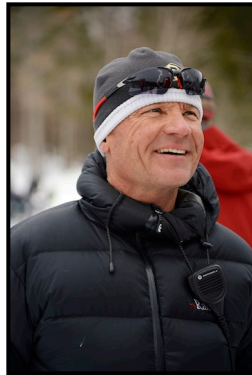


Letter to the Editor:

Advocating for Accessibility in Ski Racing



by
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In March, Dan Leever wrote article, which created an immediate discussion on the state of alpine skiing and what should be done. Most, if not all, was related to the relationship between the U.S. Ski Team, and colleges and universities. The article was well written, and it was presented as a critique and urgent call for change. However, I believe the problem is even deeper below the visible waterline.

One of the biggest challenges seems to be the country's diminishing membership of alpine skiers. Each club has a solid base of entry level athletes with lots of enthusiasm on both the skiers' and parents' side. Somehow this enthusiasm wears out and ten years later we have parents who are bankrupt, tired and unsatisfied with progress and ready to quit. They quit in the moment their kid has finally mastered technique, tactics, grown into their skin and is at an age to make some independent decisions. The membership shrinks to few enthusiasts. The rest would use their skills to pursue high school football, basketball, baseball, etc.

Alpine skiing is too expensive, and too traditional in comparison to snowboard, freestyle, skier-cross. The perception of only one minute on course twice a day in competition seems to be a waste of time and money. And yet, it is a most exciting speed-oriented sport. The thrill of the speed is an enormous motivation. A number of articles have been written by [Dr. Jim Taylor](#) on the unique mental impact of the sport of skiing and any coach can attest to it. The mental toughness of athletes exposed to speed daily, plus changes in weather,

varying terrain and course sets, is greatly enhanced. Those who endure the ‘torture’ of this outdoor sport will become a achiever for the rest of life.

However, we are losing the sport and to salvage it we have to find a way to make it more affordable, less travel demanding and more exciting.

We have to be able to offer the parents a good product worth investment. The goal of making a national team should be simply a pinnacle of the process where athletes enjoy what they are doing and parents are satisfied with a credible process.

For years, Bob Beattie advocated an affordable model: “ski locally, travel less, make skiing exciting.” As a visionary, Bob was ahead of his time and we have missed an opportunity to incorporate the concept during “leisure” times. Now we are forced to do it under the pressure in a time of crisis. A number of areas of concern need to be revisited and we have to consider a serious overhaul.

Here are some of my suggestions:

Travel: There is a “reason” why ski teams from the Central Rockies have to travel to Lutsen twice a year, but is it really necessity? That distance is 1,500 miles one way and we in the region have eight ski areas in a 50-mile radius and 11 within a 90-minute drive right in the Central Rockies. The argument will be: well, someone has to travel anyway”. Yes, but to get 20 Minnesota skiers to Colorado is cheaper than 80 Colorado kids to Minnesota. Can we chop it back to smaller divisions? Local racing even with smaller attendance makes a difference.

Coaches: I see our coaches as group of underpaid, hard-working individuals with a great deal of enthusiasm and little formal training for what they do, learning most of skills by trial and error. We do not have a complex college education in America for coaching as a profession, so most come with no degree. It is just a matter of time, they will find out, that enthusiasm does not put bread on the table. Apparently, we take very good care of high ranked officers, but we have no program for “enlisted soldiers.” Too many good coaches leave every year to become something else because they cannot afford to do what they love. The certification process and salary should be a subject of concern. A standard scale of salary increases should be based on level of certification or/and experience.

Equipment: Skis are expensive, good skis are priceless.

The FIS decision to change the length and radius of the skis back and forth twice in five years was a very expensive enterprise. The fact that everybody has to buy a new downhill suit for next season is also a questionable move.

We should consider restricting purchases to one pair of new skis per event/year with no option for more unless the ski is broken or damaged. The proposal is not overly democratic and restrictions of a similar kind exist in other sports for the same reason. The point is we need to bring the cost of the sport down.

