

THE MOUNTAIN JOURNAL

THE FEAR FACTOR: STRATEGIES FOR GAINING A MENTAL EDGE

By TONY D. CRESPI, TECHNICAL EDITOR

On runs the like of The Plunge at Telluride in Colorado, or Angel Street at Loon Mountain in New Hampshire, you either grin or your knees go weak. If you are lucky, the snow is good. The truth is that there is a big mental game to improving your skiing or becoming an expert skier. Whether you prefer skis or a snowboard, do not discount psychological skills.

"There's definitely a mind-body dimension to sports," explains Health Psychologist Mala L. Matacin, Ph.D., an Associate Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at The University of Hartford in Conn. "You can't separate the physical from the mental. It's impossible."

How you ski is impacted by how you think.

"Performance can be hampered by thoughts," explains Matacin. "It's like a feedback loop. If you think you can't do it, then you will not perform up to your own original expectations. When you monitor your performance, it will confirm what you already believe, which is that you can't do it! And that is a loop. And if you get into that loop, you're not going to perform well. But, if you get into a positive loop, you can enhance performance."

Truly, one element which differentiates top athletes is this feedback loop. If it is done well, it can provide positive energy. You need to have the mental attitude that you can do it, that you are good, and that you can get even better. At that point, you can enter a positive loop.

Still, how can you begin? How do you stay relaxed when confronted by steep terrain, and challenging snow conditions?

"Focus on breathing," suggests former U.S. Olympic Racer Holly Flanders. "When you freeze up you stop breathing. I try to breathe deeply. I imagine the hill flatter than it really is."

Does your thinking increase or decrease your performance? For Olympic racers, of course, a strong mental game can elevate performance. But this takes specific skills and specific practice. Still, how can you enhance your game no matter how frequently or infrequently that you ski? Please read on.

MENTAL EDGE #1: PRACTICE FACING ANXIETY ON THE MOUNTAIN

Most skiers have faced some fear on the mountain, it is only normal, and most folks have coped. But, unfortunately, many people do not have sound ideas for effectively handling stress and anxiety on the slopes.

HOW YOU SKI IS IMPACTED BY HOW YOU THINK.

One strategy which sport psychologists have investigated involves a technique called "countering."

Countering involves an internal dialogue where an athlete, a skier, learns to use "self talk" to refute negative thinking. But, to do this effectively, countering requires the use of facts and reason to actually change a negative mindset, if one exists.

Here are some examples:

Self-Defeating Thought vs. Countering Thought
I cannot ski ice. vs. Ice is hard, but I have skills.
I am never going to do it. vs. I am bright, I can learn this.

Counter your negative thoughts with positive points.

MENTAL EDGE #2: PRACTICE BREATHING SKILLS

Too often athletes who become tense and fearful begin to restrict their breathing. Unfortunately, this leads to a negative loop, where breathing becomes difficult, muscles tense, and performance becomes restricted.

Start by breathing evenly.

Interested? Then you can take it further. As you breathe, tighten and loosen your hands, arms, shoulders, and overall body. Practice alternately to tighten and relax each major muscle group. Start with your hands, tighten and relax, then move through your arms and shoulders. Add your toes, feet and legs, and gradually tighten and relax your entire body.

Now ski.

MENTAL EDGE #3: PRACTICE TOUGHENING ON MODERATE TERRAIN

One useful strategy for toughening one's mental edge is to "toughen" moderate terrain.

What challenges your mental edge? Is it ice or narrow chutes? The next time the mountain is tough, take time to practice your weakness on more moderate terrain.

Visually and mentally toughen your training.

Restrict your skiing to a visually created narrow chute on a wider run. Practice skiing ice on a moderate run. You make the challenge, then practice, practice, practice. As you continue to improve, make it tougher and tougher.

Learning to build any skill takes practice, lots of practice. Musicians practice basic drills for hours. Ice skaters practice basic skills and drills repeatedly. Top skiers also must practice.

MENTAL EDGE #4: BUILD YOUR SKILL BASE

Top skiers, racers, free skiers, ski patrollers, as well as coaches and ski instructors typically have more depth and breadth of skills than less talented enthusiasts. The more skills, the deeper the ability to handle challenging conditions.

Watch the ski patrol and ski instructors negotiate a challenging trail. Sometimes they will ski it fast, and sometimes more slowly. The best can vary speed, as well as turn with ease, almost at will. Your knowledge and skills can reduce fear.

Consider adding more skills to your quiver. The more skills, the easier it is to reduce your fears. Watch the pros. Watch how differently top skiers can negotiate the same piece of terrain.

And to really improve, consider a lesson.

Be Aware. Ski with Care.

Practice. Practice. Practice.

Technical Editor Tony Crespi has served as both a Development Team Coach and Ski School Supervisor. His column is published throughout the season.

