

1 - Promoting Autonomy in Developing Ski Racers

by Diane Culver and Emma Stodel (613) 741-9578
PhD. Candidates – Sport Psychology - University of Ottawa

Coaches working with developing athletes shoulder many responsibilities; their job does not end with “performance coaching”. Along with teaching technical and tactical components of ski racing and preparing young racers for high level competition, developmental ski coaches also face the task of facilitating the development of personal and social skills in the athletes they work with. Couple this with the need to create a fun and healthy learning environment to maximise continued involvement with ski racing and it becomes obvious that the job of the developmental coach is a complex one. However, perhaps one of their greatest challenges is to foster a shift towards athlete autonomy and encourage athletes to take an active role in their learning. By developing autonomy, coaches are creating independent, self-directed, decision-making, intrinsically motivated individuals who can develop and grow in a constructive way. Experts have suggested “coaching practice that is more directive in leadership style may even stifle the development of the athlete and militate against independence” (Lyle, 1999, p. 39). To this end, in this article we provide coaches with five guidelines for promoting athlete autonomy. The basic tenet throughout, is that coaches form a respectful partnership with the athletes and move away from an authoritative or directive coaching style towards a more humanistic approach. Some coaches may be resistant to this shift as value is placed on the long-term personal development of the athlete rather than on immediate performance success – a factor upon which many coaches are appraised. Thus, whether or not you advocate this approach will be somewhat dependent on your coaching philosophy and values.

Promote reflection and self-directed learning

Rather than readily distributing advice to athletes at the bottom of the course as soon as they ski over to you, engage them in reflective learning. Ask the athletes to provide you with feedback on their run and solicit their opinions about their performance. Ask them questions: “What worked?”, “What didn’t?”, and “What would you do differently next time?” - listen to their answers. *Offer*, rather than impose advice, knowledge, and experience. Provide it in a positive, constructive, and supportive manner. Encourage the athletes to look for solutions to their problems from sources other than yourself (e.g., team-mates, teachers, role models, parents, books, video) and discuss these with you. Providing athletes with all the answers stifles independent thinking. Instead, allow them to feel they have control over their learning. Show that you value their ideas and support them during this learning process so that they feel that their investment has been worthwhile.

Involve athletes in the decision-making process

Discuss the coaching process with the athletes. Ask them how they want to be coached. What are their needs? What do they want from you? Include athletes in the planning of training sessions when possible. For example, allow them to lead the stretching exercises during dryland training or choose cross-training activities.

Give the athlete responsibility for quality training

In order for ski racers to take full advantage of their on-snow training time, they must be both mentally and physically prepared before each run. Help athletes identify what they need to do at the top of the course in order to mentally and physically prepare themselves for a successful run. Then, work with them to integrate these components into a simple routine. Going through this routine before each run should become habit for the athletes and consequently prepare them for every run and increase the likelihood of quality training sessions. Athletes may want to ask themselves the following 5 questions before each run:

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

Make goal setting a team effort between coach and athlete

Set long-term and short-term goals for all performance areas (physical, mental, technical, & tactical) with each athlete you coach. Goals must be important to the athletes if they are to put in the necessary time and effort to attain them. Allowing athletes to identify their own goals rather than you setting goals for them, often means they will be more committed to achieving them and working harder to accomplish them. However, as a coach, you can provide valuable insight into the athlete's current performance level and help set individualised goals that are realistic yet challenging within a specified time. When setting goals, remember that they should be within the athlete's control; specific, measurable, and written in positive terms. Goals are not carved in stone. If an athlete fails to achieve a goal, offer support and assist in reassessing and adjusting the goals as necessary.

Engage athletes in the evaluation process

Get athletes into the habit of evaluating their racing and training sessions as soon as possible after the event. This can be done in a log, on a feedback sheet you can create with the athletes, or through performance profiling. CSCF "Mental Training for Juvenile Athletes" provides basic, easy-to-follow instructions on how to create a post-race profile (available for download from SNOWPRO.COM). This can also be used for training and elaborated as needed. These profiles allow athletes to identify the factors that impacted their performance and provide guidance for planning upcoming training sessions.

In order to successfully adopt a humanistic coaching style and develop a co-operative relationship between coach and athlete, good communication and a respect for individual differences are critical. Communication involves listening as well as speaking, non-verbal behaviour as well as verbal utterances, and emotion as well as content. Athletes pick up on all these aspects of communication so coaches must be sensitive to the messages they are transmitting.

The coach's acknowledgement and consideration of individual differences among the team members is also fundamental to the development of a good relationship. Athletes come to ski racing from different backgrounds, with different experiences, and will have different needs and

goals. Understanding the most important challenges faced by each racer and assisting them in overcoming these will take a coach a long way.

As coaches, you work hard to ensure the athletes you train are physically strong and that their technique is continually improving. Many of you also ensure that athletes receive the necessary guidance in developing their mental skills by incorporating mental training into the overall training plan. Now, by engaging developmental ski racers in the more cognitive aspects of learning you can create independent, intelligent, reflective individuals.

References

Butler, R. J., & Hardy, L. (1992). The performance profile: Theory and application. Sport Psychologist, 6, 253-264.

Lyle, J. (1999). Coaching philosophy and coaching behaviour. In N. Cross & J. Lyle (Eds.), The coaching process: Principles and practice for sport. Boston, MA: Butterworth Heinemann.

Stodel, E. J. & Culver, D. (2000, December 8). Making every run count. Ski Racing, 33(7), 18.

Taylor, J. (1993). The mental edge for alpine ski racing. Aspen, CO: Alpine Taylor Consulting.