Coaches Workshop - Foundational Ski Skill Development

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We will start broad and focus in on the topic

What are your program goals? (mission)

Here are the most common statements in the North American alpine ecosystem:

"To inspire character growth and excellence in snowsports"

"To create champions on and off the mountain by developing life skills and providing growth opportunities through participation in sports"

"To foster a passion for ski racing and the mountains by providing opportunities for members to develop life skills, community spirit and friendship while in pursuit of personal and athletic excellence."

"To create great skiers, racers + athletes in a logical approach that enables the kids to maintain their school programing"

"Provide athletes the platform to continue to develop their abilities in a environment that is competitive, fun and balanced"

"For us it is as much about developing great people as it is about developing great athletes. In our club you can't have one without the other"

"To provide exceptional snowsport programs for the youth of the our community thereby enabling each participant to reach their athletic potential, while developing strong personal character through good sportsmanship, strong values, and individual goals"

These are all noble statements

The question is how are these outcomes achieved?

Is there a detailed plan which clearly outlines a progression around actions and behaviors which equal these outcomes?

And how are these achievements measured?

What does athlete/skier development mean?

I will share my beliefs in an attempt to stimulate thought

First and continuously, you develop great people. Great people can be developed into great skiers. And finally, great skiers can be developed into great competitors

Great people: Are coachable, teachable, polite, share respect, and possess multiple other traits that will help them succeed in and beyond ski racing

Great skiers: Are able to demonstrate a high level of skiing skill to manage all mountain terrain and conditions. They also have the capability to progress and execute within the most demanding ski racing environments with proficiency

Great competitors: Are able to manage their mind and regulate their bodies within highly competitive tests which require them to push to and beyond their limits. They understand what they are in control of and what is outside their control with a deep understanding of effort and outcome

During my journey this has been a blueprint and a sequence. If you embrace this progression it is imperative to focus heavily on a "skiing skill based approach" throughout the first major segment of an athlete's journey (6 to 14)

With this approach you should be able to answer many questions circulating throughout our sport from time immemorial

How many races should be attended as athletes progress up through the sport?

How much time should be spent practicing competition (final form racing) vs. time spent developing fundamentals as athletes develop?

When do results matter more than the development of the skier?

Keep in mind that age is just a number and everyone is a unique individual
But that does not negate the process, philosophy and progression to success

Building great people is clearly a main focus of programs. Let's assume we are doing that and we will focus on building great skiers - Our topic for today

An approach based on purposeful skill development and methods to teach great skiing

It is my strong belief that skiing more and racing less with a focused and purposeful approach to skill development is critical for the success of the missions listed earlier

I will provide a few concepts and ideas

Hopefully you will be inspired to explore additional learning around these points in order to apply and incorporate some or all within your approach

Concept One
Define your purpose with competitions?

Suggestion: Examples of a focused purpose with competition

Focused as a fun game like approach to training skills and pushing ability.
Outcomes can include; joy, excitement, opportunity, motivation and team building

Focused as a method to test the execution and application of the skills being taught
Outcomes can include; attachment to effort equals improvement, process focus, skill awareness, competition effect on execution as well as the outcomes listed around fun game approach

Concept Two
Consider a new definition of training and practice

Suggestion:

Training
This is a session which is focused on coaching interaction - introducing new material - providing a high degree of feedback - high degree of video use

Practice
This is a session which allows the athletes to practice within a structured environment with specific objectives on their own - limited to no feedback - limited to no video - coach pivots into deeper observation and recording - capture the moments you may be missing - develop athletes independence and self awareness

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Less talk and provide more action (movement/skiing)
Avoid training plans which include too much time waiting around to ski. Repetition matters and we are already way behind in volume at the beginning of our North American journey

Suggestion:

- Explore providing training objectives for understanding prior to the time during the activities
- Be clear and concise with instruction & feedback "less is more"
- Keep it simple and always check you have complete understanding from your athletes
- Complexity is difficult to communicate and breeds confusion. Understanding the task is critical to achievement, remember H over W - More about "*how*" less about "*what*" and provide context around why

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Less talk and provide more action (movement/skiing)

Suggestions (continued):

• Force space and timing in the rotation/lap
• Small sub groups with different activities; e.g. tech free skiing & gate drills or intermix training & practice focus with different sub groups

If you care to subscribe to the school of Wooden "Keep it simple", & "Pay attention to the basics"
Coach John Wooden

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Internal, external and normal coaching cues

Coaching cues are perhaps most often used to focus an athlete's attention on the key feature of the task/skill that is being taught (e.g., getting up-tall, rolling onto the edge, keeping the hands quiet, etc.). Technically speaking, this is referred to as the athlete's focus of attention, or what is otherwise known as 'attentional focus'.

