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32 DEGREES

THE JOURNAL OF PROFESSIONAL SNOWSPORTS INSTRUCTION | WINTER 2011

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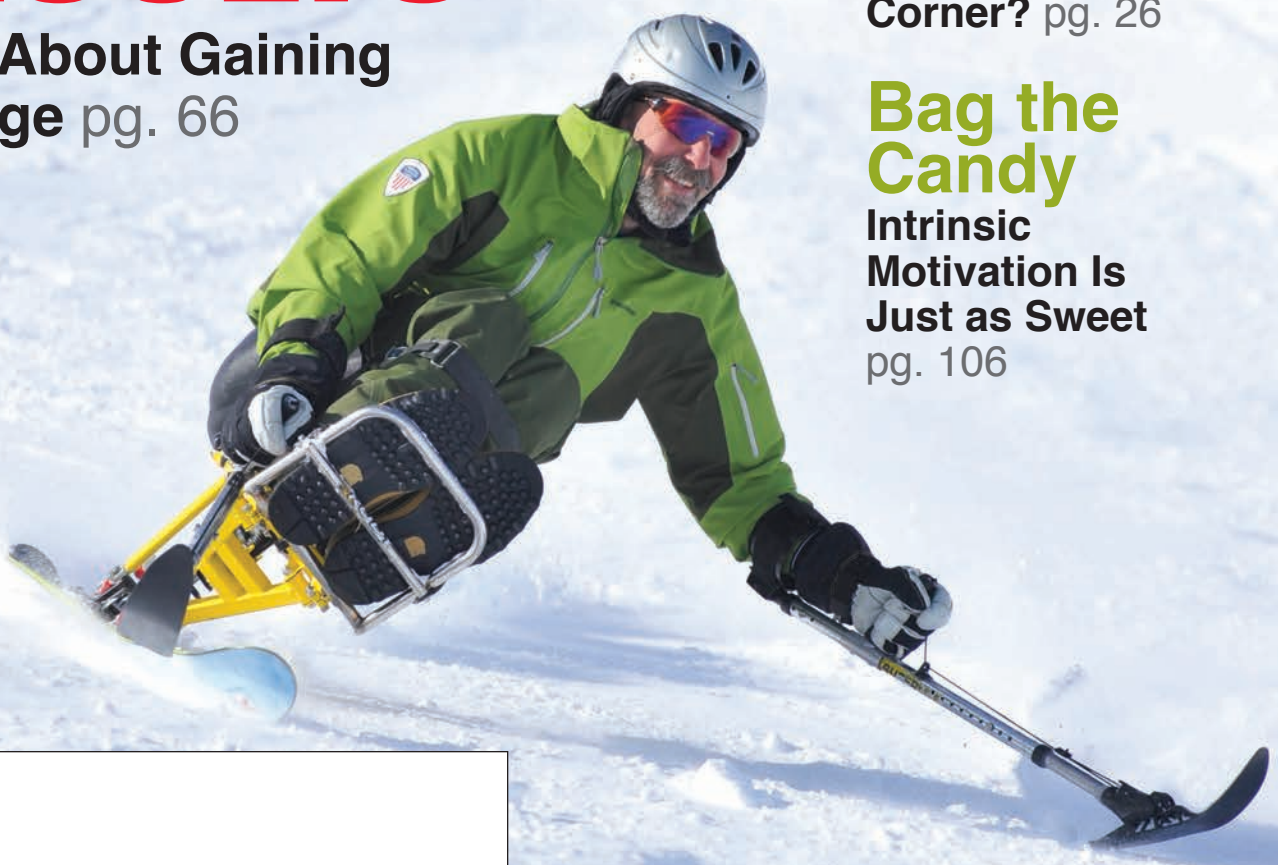

