

FIFTY SHADES OF SNOW

AND TIPS FROM A PRO ON HOW TO SKI THEM



BY HAROLD SMITH

I am pretty sure I get much more excited about winter than most people. Some of it comes from the anticipation of seeing snow blanket and smooth the landscape, or the delicious excuse on a cold blustery night of doing nothing more than sitting in front of the woodstove. For me, the extra excitement comes with my seasonal job transition from woodworker to ski instructor. For the past twenty years, I've worked 5-6 days a week from December through April in what seems the best teaching gig imaginable: I coach skiers. I coach kids and adults, I coach timid beginners and confident eight-year-old freestylers, I coach racers looking to go 80 mph and lifelong skiers looking to ski comfortably into their 80th year and beyond.

I began as a ski instructor for most of the same reasons anyone does; I liked to ski and I thought it would be fun to teach it, maybe even more the latter than the former. I come from a family of teachers. Right after college I worked at a prep school in California teaching chemistry and physics while coaching distance running and soccer.

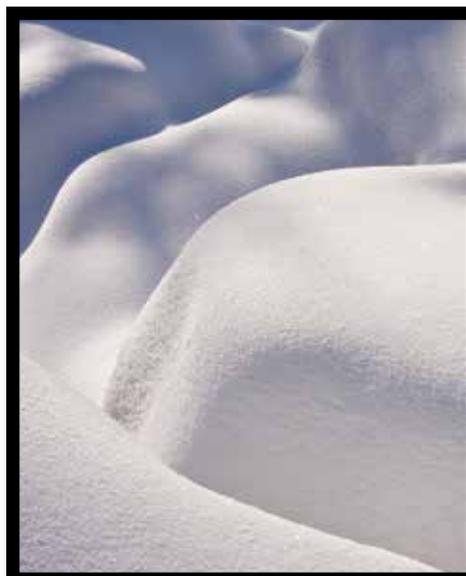
Looking back on things, as a teacher with teaching in his genes, teaching/coaching skiing really is the most rewarding version of

being an educator. First off, someone who comes into a ski clinic is much more motivated than even the most attentive high school student. People only take ski lessons because they have a clear goal, either to alleviate some anxiety on the slopes (Steep! Icy! Too fast!) or they think the idea of being brought uphill and then allowed to do the easy part and just slide down sounds really, really fun. While I like to think I was a pretty enthusiastic chemistry teacher, I guarantee precious few students came into the class with wide-eyed excitement to learn something about covalent bonds that would stay with them for the rest of their life.

Working with skiers also offers immediate job feedback. Again, I think I did well to generate both interest and understanding of how physics works, but I'm not sure I had any student actually come up and thank me at the end of class. On the other hand, after a ski clinic a student can point to a newly refined athletic movement, or can describe the difference in how they turn on the steeps, or even just point to the bunny slope and say with pride that they just skied down that. Best of all, they do that with me right there to glory in it with them!

It is true that most every job has its every day. Some days as a woodworker, it's pretty difficult to get very excited about nailing up 800 square feet of tongue-and-groove ceiling. But there is no "every day" in ski coaching. Some days it's a three-hour beginner lesson with nine anxious adults, but the next day might be an hour-long lesson with two 14-year-old best friends on the field hockey team looking to ski black diamond trails together, and then a six-year-old boy from Florida who has never even seen snow before but now he's going to ski on the darn stuff.

And that's to say nothing of how the mountain changes every day. Sure some days are stormy. Yet sometimes the view from the summit is though crystal clear air, with Mt Washington seeming close enough to touch. Other times you ride up the chairlift through the clouds to pop out above it all. And skiing nearly every day in the winter, I get to see all the possible variations of snow. The legend



Powder pillows



Frozen chicken heads



Becoming crud

Ski instructors have dozens of terms for the stuff we spend so much time on: there's corduroy and champagne powder, of course, but also crud and Sierra Cement . . . In the East, we have ice but also porcelain, the stuff that is seemingly harder and slicker than "just" ice. If it gets that scary grey color, it's now stainless steel.

is that Eskimos have a hundred words for snow. While that may or may not be true, ski instructors have dozens of terms for the stuff we spend so much time on: there's corduroy and champagne powder, of course, but also crud and Sierra Cement. After a cold night, that might turn into frozen chicken heads, which get skied into death cookies. In the East, we have ice but also porcelain, the stuff that is seemingly harder and slicker than "just" ice. If it gets that scary grey color, it's now stainless steel. More enticing are terms for softer, springtime snow: cream cheese, peanut butter, mashed potatoes and slurpee-on-the-slope. Then you have moguls, aka bumps. But icy ones become coral heads, and a steep bump run that's been skied a lot? That's the refrigerator and bathtub graveyard.

Skiing with a coach could introduce you to these terms and more importantly how to deal with such changing snow conditions. It may surprise skiers to learn that only a portion of what we do as instructors is teach new-to-the-sport beginners. More than half of my coaching is at advanced levels, some for kids, but for lots of adults, too. Too often, I think people associate Ski/Snowboard "School" with elementary, remedial or even reform school! But for most skiers, it could better be thought of as a Graduate School of Skiing/Riding. Participating in a group or a private lesson as an adult offers the chance to ski through problems or questions specific to your own skiing/riding. Indeed, it's one of the things that separates ski instruction in the US from that of most other countries. The major tenet of our teaching system is that it is student-centered, meaning we are asked to tailor what we do on snow to the specific needs, skills, desires and learning styles of each of the students.

It's not the stereotypical picture from the 1950s and '60s of a group of students lined up on the hill with a usually European gentleman out front, going through a rigid lesson plan. Instead, most lessons beyond the introduction to skiing nowadays start with the ski coach asking students what they want to get out of the lesson.

But the truly inspired part of the US system is acknowledgment of differing learning styles in students. Most people are predominantly either watchers, doers, feelers or thinkers. Coaching an athletic activity, we focus much more on doers and feelers; there's very little standing around being talked at in a ski lesson. During most lessons, I show some activity which focuses on some part of skiing (watcher), we ski a bunch (doer), then decide whether it feels more efficient, or more powerful, or smoother, or just more comfortable (feelers).

Ski and snowboard lessons today address individual needs and challenges. And the feedback is immediate for both coach and student. Sounds good, right? Ask yourself, would you maybe like to ski or ride more efficiently, getting less quad burn for example?



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Clinics can be helpful for everyone, short or tall, beginner or advanced.

Maybe you'd like to figure out a better way to deal with late-day, less-than-perfect snow conditions. How about just looking to develop more confidence on steeper terrain? Or what about exploring some of those tree runs your kids talk about?

The first step is to talk with the Snowsport School front desk folks at your favorite area. The best deal on every mountain is a group clinic, commonly an hour-and-a-half lesson, with groups split generally on terrain; Green Circle Trails, Blue Square or Black Diamond. And the industry standard price point here in the East is only about \$30. Because you've read this far, here's the secret pro tip: do this mid-week (or Sunday afternoon) and your non-beginner, group lesson is likely going to be a very small group, like one or two! To guarantee a one-on-one lesson, you're looking at a private lesson at maybe \$70-\$90 for an hour, although you can go with a friend or two with semi-privates being closer to about \$50 per person.

As a final pro tip, remember that this is your lesson, specifically the one you talk about with your coach. Be clear and open about what you want out of your time on snow. Speaking for most instructors in my profession, we've trained really hard to serve the skiing and riding public. We'd love the chance to increase your enjoyment of the sport and to let you enjoy it on different terrain, in different snow conditions and to enjoy it well into your 60s, 70s and even into your 80s. ❄️