

To Be or Not To Be

Richard Rokos
Head Coach
University of Colorado

CROSSBLOCKING IN DUAL RACING DEFEATS THE PURPOSE

A few years ago Edith Thys Morgan posted an excellent article challenging the terminology, and questionable benefit of a forced movement in slalom.

In "Clearing up an Issue: an anti cross-blocking manifesto," Edith pointed to the fact that correct body position should be a decisive factor for classical vs. cross-block execution of the turn, and that the expression "clear" would better describe the movement. The body should be in an athletic position, with parallel ankle, knee, pelvis and shoulder. Wherever the body gets far enough inside the turn—without compromising the alignment described above—the outside hand would "clear" the gate. Reaching for the gate across the body, where the center of the mass is not enough inside of the turn, leads to shoulder rotation and travels down throughout the torso to the hips, moving the center of body mass opposite to the desired direction.

Unfortunately a whole generation of young skiers have been told that cross-blocking is the only usable technique, and has to be practiced and executed as such. Smaller skiers become "victims" of this technical "atrocious" (sic), reaching and rotating in every turn. For the victims, this bad habit becomes a limiting factor in developing their slalom technique, and slows or stops their advancement through the peer rankings, while capping future improvement. With the limitations imposed by the physics of their kinesthetic movements, even the increased body strength of a trained and maturing body will not bring further improvement of speed.

SOME BACKGROUND

This phenomenon became an issue since the advent of breakaway gates. The original stiff bamboo gates required a classical execution of the slalom turn with contra-rotated torso, while the breakaway gates permitted skiers to use a tighter, aggressive and faster line to utilize all available means in favor of speed.

Sadly, cross-blocking became the only recommended slalom technique used in any situation, terrain and gate configuration. This created a new generation of less-equipped skiers. I can attest to the frustration of collegiate coaches trying to fix something that was neglected earlier. Four years of hard work, by both the coach and the athlete, with no result, is sometimes the end of the story for an otherwise hard-working skier.

WHERE ARE WE NOW

USSA adopted a new proposed Dual Slalom format for U14 and U16 age classes. It is a format that was originally proposed and adopted for NCAA intercollegiate competition; however, the benefits for younger skiers largely exceed the original intent because of its simplicity, the “forgiveness” rule and the speed of the race execution.

The USSA task force committee fully adopted all rules for the format, with exception of one.

The cross-block, which was originally prohibited, is permitted under USSA rule. Because the committee did not reach the consensus on the rule enforcement, the risk now is that all developmental benefits of dual racing will be compromised.

THE IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

What Edith described as a disadvantage of cross-blocking in the single pole slalom would greatly multiply in the double pole GS panel gates used in dual racing. To cross-block a GS panel takes far more force than a single pole, and this obviously benefits taller and heavier athletes. To improve the chances to clear the gate with the hands, organizers started elevating panels. This helped the racers to lessen the impact but then created another safety problem, by obstructing the athletes’ visibility. To prepare for the impact with the gate, the athlete has to reach for a higher point of the gate. Extending the hands above the head totally compromises the good anatomy of a turn. In addition the less experienced racers would focus on the impact with gate and neglect or disregard a correct entrance of the turn. Sequence: initiation-execution-completion reduces to a “hit and run” (with late and low line).

Another problem with this placement is that it makes the panel very vulnerable, so that it easily detaches from the gate. Where a “no cross block” rule is enforced, a three person course crew is sufficient. When cross-blocking is allowed, it requires one course worker per gate to administer “flying” panels. This takes it far from being a simple and inexpensive race, while an extra 50+ people in the arena challenges the safety protocol.

The biggest damage, however, would be in missing the many technical development benefits of dual racing. While classical turn execution would enforce the good habits, cross block will dismiss or compromise all developmental benefits. What could be our strength would become our weakness.

IT CAN BE DONE

Concern about enforcing the rule does not hold water. To penalize or disqualify a racer would send a clear message. The form of execution is clear: Hands go either outside of the gate (permitted) or inside the gate (prohibited). The intent is obvious to any observer, and detecting a intentional cross-block does not require any high expertise on the side of the jury. As with classical Nordic skiing, the skating steps allowed in cornering or changing lanes are allowed, and not

confused with skating for speed, which is grounds for disqualification. Skating in a classical Nordic race is a faster execution but prohibited.

There is also an argument criticizing the classical execution, of turning around the gate, as limiting the means for speed. Yes, the cross-block could be faster for some skiers; however, the classical execution would benefit the development of everybody. If we give 14-year-old developing skiers the best tool for technique improvement, in the form of a forced classical turn, we will have technically sound skiers four years down the road. And that is where we want to be!