



right from the start

*fundamentals of skiing are taught in the very first lesson*

by Terry Barbour

With his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum got people thinking about life's more enduring lessons, and he got me thinking about the basics of ski instruction. Maybe it's time for a sequel called *All You Really Need to Know About Skiing You'll Learn in a Level / Lesson*.

Many instructors—namely those who believe that the most critical aspects of skiing are taught at the upper levels—might assume that this book would be a work of fiction. But I strongly believe that the introductory level is precisely where the seeds of success are sown. A well-taught level 1 lesson provides a student with all the fundamentals to be a competent and potentially great skier. Just as Fulghum's examples of “share everything” and “don't hit people” are timeless bits of advice dispensed in kindergarten, tidbits such as “skiing is fun” and “turn shape is the most important way to control speed” underlie all progress a skier makes as he or she evolves from beginner to expert.

To determine if your beginner classes are well taught, ask yourself these questions: Do your lessons instill sound fundamentals? Do you empower your students to continue learning on their own? At the conclusion of each lesson, are your students eager to come back for another one? Do you take advantage of recent advances in equipment technology to speed up and enhance your students' progress?

If any of your answers were less than a resounding “YES!”, here are some practical ideas for presenting introductory lessons that rock. I base these on American Teaching System fundamentals and 23 years of experience as a ski teacher. Even though I most often work with upper-level skiers, I still enjoy teaching beginner lessons. Oftentimes they're the most rewarding—especially when you see the huge smiles and unbridled excitement of first-timers making graceful turns on the hill.

### Attitude is everything

The first ingredient for a successful level 1 lesson is the right outlook, namely a “can-do” attitude that shows you're psyched to

share your passion for the sport—regardless of the skiing proficiency of the student. Do you arrive at line-up with your heart set on a level 7 bump lesson? Well, you shouldn't. A good instructor is able to make a quick shift in attitude and approach when lesson assignments don't go as planned or envisioned.

Think back to the last time your passion for skiing was at an all-time high. How did you feel? Make it your goal to provide an experience that your students will recall with similar emotion. Supervisors can certainly help drive this approach by pre-assigning levels so everyone can mentally prepare, but you should be able to go with the flow if things change.

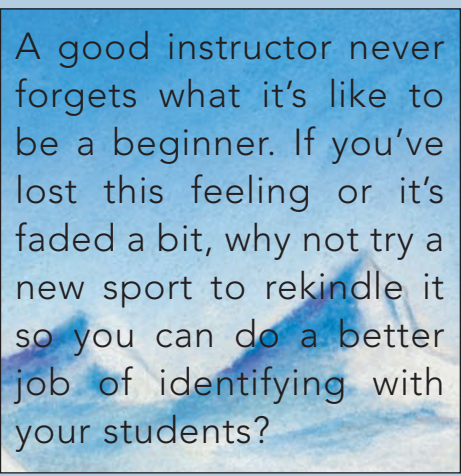
A second indispensable ingredient is empathy. Do you remember how you felt the first time you skied? You were probably excited but also a bit scared and unsure of yourself. And then there were those totally foreign movements you were supposed to make with bulky equipment on a slippery surface. No wonder you felt nervous!

A good instructor never forgets what it's like to be a beginner. If you've lost this feeling or it's faded a bit, why not try a new sport to rekindle it so you

can do a better job of identifying with your students? Try snowboarding, nordic skiing, snowblading, inline skating, or just about anything that involves balance in motion. To better relate the activity to alpine skiing, it should ideally be a sport in which gravity propels you.

The third ingredient you'll want to add to the mixture is sincerity. It's next to impossible to be a good instructor unless you really care about your students' success. Your concern—or lack thereof—will show in your mannerisms, body language, and voice. Trust is a critical component of the learning partnership, and one of the easiest ways to start that journey

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toward mutual trust is to show genuine concern for your students. Establish a connection from the very beginning by shaking each student's hand and making eye contact when you introduce yourself. Learn your students' names and refer to them by name throughout the lesson.