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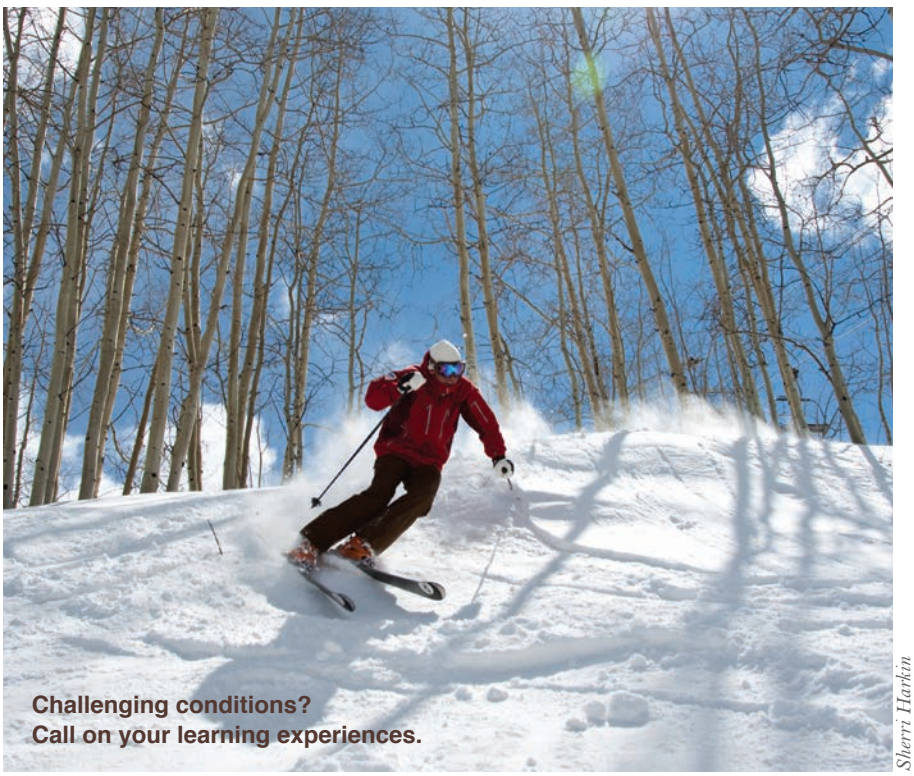
WEREN'T YOU A STUDENT ONCE?

By **PETER HOPPOCK**

The memory of a difficult challenge you overcame often leads to giving your best lessons. When you relive the process by which you overcame your fear of steep and icy conditions, you may find hidden within that struggle the right combination of psychological insight and movement self-analysis to lead your students through the same path to success.

Or you might have been the recipient of a lesson when the transformation from struggle to delight occurred. The point here isn't to remember what the instructor taught you. It's to remember what you "went through." Remembering what you were taught is of course useful, but it's not really your own; in the end, it's just words. But if you can relive what you felt—*how you felt*—the experience will not only encompass what the instructor did, but deeper personal issues that are at the heart of all significant learning.



Challenging conditions? Call on your learning experiences.

Sherri Harkin

LIKE IT WAS JUST YESTERDAY

The value of past experience hit me full-force a while back when I led a group of Midwesterners out West. They were eager to tackle some challenging conditions and terrain: black and double-black pitches with two feet of heavy powder that had been cut up the previous two days. There were also hidden treasures underneath the surface: bumps, old crusty snow, and the occasional icy patch. Hey, never mind the clients—this was going to be a struggle for me!

As a Midwesterner myself, I took quick inventory of my own abilities and options. I'd been skiing in this goulash of white a couple days already with some success. Now there was another foot of soft stuff—should I go back to Powder 101? Boring. Maybe we could just ski and I'd give the occasional tip? Too haphazard. Maybe everyone would be just fine without me—and we could have a glorious day putting in significant vertical!

When I looked at their faces—nervous and excited—separated from mine by the heavy falling snow, I saw something I hadn't expected to see: myself. I realized while learning the area during the previous two days, I had been going through a process that was exactly what I wanted my group to go through.

I had been reliving all my struggles, re-acquainting myself with movements and tactics I rarely had the opportunity to put into practice. I had just spent a couple days "learning" all over again! The excitement I had felt over those two days, the pure joy—that's what I really wanted my group to feel. I thought what better way to help ensure that than to go through that process with them.

I had brought my Midwestern hard-snow, long-leg, short-leg movements to the mountains and had to change my tactics. As I watched my group, I relived

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the adjustments I had made the previous two days; from grinding out turn after turn heavily flexed through most of the arc, thighs burning, with a mix of edging and pressure control—to a more narrow-stanced, evenly weighted, turn predicated on a combination of rotary movement and pressure control.

I watched—*and I remembered.* Not just the previous two days, but all the struggles and accomplishments I had been through related to these conditions. That's when I decided that my class would be better served by my flipping through the pages of my own history than by mentally turning the pages of an instructional guide.

A quick inventory of their sensations confirmed that I was on the right path. Responses from the group were "My thighs are killing me already," or "I can't seem to turn in this stuff," and "I can't get my balance right."

To these responses I replied, "I know exactly what you're feeling."

