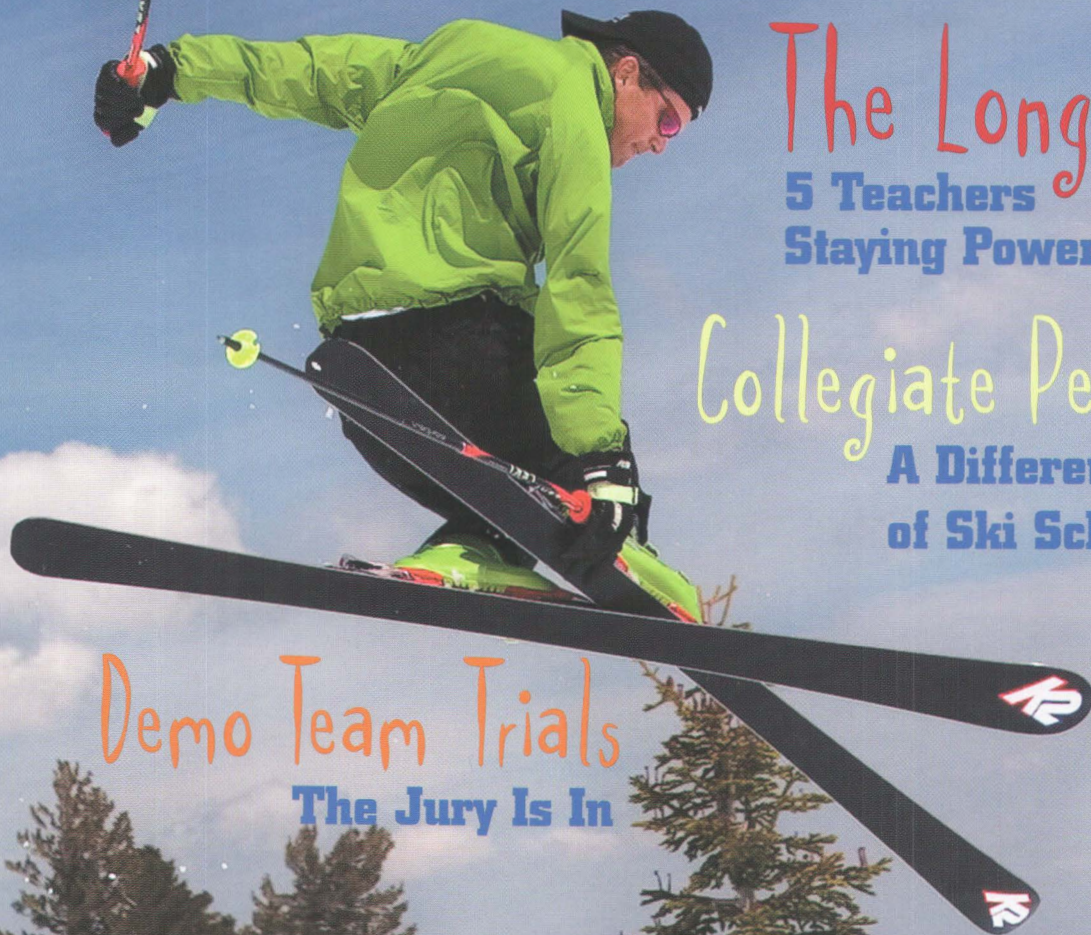


the professional

PROFESSIONAL SKI INSTRUCTORS OF
AMERICA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

FALL
2004

skier



The Long Run
**5 Teachers With
Staying Power**

Collegiate Peek
**A Different Kind
of Ski School**

Demo Team Trials
The Jury Is In

Steep Tricks

Now you ski it...now you don't

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do you slip or grip?

to grow, you need 'em both

IT WOULD BE FAIR TO SAY that today's intermediate skiers—when compared to their counterparts of the mid-1980s—ski faster, learn how to carve turns sooner, and might very well be having more fun on the slopes. Because of innovations in skis, boots, and bindings, carving is easier, wide-track parallel is the norm, and speed control is more often achieved through turn shape than desperate hockey stops.