And be sure to treat students as individuals by giving specific feedback to each one. General feedback to the group as a whole can be confusing. You may think you're being kind by making broad comments with the hope that the right individuals will know you're talking about them, but such an approach is ambiguous at best. Your students will get much more out of your feedback if it is specific to them.

Positive feedback, such as "Jenny, you're really getting the hang of those wedge turns," is usually the way to go, but some people prefer a more direct (even blisteringly honest) approach. Those types of students will often clue you into that preference by asking something like "Tell me what I'm doing wrong." Sometimes, however, there's a fine line between positive and negative feedback. For instance, it's not always negative feedback to point out a faulty movement if the information serves as a resource for correction. The skill is in the delivery. For example, opt for "Kevin, your parallel turn is almost perfect; steer a little more with your knees instead of your shoulders and you'll have it!" rather than "Kevin, you're using your upper body too much in your turns."

Remember, you're trying to create an environment in which your students are willing to risk a little and maybe even look silly at times. Maintain a playful atmosphere and try to avoid turning the spotlight on any one student—unless you're highlighting a good performance. (Even so, if you're going to give shine to one student, try to do so for everyone else at some point during the lesson so no one will feel left out.)

It's a little easier to keep students out of the watchful glare of others if you have the luxury of space in your beginner area and can have everyone spread out. If more confined, create an atmosphere of teamwork in which the students are cheering for their classmates and themselves. You might have everyone wave their arms in the air, click their poles, cheer, or whistle—any commotion that creates energy and rewards effort.

## The first movements

In laying the groundwork for a successful lesson it's important to help students get comfortable with their equipment, refine mobility, and develop balance in motion. There are

numerous ways to do this and you should develop a repertoire of favorite activities from which to choose, varying them from time to time to help you stay fresh and enthused. Here is one of my favorite lesson approaches.

The first thing we do in a class setting is walk around with our boots on. I have each of my students place their skis on the snow, allowing enough space to walk between each pair. I then ask them to do a series of figure 8s around the skis, alternating between walking on their toes, walking on their heels, sidestepping, hopping, and jumping.

Next we move away from the skis and gather in a circle, shoulder-to-shoulder, putting our arms around the person on either side of us. Telling my students that the group is now a human grooming machine, I have them make synchronized

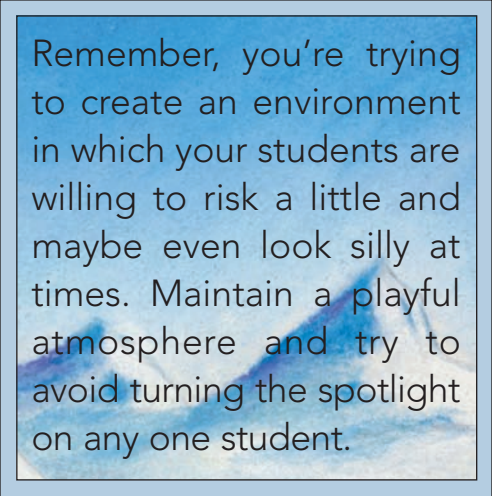
turning movements with their legs and feet. We try turning just the toes, just the heels, and then the whole foot to make "bow ties" in the snow.

Then we start marching in place. I ask them to step to the right and then to the left. We speed up. Next I call out "Right!" or "Left!" and we try, as a group, to change the circle's direction as quickly as possible. We stop and then I ask everyone to jump into the air on the count of three, with a goal of getting the whole circle into the air at the same time. Notching up the difficulty level a bit, I say, "Let's jump and

rotate the circle to the left!" My objective in all of this is to help my students develop mobility through different activities that create teamwork, synergy, and an atmosphere of fun and play. This is much better and far more exciting, in my opinion, than standing around doing stationary drills.

Next on the agenda are some "one-ski activities." We each click into one ski and scoot around in figure 8s. Most students start out with their ski way out in front of them, but I challenge them to keep the "ski foot" under their hips. Here, in their very first lesson, is where I want them to learn and understand that skiers have the best control over their skis if they keep them centered under their hips. This is a prime opportunity for students to learn to develop an athletic stance in which all joints are slightly flexed, the hips are over the feet, and the shoulders are inclined forward as if the person is running.