Costs of racing: Entry and lift tickets in the U.S. are absolutely the highest in the world. Not by a little. By tenfold! A race lift ticket is generally \$90, and \$47 for race entry totals \$137 per day at junior race, which is insane! An athlete's nightmare of popping out of first run on the second gate is nothing compared to a parent's nightmare of \$137 flying out the window. There must be someone who is able to control the legitimate robbery of this kind. I would imagine U.S. Ski & Snowboard or the regions should have some negotiating capacity in this realm.

Development: Every year in the middle of the summer teams are traveling to France, Italy, Australia, New Zealand. Although it is a great cultural experience for those who can afford it, it is another unnecessary expense. Skiing in Keystone, A-Basin, Red Lodge, Winter Park in spring is good. Mt. Hood all summer is equally good, so Europe or South America is not a necessity. The summer snow training is actually getting in the way of practicing different and needed skills. Cross-over sports are critical to alpine training also. You cannot ski yourself to physical fitness. The fitness has to come from training in other sports. Inline skating in the summer is a extremely valid option. Creative training invented in nineties gave the room to snow skiing. Skiers go on snow day after day, going through the motions without signs of improvement. Improvement of fitness and skills was always based on a fine balance of load and rest. Young skiers skiing five to six days a week are not bound for improvement. The element of recovery is inadequate or totally missing. Clubs are going to Europe to ski for two weeks indoors to gain absolutely nothing. I am not advocating against doing it, but go there after you've developed all needed strength and endurance and skills.

Parents: Some parents can afford far more than other parents, which creates instant peer pressure and disproportion. Lack of parental expertise forces coaches to compromise the fundamental principles of development. If parents are demanding to have a seven-year-old skier ski gates daily, while threatening the program to leave for greener pastures if demand is not met, the coaches and programs are in trouble. Year after year young athletes are choosing to go to bigger and typically more expensive programs. Kristina Koznick and Mikaela

Shiffrin left small Minnesota ski areas as well but not because of perceived shortcomings in the programs; because they started skiing World Cup.

Colleges: As long as NCAA does not cut skiing as a sport, very few changes can be expected that would modify the current status. The system promotes excellence and with a no discrimination formula the door is open to the whole world, and the world is taking advantage of it. As long as collegiate skiing exists, there will be enough financial resources to assure good developmental support. There might not be a scholarship available, but as long as parents can cover the cost of the school, the annual package for the skiing part is in the neighborhood of \$30K per individual per year, plus medical, academic, meal plan and other expenses.

The presence of better skiers from the rest of the world makes it an incredible opportunity for development. Because of school schedule, we have to take the nearest opportunity to train with the most efficient schedule. No fancy trips, but an almost daily opportunity to hit a slope, measure yourself with the same or better skiers and take a break to “recover” in classroom. To place four eligible U.S. Ski Team kids to each NCAA school program will save lots of money.

RICHARD ROKOS

Head Alpine Coach at the University of Colorado

Richard Rokos and Colorado Skiing. Now in his 28th season as the University of Colorado's head coach and his 31st overall at the school, you can't think of one without the other, not to mention that the combination has been synonymous with success. Twenty-seven seasons, eight national championships, 42 individual champions and 220 All-Americans later, he has turned CU into the premier ski program in the nation.

Richard, 67, is the 11th and longest tenured head coach in CU ski history, has guided Colorado to eight NCAA titles, claiming the crowns in 1991, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2006, 2011, 2013 and 2015. In addition, his Buffaloes have won individual titles (42 total) in 18 different years.

In 2006 Richard was selected as the Coach of the Year in the state of Colorado by the Sportswomen of Colorado Hall of Fame. In 2013, he was inducted into the Colorado Ski & Snowboard Hall of Fame for his accomplishments in his two-plus decades as CU's head coach.

Rokos was born May 25, 1950 in Brno, Czechoslovakia. He and his wife, the former Helena Konecny, and then-18-month-old daughter Linda, left a communist-bound native homeland in 1980 for Austria where they spent a year preparing their visas, and defected from Czechoslovakia to the United States (Detroit) a year later before calling Colorado their permanent home beginning in 1982. He and Helena are the parents of two grown children Linda, now an alpine ski coach and Thomas, and one grandchild, Stella, who is also an avid skier.