But does this trend signal a rise in the overall skill level of intermediate skiers or merely indicate a shift in emphasis of the skill blend? If you watch your intermediate students closely, I think you'll find that the latter statement is closer to the mark. And this can be a cause for concern, since emphasis of one skill blend to the exclusion of others can have negative consequences. Sure, today's skiers are effortlessly applying the edging and pressure-control movements that enable carved turns and a parallel stance, but how are the rotary skills that support versatility faring?

Twenty years ago the goal of intermediate skiers was parallel skiing, which relied on a near equal blend of rotary, edging, and pressuring skills for the skis to perform optimally. Along came shaped skis coupled with more responsive boots and bindings, and suddenly the prospects for parallel didn't seem quite so confounding. But while the shaped ski revolution may have offered solutions to old problems, it has created a new set of dilemmas as well. Ask one of your Level 5 students to pick his or her way down a narrow gully, negotiate a steep face strewn with piles of Sierra cement, or stay

in control on a fall-away slope with a mix of ice and windblown and you'll likely get one of two responses: an honest "I can't really ski that stuff," or a calculated "That doesn't sound like much fun. Let's just stay here and cruise."

If the elusive brass ring of yesteryear was parallel skiing, today's goal is to ski the whole mountain in all conditions, which requires highly developed skills and the *ability to blend them as necessary in a given situation*. And guess what?

If the elusive brass ring of yesteryear was parallel skiing, today's goal is to **SKI THE WHOLE MOUNTAIN** in all conditions.

Those edging and pressure movements that serve skiers so well on shaped skis in groomed terrain need to make the acquaintance of the rotary movements skiers have found so easy to neglect lately.

SLIP INTO SOMETHING MORE COMFORTABLE

On grip 'em and rip 'em midfats and skis with radical sidecuts, skiers can easily dig in and hold onto the hardpack and groomers. But ice, steeps, and out-of-bounds crud don't always answer to the call of the parabolics. The fancy new boards are supposed to carve into just about anything, but when they don't and you start to slip, it's instinctive to fight against the forces instead of going with the flow. This is the new plateau for intermediate skiers trying to reach the expert level. And truth be told, I ran headlong into that plateau myself on another continent a while back.

Some years ago I was in Chamonix, France, skiing hors-piste behind my guide, Gilles, who was wearing a huge pack that contained our meals, crampons, ice axes, helmets, extra gear, space blankets, sleeping bags, a tent, and more. (I tried lifting his pack once and estimated it weighed about 60 pounds.) Before setting off down a steep east-facing pitch along the peak known as Les Grands Montets, Gilles reassured me that as long as I did exactly what he said *I would not die*. This

meant skiing behind him and within his track parameters. I had made the mistake of mentioning that I was a *moniteur de ski* in the United States. I might as well have waved a red flag in front of a bull.

Gilles set off, gracefully linking easy, medium-radius turns down the face through three inches of fresh powder. *Piece of cake*, I thought to myself, *I can do that*. And I took off. One turn later I broke through a hidden layer of icy crust. *Surprise!* Face plant. Embarrassment.

I got up and tried again. Two more turns and . . . crack, the crust broke again. Another face plant. After regrouping once more I made it through two more turns before hearing that sickening crack again under my skis. This time the action shifted into a series of ballet-like moves that included hops on one leg, a step-hop, and . . . not a faceplant. No, this time it was a half-twisting barrel roll that ended in a double-binding-release hip

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auger. Gilles was not impressed.

In stark contrast to my performance, Gilles' descent was the epitome of Les Grand Montets flair. Skiers often talk about flowing down a hill, but seldom have I ever seen a more perfect example of it than the Frenchman's exhibition on 500 feet of vertical that morning. "*Ne faites pas les mouvements trop durs,*" he explained. "*Il faut glisser. Il faut planer.*" (Translation: "Don't be so harsh in your movements. It's necessary to slip. It's necessary to plane out [i.e., flatten your skis on the snow].")

We never encountered conditions like that again during the time I skied with him. Significantly, though, it's the run I remember most clearly when thinking back on that trip all these years later. Since that day I have actually searched for similar conditions, trying to re-create Gilles' amazing run.

Most instructors have associated SKIDDING with a lack of control. The key, however, is not to avoid skidding, but to learn how to use it properly.