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Internal, external and normal coaching cues

Internal Cues
Internal coaching cues direct the athlete to focus their attention on the body movements associated with the skill. Internal cue examples include: Bend from your hips, Rapidly extend through your hips, Flex your knee(s), Flex ankle at this point of the turn

It is believed these types of cues can disrupt the athlete's automatic control/movement processes as they direct the athlete to consciously organize their body's movement

With that said, it is important to acknowledge that this is not to suggest that internal cues are not effective, it is simply to draw your attention to what this type of cue is believed to do.

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Internal, external and normal coaching cues

External Cues
External coaching cues direct the athlete to focus their attention on the movement effect or the outcome associated with the skill. External cue examples include: Stay long and low during the xxx phase, Push the ground away, Absorb the ground/snow, Explode forward towards the next turn, etc.

These cues, therefore, encourage the athlete to think more about the outcome (e.g., absorb the ground), than the internal actions needed to perform it (e.g., bend your hips and knees at the same time). Given this, it is believed external cues reduce conscious interference and "this allows the motor system to more naturally self-organize", leading to enhanced learning and performance.

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Internal, external and normal coaching cues

Normal Cues

This form of coaching cue is, in fact, an absence of instruction, and can instead be referred to as the athlete's normal focus when they are given no cue whatsoever. Having said that, the athlete is arguably likely to think of their own cue/instruction based on what they have previously been instructed to do by their coach – potentially resulting in the athlete thinking of either an internal or external cue.

Article of reference: https://www.scienceforsport.com/coaching-cues/

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Internal, external and normal coaching cues

Suggestion:

- Understand that: the words you use matter & how you direct them matters
- Deepen your awareness of what type of cue you are providing
- Pay attention to the outcome when you consistently apply a certain type of cue
- Use them all - but be aware, explore your methods and improve your cues and feedback

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Feedback

Stay focused on predetermined objectives, stay on task. Resist random error detection and corrections
Feedback should be timely and specific, descriptive, constructive & positive
Identify how to improve, resist pointing out what is not happening or is wrong with the execution

Suggestion:

- Stay on task
- Focus on how to improve
- Keep it simple, short & concise
- Remember to seek their understanding

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Praise

Praise Effort not Outcomes or what people may be good at or possess

In the academic setting, studies show that the students who were praised for their effort got better results, and were more likely to persist at challenging tasks. The groups who were praised for their intelligence and/or achievements on the other hand, not only gave up easily when the going got tough, but when given another easy test, their results actually got worse!
Expectations can get in the way through fear of failure (not achieving what they have been told or loss of current status/praise)

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Praise

Suggestion:

- Effort - Effort - Effort
- How & process
- Resist pure outcomes or achievements/labels

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Block training vs. Random (decision based)

Blocked training (training & practicing the same skill under the same conditions) leads to more rapid gains in performance but limited transfer when variability is introduced. Random practice (adding variability and interleaving training types) slows learning but improves retention and transfer.

For example, blocked training leads to faster skill acquisition, but a decreased ability to retain and generalize to new situations days after training. Random training leads to an increased ability to retain and generalize, but is linked with slower skill acquisition.

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Block training vs. Random (decision based)

Suggestion:

Use both and understand the structure of your training sessions based on what you are attempting to achieve

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Situational training

Building a training session around specific situations which athletes will encounter on the mountain and within the race course

For example
A single jump session, The use of terrain features, spines, rolls, knolls, gate-drill courses to single out specific concepts and/or situations in a race course

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Situational training

Suggestion:

Identify which situations are important within your athletes progression and mix these into sessions within your overall seasonal training plan.