SKI SEASON PREPARATION TO AVOID INJURY

Special to SKIER NEWS: Sports orthopaedist discusses pre-season strength, flexibility, training

NEW YORK, NY -- Skiing continues to be one of America's favorite winter pastimes, attracting nearly 20 million participants to the snowy slopes each year. Snowboarding's popularity attracts more than eight million Americans to the sport each year. Yet along with the excitement of a day on the slopes, skiers and snowboarders face numerous health risks associated with these activities, which are considered among the most physically demanding of all sports. The good news is that many of these injuries can be prevented with a smart pre-season training program which will add strength and flexibility to muscles, tendons and ligaments that are used while skiing. Many of these are rarely, if ever, used during normal everyday activities.

"Skiing and snowboarding continue to rise in popularity because they are fun and they offer an opportunity for outdoor activity during the cold winter months," notes Kevin Plancher, M.D., a leading NY-area orthopaedist and official surgeon of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Teams. "Moreover, these sports have a very benevolent reputation; and they sometimes look easy to the average non-skier, and many people even believe that the soft, powdery snow will cushion their fall and help them avoid injury," Plancher adds.

Not so. In fact, while an increase in helmet use has resulted in fewer head injuries in recent years, and better equipment has all but eliminated instances of severe leg and ankle fractures, the overall boney injury rate among skiers has remained stagnant for the past 10 years. As for snowboarders, injury rates more than doubled during that time.

"For skiers and snowboarders alike, we are concerned both with the rate of injury, and with the fluctuation in the types of injuries we see from year to year," explains Dr. Plancher. He notes that many of the changes in injury patterns reflect changes in the sports themselves, as younger participants begin to "push the envelope" by incorporating more risky freestyle moves into both sports. "The most prevalent injuries now involve tendons, ligaments and muscles in the legs, knees, and

even in the upper body. These parts of the body, when specifically trained for added strength and flexibility during skiing, may withstand greater load and range of motion without injury," he adds.

Dr. Plancher, who serves as Chairman the Orthopaedic Foundation for Active Lifestyles (www.ofals.org) – a non-profit organization dedicated to advancements in research and education for orthopedics and sports medicine – encourages skiers and snowboarders of all ages and skill levels to begin training early for the winter season. He recommends a program that focuses on four key areas of conditioning:

Flexibility

"Increasing the flexibility of connective tissue is the most important thing skiers and snowboarders can do to reduce the risk of injury," Dr. Plancher advises. That is because virtually every major joint in the body – including ankles, knees, hips, shoulders, wrists and elbows – are relied upon heavily during active skiing and snowboarding, as well as during a fall. "More flexibility can help skiers and boarders stay on their feet, but it can also help them land properly during a fall with the least chance of injury," he notes. Engaging in a 20-minute full body stretching routine daily, after an aerobic activity that has warmed up the muscles, can result in better flexibility within six to eight weeks, Dr. Plancher assures.

Strengthening

Strength and flexibility go hand-in-hand in preventing ski injury, Dr. Plancher maintains. Here, the key is to strengthen muscles, tendons and ligaments that may not have even been used since last winter's final trek to the slopes. For example, doing squats and rotations on a bosu ball, a device with a large flat surface on top and a soft ball-shaped underside, can give underused leg and knee muscles a stretching, strengthening workout. Dr. Plancher cautions everyone to avoid deep knee squats or leg extension exercises with weights.

Endurance

Overall physical fitness is important, as an exhausted, winded skier or snowboarder may be more prone to injury than one in good physical shape. Between 30 and 60 minutes of daily aerobic exercise can increase cardiovascular endurance, lung capacity and overall fitness. Choose walking, running, tennis or biking to strengthen leg muscles simultaneously.

Core Development

The structures that make up the body's core, the spine and abdomen, can improve balance, coordination, gracefulness and overall power and strength when well developed. "This is an often overlooked aspect of pre-season training," Dr. Plancher reveals, "But it can be one of the most crucial ones, because few sports require such a well-honed sense of balance as do skiing and boarding," he adds. Dr. Plancher recommends professional guidance, and for those who enjoy yoga and Pilates to help develop those core muscles and for increasing mental focus, key to reducing the risk of ski and snowboard injury.

"There is no 'magic bullet' to preventing all the possible skiing and snowboarding injuries," Dr. Plancher admits. "However, preparation that starts now can have snowsports enthusiasts well on their way to a safe season this winter."

Please log on to www.ofals.org for more info on the Orthopaedic Foundation for Active Lifestyles.

Kevin D. Plancher, M.D., M.S., F.A.C.S., F.A.A.O.S., is a leading orthopaedic surgeon and sports medicine expert with treatment in knee, shoulder, elbow and hand injuries. Dr. Plancher is an Associate Clinical Professor in Orthopaedics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. He is on the Editorial Review Board of the Journal of American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. In 2001, he founded "The Orthopaedic Foundation for Active Lifestyles" (www.ofals.org) a non-profit foundation focused on maintaining and enhancing the physical well-being of active individuals through the development and promotion of research and supporting technologies.

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