Like many guides and experienced all-mountain skiers, Gilles had discovered how to "go with the flow." Even with a 60-pound pack on his back, he managed to ski softer and lighter than I did. He could carve 'em when he had to, and if he couldn't carve . . . well, he slid 'em. While my edges dug in, his merely slipped along the surface. When I braced against the downhill ski, he let his go. My edge angles were high, his were low. My center of mass was distinctly inside the path of my skis. His stayed pretty much "on top."

It wasn't easy, but eventually I learned to simply slide over less-than-perfect snow in the manner Gilles suggested. As a result I'm now more adaptable in the mountains. Carving, sliding, skidding, leaping—whatever the mountain suggests, I now listen and follow orders. More often than not, my attempts meet with success. Most instructors have associated skidding with a lack of control. The

key, however, is not to avoid skidding, but to learn how to use it properly.

WHAT TO DO, THEN?

Whether you ski on a big mountain in the Rockies, a small hill in the Midwest, or at an Eastern resort, you can try this series of tasks to see just how easy it is to find your flow. Believe it or not, there is a happy medium somewhere between an out-of-control slip and a white-knuckle grip. Once you find it, you'll be able to ski the whole mountain.

As instructors we owe it to ourselves and the public to keep growing and challenging ourselves technically and tactically to become as proficient and as knowledgeable as possible. At the risk of spoiling the party, I suggest that we become more multi-dimensional in our skiing before we pat ourselves on the back for digging deeper and deeper trenches all the way down our resort's

groomers. Once we attain the rank of master and commander of all-mountain skiing, we'll be better equipped to pass these skill blends along to students.

Use the new skill blends to challenge yourself whenever possible; seek out ski trails and snow conditions you previously might have avoided out of fear or lack of confidence. Hopefully, though, you won't have to experience a series of face plants before the light bulb goes on above your head and you experience an alpine epiphany.

Exercise 1: Traditional Sideslip

To begin your journey of experience, find a groomed slope with moderate pitch and point your skis across the hill. Your next step is to *prepare* for a vertical sideslip, but don't make the mistake of initiating the movement with your knees and/or ankles. Instead, make sure you have an easy, tall stance before beginning. Don't use any

extra flexion, and apply only slight pressure on the cuffs of your boots. You'll also need to weight your downhill ski slightly more than the uphill ski.

Begin the sideslip by tipping your entire body (beginning with your downhill shoulder) down the hill. In other words, your frame should be perpendicular to the slope angle, or at least approaching it. Initiating this movement should set you off on an easy slide, with your center of mass moving only slightly down the hill to get you underway. *Your tib/fibs will no longer press into the front of your boots, but will instead shift to the side, and only gently at that.* Try to gain speed, i.e., *build momentum*. You can stop your progress by using knee-ankle flexion-angulation, but don't try to control your speed with those movements. *Let it go!* (Note: At this point do not attempt to flatten the skis. Not only is such a move unnecessary, it would force your body into an awkward and ineffective position.)

Exercise 2: Sideslip Races

If you have a ski partner, set up a little race over a predetermined distance to see who is fastest. Such competition can prove that you've found the edge angle that provides control while still allowing you to slip down the hill at a good clip. Challenge each other several times on different pitches, facing both directions on each pitch. While you're trying to slip down the fall line, take note of whether your tails or tips head down the hill, and check the pressure on your cuffs. After conducting this check, do you find that you're still slightly forward or aft? Ultimately you want your skis to remain facing across the hill, without allowing your tips or tails to seek the fall line.

Do you, like so many skiers, resist the *momentum* with an almost unnoticeable flex? You might at first experience some trepidation as you gain speed, especially if you're used to heading directly where your edges are lined up.

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Hang in there! Remember, it's speed gain you want: *Feel the momentum.*

