

## SmartWool NTS Mid 250 Zip-T Long Underwear Top

I've long admired SmartWool's products and have happily worn their Nordic ski socks almost exclusively for years. For me, the brand name immediately brings to mind top quality, dependable clothing designed and manufactured with intelligence, beauty and style. This NTS Mid 250 Zip-T long underwear top definitely did not cause me to adjust my opinion. It is well-constructed, form-fitting (stretchily, lightly and comfortably so) and is beautiful enough to sport on its own while out and about. However, based on my own experiences wearing it during workouts of various intensities in varying conditions, this NTS Mid 250 top may not be the one you want to purchase strictly for use in your Nordic skiing. First, the particulars.

SmartWool's site describes this 100% Merino wool top as "Our warmest baselayer. Works as a single layer in cool weather or as a baselayer in cold weather." The words "wool" and "warmest" make this top sound as if it might be itchy and heavy; however, it is neither. It is meant to be worn next to the skin, so thankfully is deliciously soft. And though its deep weave makes it thicker than any other baselayer I wear, it is surprisingly lightweight. That said, it might be more thickness than one might want to wear under a tight race suit on a frigid day, were that your intention, or to layer over in any way. I suppose that's where the "single layer" in the description comes into play. Note: layering beyond adding a jacket or wind vest immediately made me feel "packed in" and impinged upon my freedom of motion while skiing.

I really like SmartWool's construction of this top. It is quite sculpted and well-designed for movement. The raised collar (think low turtleneck) has an 8-inch front zipper, one of my very favorite things in a baselayer. The ability to ventilate on demand is a big plus. The design is unique, almost a small yoke-type look. From the SmartWool website I learned this is to do away with top of the shoulder seams to reduce chafing and make pack strips more comfortable. Also, the seams are all flatlock stitching for less bulk and abrasion. Brilliant! As noted above, the top is form-fitting for baselayer effectiveness. After several wearings and washings, it has maintained its original shape perfectly. Note: The main body of the top and especially its sleeves are longer for greater coverage. This could be an issue for some wearers depending on height.

I tested this top while classic skiing several times. The first couple outings were in 20-30 degrees, as that's all the Twin Cities were offering at the time. Predictably, this top was far too warm in those conditions when worn under a light wind-breaking shell. Although, I must say that at 23 degrees topped with only a wind vest, I was pretty close to perfectly comfortable. Still, it didn't feel fair to judge this baselayer outside its intended usage.

With temps and windchills well below 0 blowing in, I thought I would finally find the comfort zone for this "warmest" of SmartWool's baselayers. To my surprise, wearing solely this mid-weight layer under a windblocker jacket at -2 plus a hefty windchill, I was STILL too warm. I drove home from that interval workout completely soaked with the car heater on as high as it would

go. So much for wicking. Gee whiz, I thought, if it can't be worn in those ski conditions, when can it be worn?

Weighing all of my experiences with this SmartWool NTS Mid 250 Zip-T Long Underwear Top, I have to conclude this is not an article of clothing for your cold weather Nordic ski performance wear arsenal. I believe its best ski usage would be low-key, low-heartrate touring, perhaps, and most definitely backpacking, dog-walking, general being-outside-while-its-cold baselayering. \$110 may seem a big price tag, but I opine this top is worth it. The quality and longevity of SmartWool clothing is nearly unbeatable. While this may not be specifically a layer for Nordic skiing, it can definitely be worn all winter long in a large variety of lower-intensity activities – including having coffee with pals.

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