I also challenge them to keep their ski foot on the snow when they're maneuvering around in a figure 8. I encourage them to trace the pattern with the tip of the ski because I want them to guide the front of the ski rather than push the back of the ski. By having them guide the ski around the figure 8, I'm able to make them aware of the big toe- and little toe-side of



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the curves, which will give students a familiar image they can relate to later on when they learn how to turn. Another benefit of doing figure 8s is that students have to thread between each other to make the shape, which helps them notice traffic patterns and avoid a purely internal focus—important parts of learning at any level. After doing these one-ski exercises with both feet, it's time to put both skis on.

## Sliding, slipping, and skidding

By this time, my beginner students can move around in their equipment and put their skis on and take them off. They've been exposed to some of the movements and sensations they'll need to draw upon when they have both skis on. The next step is to develop balance in motion, or dynamic balance. This can be a bit of a challenge for students who have no background with "sliding" sports, since skis feel very slippery and uncooperative to a new skier. And once you add a little gravity, watch out!

It's important to make those first sliding adventures as easy as possible. I generally have my students push themselves on flat terrain to get a feel for the way skis slide. (Yes, in my lessons beginners use their poles!) Next on tap is a discussion of why an open stance—in which the hips are over the feet and the feet are at least hip-width apart—helps them remain in balance.

At this point we move to terrain that has a slight incline in order to play with gravity. A lot of novice skiers resist that initial feeling of sliding downhill because they think they're going to accelerate to mach speed and crash into the base lodge. I explain that the sensation is a lot like stepping onto a moving walkway or escalator—they need to anticipate that initial acceleration and go with it. My name for this is "balancing in the future."

This presents a good opportunity to mention that fighting the glide with tight muscles will throw them backward and off balance, which reduces their ability to control their skis. (Ah, the first chance to introduce the evil consequences of "being in the backseat!") By taking "baby steps" with terrain and teaching students that balance involves the whole body, I find that they're less apt to fight the pull of gravity when they graduate to steeper slopes.

The other thing that's crucial to do from the get-go is teach beginners how to slow down and stop. I show my first-timers how "stepping around a corner" will slow and stop their forward

momentum, and I always make sure they end their first glide runs with angled steps to a stop. This helps them learn that turn shape controls speed. It also helps students see how the "big toe/little toe" guiding and steering moves they did on the flats with figure 8s can translate into speed control. At this point I want them to feel and understand that it takes sustained effort to step or steer the skis along a circular path.

This is also a great time to underscore the message that the body follows the eyes. In other words, they need to look where they want to go. For first-timers, this emphasis helps them feel how the whole body can help the feet and legs turn the skis. I don't want my students to throw their shoulders into the turn, but neither do I want them to think the upper body

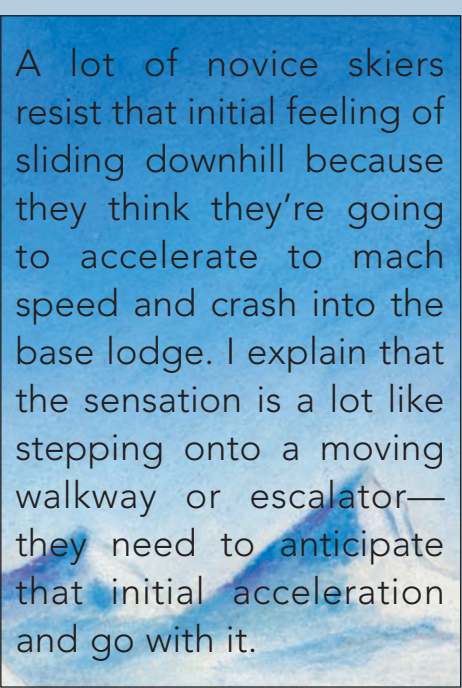
should be held totally rigid. When they initiate the turn with the lower body and look where they're going, the upper body turns to follow the eyes. Basically, the legs and feet start the turn and the body helps sustain it.