Exercise 3: Redirecting the Slip

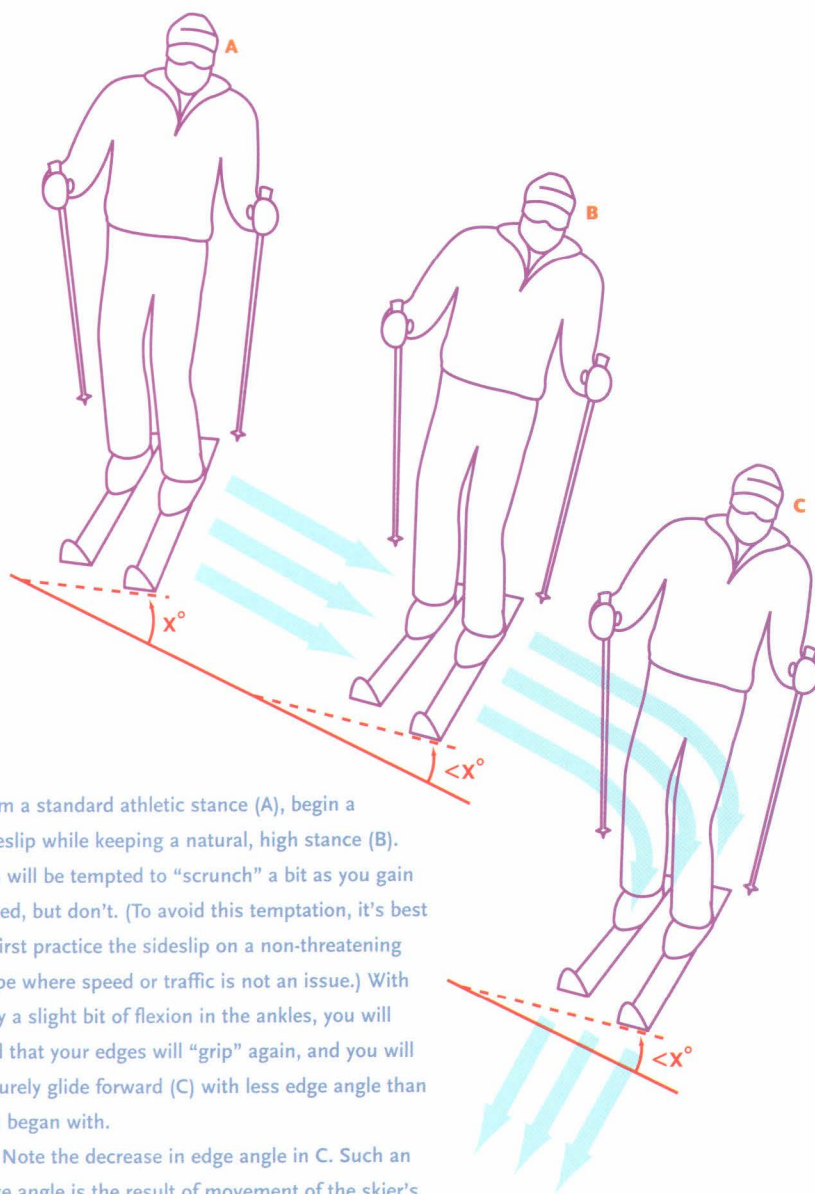
On the next run, begin the same vertical sideslip again. As you're descending, feel the momentum and gently begin to redirect the tib/fibs from the downhill side of the boot cuffs to the front of the boot cuffs. "Gently" is the key word here. Without much effort your skis will, in the space of a few yards, find and hold their edges as you travel in a line across the hill in the direction of the ski tips. Practice this a few times in both directions to make sure you have a feel for it.

Why is subtlety so critical? Well, because in order for the rotary skills to win out—i.e., the tib/fib shift from side to front—no leveraging can insinuate itself into such a movement. (Just watch your tails slip out into an unwanted christie if leveraging occurs.) Note that this rotary movement does not require any "steering" or rotation of the tib/fib along its own axis.

While moving, however, keep in mind that you don't want to flex or build up any extra angles in the ankles/knees. You're not trying to *create* a "holding" edge; you just want to *find* one. Again, if your tips start to head downhill, check to see if you applied too much cuff pressure. Or, if your tails start to head downhill with that extra cuff pressure, your edge angles may still be unnecessarily severe. *Be gentle!* Repeat the move several times

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figure 1



From a standard athletic stance (A), begin a sideslip while keeping a natural, high stance (B). You will be tempted to "scrunch" a bit as you gain speed, but don't. (To avoid this temptation, it's best to first practice the sideslip on a non-threatening slope where speed or traffic is not an issue.) With only a slight bit of flexion in the ankles, you will find that your edges will "grip" again, and you will securely glide forward (C) with less edge angle than you began with.