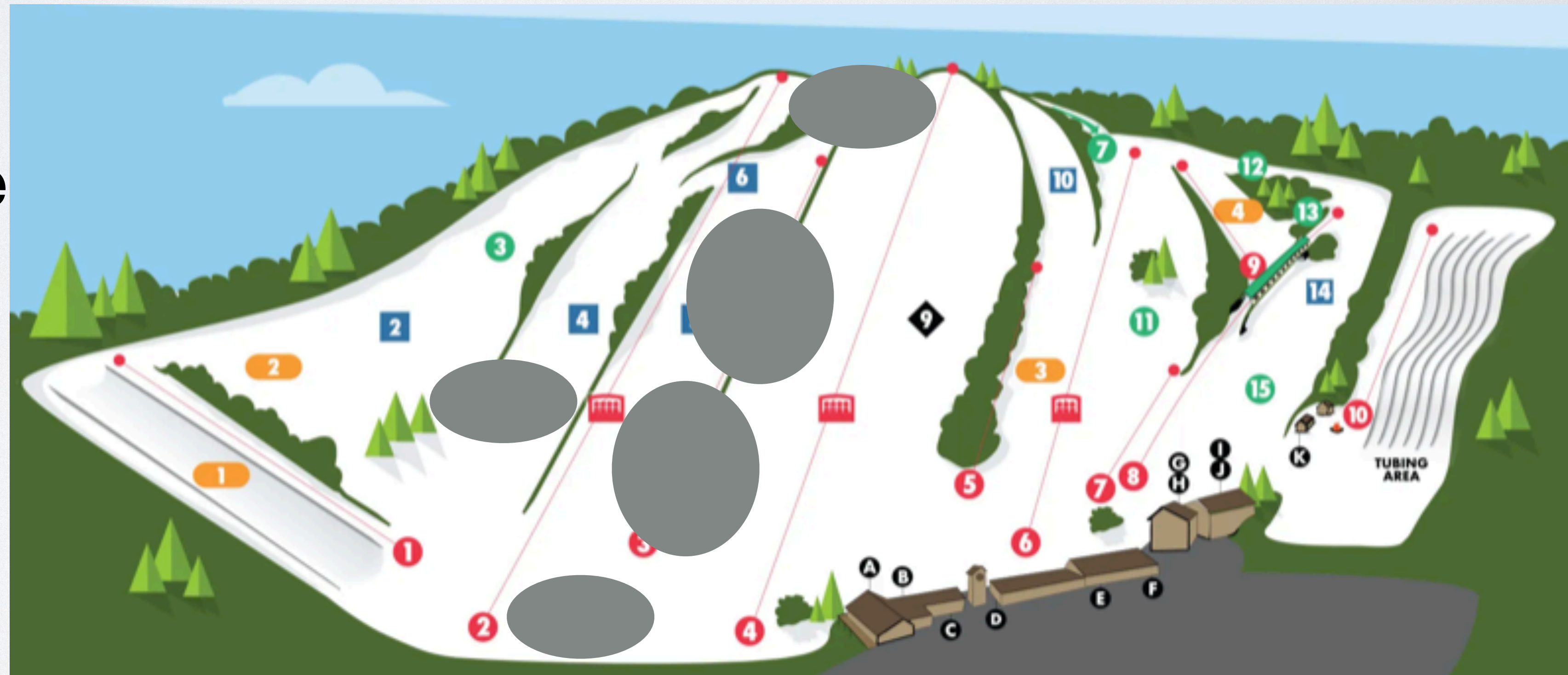Remember, with this and everything we are covering, CONTEXTUAL FIT

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Circuit training approach

The utilization of the entire rotation/lap to increase productivity and focus

What does this look like

Concept Three *(this is the big one)*
Understanding methods around teaching & coaching skills

*Circuit training approach

Suggestion:

- Develop training plans with this approach in mind
- Be creative
- Focus on movement
- Be specific with different intentions at different locations
- Improve coaching interaction

Concept Four
Evaluation of skiing improvement & achievement

Subjective vs. Objective

How do you measure improvement?
Is your method more subjective than objective?

We operate in an environment where the natural subjective focus is race day results

How can we correct this imbalance which can be detrimental to motivation, sustainability and real skill development?

Concept Four
Evaluation of skiing improvement & achievement

Suggestion:

Identify the skills you will focus on for the entire season and within each block of time within your plan

Consider only a few exercises which can be adapted to multiple skill improvement outcomes

* The goal is to master exercises and therefore achieve greater skill improvement
* Identify skill tests/contests which can be objectively evaluated at set times throughout the season

Examples

- One ski race
- Hop turns contest
- Obstacle course race
- Turn shape race

Concept Four
Evaluation of skiing improvement & achievement

- Set up is critical
- Consistency is critical
- Staying on task is critical

Some of these will use time as one indicator of improvement

All will include a predetermined set of outcomes which can be measured; e.g. pole is planted X number of times, X number of hop turns within the set distance, balance maintained X number of times, ski boot maintained off the snow X number of times

Video is used in order to record the activity to be specific with outcomes and score

Remember to praise effort and direct improvement towards objective change

Summary

I have witnessed many skiing styles which I did not prefer but I have yet to find a champion racer which is not a technically strong skier

More importantly, I have never witnessed a skier that truly knows and believes they are improving that does not enjoy the process and the overall experience of our sport

Phil McNichol