From here, I strive to emphasize these feelings of guiding, steering, aiming, and directing the skis around the corner. I ask my students to visualize the path they want their skis to take. To help them see connected "C" shapes, I have them follow me or follow my ski tracks. "Because steering is a sustained effort," I tell them, "you're either turning your skis to the right or to the left by gently pointing your knees and working the big toe and little toe through the arc." For those who play tennis or golf, I equate sustained steering with the follow-through that char-

acterizes any good tennis stroke or golf swing.

In addition, I want them to think of both feet and legs mirroring each other. In other words, if they want to go left, both feet and legs should work toward going left. Again, those "big toe/little toe" sensations come into play as they learn to turn their feet, but I let them know that they'll get more power by steering with their legs as well. "If you please, point your knees" becomes the auditory cue to remind them that foot steering is okay but power comes from leg steering. Again, this is a lesson that will serve them well throughout their skiing lives.

You may ask, "What about weight transfer and edging?" My feeling is that these elements of the turn will occur naturally if students develop a good stance and good steering skills. I cringe at the thought of all those out-of-control skiers who think that all they have to do to turn is put weight on the downhill ski or tip a ski on edge. Yes, these actions may result in



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something of a turn, but I prefer to show people how to create turn *shapes*. Skiers naturally feel heavier on the outside foot as they go around the corner in good balance, and edging is necessary to properly steer the skis. And students who are using the new shorter shaped skis for beginners will quickly discover that they influence turn shape by playing with more active edge involvement.

Another thing worth mentioning at this point is that I tend to encourage level 1 skiers to make short, medium-size turns instead of long turns. This way they spend less time in the fall line and therefore do not pick up a lot of speed. Another advantage of short turns is that they allow us to explore narrower green trails.

pick up speed. But with good steering we can also use the hill to slow ourselves down since gravity won't let us ski uphill (at least not very far). After establishing the foundation for good skiing during those first exercises, all that remains—from then on—is working to connect turns with good rhythm and flow in a variety of conditions and terrain options.

## Wrap up

So there you have it, my idea of the primary elements for a successful and fun introduction to skiing. When instructors bring to their classes the right attitude as well as empathy and genuine sincerity, students are more apt to take away a positive experience that inspires them to learn even more. And just as



### Building blocks for success on the slopes

- Skiing is playful and fun.
- Stance, whole-body involvement, and “balancing in the future” support dynamic balance.
- The body follows the eyes.
- The feet, legs, and body help guide, aim, direct, and steer the skis around a circular path.
- Movements should be smooth, progressive, and sustained.
- The feet and legs mirror each other as they make their way through various movements.
- Turn shape is the most important way to control speed.
- Rhythm and flow enrich good movements.

You may have noticed that I don't dwell too much on the configuration of my students' skis. At this stage, whether they're doing a wedge, wedge christie, or parallel turn is unimportant. What is important is that they are turning smoothly in a sustained and balanced manner, that they're looking where they want to go, and that their legs and feet are complementing each other. If my students are athletic or have experience ice skating or inline skating, their turns will likely be parallel or at least nice wedge christies. Those with less athletic backgrounds or who are a bit more fearful will probably be using a wedge turn.

The bottom line is that the shape of their turns is more important to me than the shape their skis leave in the snow. The fundamental lesson to be learned here is that skiers control their speed by redirecting the path of their bodies. Between gravity and the angle of the slope we're bound to

Robert Fulghum contends that we're taught all of life's most important lessons in kindergarten, I say that students learn the essentials of good skiing in their very first classes. In addition to learning how to put on and take off their boots and skis and how to maneuver with their equipment, they pick up the building blocks for success on the slopes (see table).

Skiing with these fundamentals in mind will allow your students to handle the greatest number of conditions with the least amount of stress on their bodies. Plus, they'll be well on their way to taking on all future skiing adventures with greater confidence. After all, everything they need to know about skiing they will have learned in their level 1 lesson!

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