

3 - Making Every Run Count

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The amount of time alpine ski coaches and racers are afforded for on-snow training is precious. Short seasons, bad weather, poor snow conditions, time constraints, and lack of hill space often cut into quality training time. Even when conditions are perfect and racers have access to a fast lift, turn around time between runs is usually about 10 minutes. Add this to the time racers spend at the top of the course stretching, adjusting equipment, and waiting for the course to clear, and it results in them spending one minute out of every fifteen actually training. Given that ski racers are restricted in the amount of time they can work on technical and tactical aspects of skiing, it is important that they are both physically and mentally prepared for each run so they are able to get the most out of the time they spend training in gates.

Mental training is slowly beginning to be seen as the logical complement to the technical, tactical, and physical training which is currently the norm for alpine ski racing. Ski academies and race programs throughout North America are starting to turn to mental training consultants to help racers develop the mental skills they need to take their performance to the next level. By teaching ski racers what it means to be mentally prepared before each run, along with the skills which will enable them to engage in this type of preparation, better use will be made of the limited training time they have on snow.

Based on our experiences working with ski racers, we developed a concern that young racers do not always make the most of the opportunities they have to train in gates because they are inadequately prepared mentally, and sometimes physically, before each run. Stemming from this, we felt it was important to investigate how youth alpine ski racers use their time at the top of training courses and how, if necessary, we can help them put this time to better use.

Through observing 5 members of a developmental alpine ski team (K2s) at the top of a training course over a number of runs and training sessions, we found that they engaged in a number of different behaviours¹. Some of these comprised physical and/or mental preparation for the next run (e.g., adjusting equipment, stretching, talking to the coach, mentally preparing), whereas other behaviours were not essential to the learning process (e.g., waiting, talking with other racers²). We were glad to discover that all of the racers in our study engaged in some form of mental preparation before they set off down the course. However, this time was short (an average of 17 seconds/run) compared to the amount of time spent waiting around doing nothing (an average of 41 seconds/run).

Mental training was not a new concept to these racers. Before the start of our study, the team had already participated in a series of 6 mental training workshops in order to develop some basic mental skills such as goal setting, intensity control, imagery, focusing, distraction control,

¹ Culver, D., & Stodel, E. J. (1998, March). Analysis of time use of youth alpine ski racers during on-snow training sessions. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Eastern Canada Sport and Exercise Psychology Symposium, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

² We recognize that a certain amount of interaction among the racers is an important element of the learning process, however, in our study we observed that many of the communications did not contribute to productive training.

and positive thinking. We wondered whether we could increase the amount of time these racers engaged in mental preparation before each run by conducting a short mental training session immediately before an on-snow training session. Consequently, in the lodge before training one day we re-emphasised key points which had been presented in earlier workshops and provided concrete examples of how the mental skills the racers had developed could be applied to make every training run a quality run. Impressively, after this short reminder the amount of time the racers engaged in mental preparation at the top of each run increased dramatically (from an average of 17 seconds/run to 34 seconds/run). Not only did the amount of mental preparation increase, but the time spent waiting around dropped substantially (from an average of 41 seconds/run to 4 seconds/run) as did the amount of time spent talking with other racers (from an average of 13 seconds/run to 4 seconds/run).

These results are not just impressive numbers; they related directly to a quality day of training. The increased amount of time the racers spent mentally preparing was reflected in their skiing. After that day's training the coach was ecstatic:

What an awesome day! The kids were really focused and some great things happened. . . . I strongly believe that when the kids are focused well they can execute their moves so much better. They can communicate what goes on in their mind to their muscles a lot easier and a lot faster.

The racers also acknowledged the importance of mental training and how it was helping them. One racer commented:

I think sport psychology is really helpful. . . . People on the team are starting to realise how sport psychology can help them and how much it can improve the efficiency of your training runs so you can get a lot more out of it. So [now] you don't kick yourself at the bottom of the course for not doing it. You do it at the top.

This study highlighted the importance of making mental training an ongoing component of ski racing preparation. It is not a "one shot deal". Mental training is most effective if it is started at an early age and integrated into other aspects of training. It is not something that can be done in isolation; separate from the work of the technical, tactical, and physical strength coaches. The mental training consultant must become part of the team and work with the coaches and racers towards common goals. Unfortunately, due to limited funds, time, and a lack of qualified mental training consultants, this can often not be realised. Instead, the coach and athlete must take responsibility for mental skill development. To start you on your way towards better mental preparation, ask yourself the following five questions before each run.

1. What is my **goal** for this run? (e.g., be aggressive, run a straighter line)
2. What is my **focus** for this run? (e.g., keep my arms in front)
3. Can I **see** myself doing it? (use imagery to mentally practice what you want to achieve)
4. Am I at my optimal **intensity** level? (Am I too psyched up? Too relaxed?)
5. Am I **committed** to making this run? (Will I give it 100% and fight all the way down?)

Then, commit to MAKING EVERY RUN COUNT. You will soon notice the improvements. Have a great season!