is the exact opposite of what usually happens naturally on heelside. This is an unbalanced position. The center of gravity is high, so to compensate the rider tilts their upper body down into the carve, and reaches for the snow. Be not ashamed if you ride like this. It is very common, and it is the natural result of innate defense mechanisms. We have ALL been there. It just takes a little concentration and some practice to overcome it. This problem is typical among new and intermediate carvers, and it often stays with people well after they have progressed to advanced or even expert status. It is possible to work around this and learn how to carve fairly strongly and even to layout carves low to the ground with one's tush up on display. However odds are that even expert carvers who ride like this would confess they favor their heelside carves.

So how do we fix this? Simple. We take that nice down-and-in hip position from our heelside carves and make it happen on toeside. But how? *Drop the hips* into the toeside carve. Well, first we have to talk about body *alignment* relative to the nose of your board. Racers and race coaches will tell you to face your binding angles. Some people like to face the nose of their boards. Who's right? In my opinion, as long as you are facing your binding angles, or the nose of your board, or somewhere in between, you're doing just fine for freecarving. Unfortunately, it only takes a very small twist towards your toeside edge with your hips, knees or shoulders to cause problems. Many people who think they are facing their binding angles on toeside are actually turned slightly back, towards the edge. Usually this is compounded by a bend at the waist, a reach for the ground, and then it's all over.

Next, we need to talk about *sequence*. Our carcasses must cross the board between carves in some order of body parts. In the toeside pictures above, it is probably safe to assume that the order went something like hands, head, shoulders, hips, knees. Again, this is the exact opposite of what we want. When you're really railing solid cross-through carves, the order should be knees, hips, upper body. In any case, the goal is to drop the hips into the toeside carve before your upper body. If your heelside carve feels better, that's probably what you're doing on that side. So do it on toeside too!

Take a look at these toeside carves. Let's call this the "B" group:







The hips are *down and in*, just like on heelside. One very important thing to notice here is that in these not-so-laid-out toesides above, the B riders have their hips about as far or farther into the carve as their counterparts do in the A group. But the B's heads and shoulders are nowhere near as leaned over or tipped in as the A's. Both group's bodies form somewhat of a "C" shape, but curving in opposite directions. The result is better balance, and greater range of motion for the B riders. Okay, so what happens when you crank up the volume?





Hips down is the way to go. Notice the above riders' knees and hips and how close they are to the snow, yet the shoulders, hips, knees, and feet are all still in line. This is a stacked, balanced position. Your upper body remains quietly suspended directly by your lower body. You can relax and concentrate on absorbing the terrain and holding that edge with your legs. When the upper body gets tilted off to the side as in the A group, it is no longer above or in line with the center of gravity. In this position it becomes much harder to balance because your suspension system is now bent in the middle. Your upper body is not supported by bone structure, so you have to compensate with brute muscle force.

So if your heelside carve is obviously your stronger carve, try the toeside hip-drop. First you need to make sure you're not rotating your hips slightly towards your toe edge. At a heel-to-toe transition, take your back hip (right hip for regulars, left for goofies) and bring it forward. Think about putting it just in front of your back foot. Then, drop that hip down towards the snow and into the toeside carve. Do this *before* any movement of your hands, head or shoulders towards the snow. Concentrate on "pencil pinching" (as mentioned in other articles here) to keep your upper body upright - that is, you should feel like you could hold a pencil in the crease that forms between your downhill hip and rib cage. Stomp the front foot to start the carve, then smoothly shift back as the carve comes around, finishing the carve with your weight about two-thirds on your back foot. When you master the hip drop and combine it with quick cross-through transitions, you'll probably find that confidence on toeside that you've been enjoying on heelside all this time.