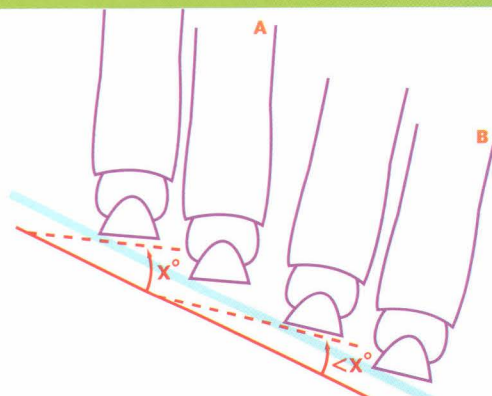
Note the decrease in edge angle in C. Such an edge angle is the result of movement of the skier's center of mass down the hill and should not come from knee or ankle adjustments.

figure 2

Initially, you may have trouble releasing the edges without releasing the knees. If so, check to see if you are over-flexed at all the joints, especially the ankles or knees.

Avoid such over-flexing to allow for a clean release at the knees.

Note that from A to B there is a decrease in edge angle as a result of the movement of the skier's center of mass down the hill. Again, it's important not to try to affect such a change in the edge angle with knee or ankle adjustments. Remember, you're looking for a movement that will allow you to increase your speed. In other words, the goal is to gain momentum. Let it happen!



slip or grip

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in both directions with the goal of having a *minimal amount of movement* of the tib/fibs as they direct and instigate the sliding. Even with a tall stance, you'll want to strive for minimal movement of the upper body.

Exercise 4: Forward Sideslip

By now you will be ready to practice the forward sideslip. From a traverse, redirect your tib/fibs toward the downhill side of your boots, i.e., they will be perpendicular to the edges of your skis. Do this with the same movements you used in Exercise 1. Use the momentum you gained during the traverse to create the *forward* aspect of the sideslip, but don't try to "manage" the angle of your descent (for example, it doesn't have to be 45 degrees off the fall line).

Once again feel the momentum build as you slide. By bringing the tib/fibs back toward the front of the boot cuff, you will change direction and resume a classic traverse. Note how little edge angle is required to hold that traverse. Continue switching the pressure back and forth from the front of the boot to the downhill side of the boot so that you're forming small garlands in a diagonal progression down the hill.

Exercise 5: Turns

Are you comfortable with these rather speedy sideslip variations? If so, try using them in some turns.

From a traverse heading to your left, for instance, redirect the tib/fib to the bottom of the hill (that is, to the right side of the cuff) as in Exercise 4. As you gain momentum, redirect all 10 of your toes along the path of travel. Note that the direction of the toes accompanies, *but is secondary to*, the tib/fib movement. It is only with this slight rotary movement of the feet that your skis will actually start to "flatten" out. The result is a turn where rotary predominates but is not overpoweringly applied. Once your skis cross the fall line, the tib/fib

pressure (to the right) continues without exerting extra pressure on the front of the cuffs to provide leverage.

If you feel your turns are too skidded, don't fight that feeling—at least not just yet. Concentrate instead on the sensation of speed gained through the turns (i.e., the buildup of momentum) and your ability to control the direction of momentum while attempting to create S-shapes without setting a hard edge.

After several runs you'll be cruising right along. You might not even realize the speed picking up until you're really moving. Only after letting yourself go for a while should you try to control your turn shape by consciously increasing or decreasing edge angles with extra knee or hip angulation. Even without these added elements, you can achieve rounded turn shapes with very little skidding and without a lot of flexion needed to help control that shape.

This is a time for learning. So, if you find yourself getting too comfortable and don't feel challenged, just up the ante! Find a steeper slope or some messier snow. Consistently test your comfort level with smaller edge angles and greater speeds until you can float over the breakable crust and glide over patchy ice.

And if you're ever in Chamonix, look up a fellow named Gilles at the Ecole des Guides Montagnes du Ski. Unlike my younger, inexperienced self, you should be prepared to follow him. When he asks where you want to go, just tell him you'll tag along anywhere he cares to lead. ♦

Peter Hoppock has taught skiing in various parts of the country for more than 35 years. He is currently an examiner for PSIA-Central, based out of Wilmot Mountain in southern Wisconsin, where he's taught for the last three decades. Hoppock recently abandoned a long stint in advertising to pursue a master's degree and a second career as a high school English teacher.