A day of guided discovery began. I remembered my early struggles and said, "I don't want you to think you have to change the way you ski to have fun in these conditions. Let's just look for the right combination of movements that you already know, but are not aware that they will work for you here."

We skied. A lot. I relived my own experiments and asked, "What if you forgot all the forced flexion and extension you are used to and just turned? What if you focused more on the femur and less on the feet"?

And we skied. A lot. When we stopped I asked, "What if you could feel as tall in the fall line as you do standing up right now? By keeping your thighs more vertical for longer?"

And we skied a lot more. We might have had lunch. I forget.

"What about in the transition between turns?" asked one instructor. "Isn't there flexion and then extension as you start the new turn?"

I remembered the process I had gone through and asked, "What if you just kept turning and let your feet tell you when to relax and when to extend?"

And we skied . . . and skied. And I asked, "So what do you think?"

"That's a lot of rotary," one said. "I thought you had to have a lot more up and down in powder." Another added, "I'm hardly using my poles."

"And how do you feel?" I queried.

"Less tired" . . . "It's easier" . . . "My thighs aren't killing me," came the replies. And the defining phrase from the group of that day was: "More turning equals less burning."

I couldn't have written out a lesson plan that worked as well, or driven an entire day's worth of skiing. As a capper, the group eagerly agreed to have the person who fell first buy beer for the group at the end of the day. I knew we'd had a good day, but the laughter and smiles seem a bit exaggerated until I realized that I was the one who'd taken the first tumble!

AH YES, THE AUSTRIAN

As it turns out, an even more distant memory saved the day on another occasion. I was giving a lesson with a woman who wanted to ski steeper slopes with her husband, but who was afraid to commit her center of mass (CM) downhill for the upcoming turn. She was fine on the blue slopes but even easy blacks scared her and she reverted to jamming wedge turns, weight back and fulcrum-powered. It reminded me of one of my ski experiences as a preteen.

I thought back to the lesson in which a "caring" Austrian pro had taken my rental poles in frustration, pulled the cap handles off, and proceeded to bend and twist the top portion of the shafts until each broke. He then replaced the handles, each pole now at least a foot shorter. He bellowed, "Und now you vill reach down zuh hill, yah? I place zuh paper down here und you stab it!" He was reminding me that we had been using the pole as a parks attendant might use his pick for trash pick up! And the next time I "reached" down the hill to "pick up the

trash," my turns began more easily.

I was not about to turn all Austrian foot soldier on this female student. But when I thought about her needs now and my needs back then, I realized could use something that flowed from that lesson. The success of that early lesson came when I reached so far with that shortened pole that my body straightened out. The result was that my edges released, the turn began and flowed easily as a result, and I stayed ahead of my skis.

So I asked her, "Could you imagine yourself being as straight and as tall as the ski pole when it actually touches the snow?" That is exactly what I had felt long ago.

She said yes and we began again on blue terrain. Then I asked, "Could you imagine your body and the ski pole being at the same angle when the pole touches the snow?" Again that is what I had felt long ago.

She had been used to crouching when she touched the pole forward and to the inside of the upcoming turn to avoid committing her CM, so the next few dozen turns were a voyage of discovery. There were awkward moments when her edges released when she wasn't ready and she found herself turning earlier in the process. On the blue terrain, she thought this was "exciting," and she was beginning to enjoy moving more freely, using—instead of fighting—gravity.

"Could you imagine jumping across a four- or five-foot gap toward where you are going to touch the pole?" I asked her. That is what I had felt years ago. She said she'd try. "So do everything except the actual jump," I added. That appealed to her.

We progressed on terrain that grew from blue to black. Her movements were a bit exaggerated for the terrain we started on, but I could see—and she could feel—how easily and quickly her edges released, and she could turn powerfully through the fall line without fishtailing, staying ahead of the turns.

The skill shift from blue to black came almost unnoticed. She realized instinctively that she needed to do "way less" on the blue terrain. In the end, she said that even if she never really got used to black terrain, the feeling of being able to guide a turn from start to finish was thrilling.

This lesson wasn't cut from a template—it came from my experience. And it was more satisfying because of it.

When you are freeskiing next time, or when you're facing a challenging group or private lesson, take a moment to explore your feelings, to delve into your own past. You may be surprised how rich and varied your own experiences are, and how useful they can be. 32°

Peter Hoppock is a PSIA-certified Level III alpine instructor at Wilmot Mountain in Wisconsin. He is nearing the end of a 30+ year run as a member of the Central Division education staff.