

AmSAT News is pleased to bring you three short excerpts by Erik Bendix introducing his Alexander-based approach to skiing. These essays are from the book he is writing on this topic.

A New Method of Teaching Skiing

by Erik Bendix

To be unbalanced is perhaps the greatest problem of our age, for so many of us are that way. Skiing provides a method, a means, of making the imbalance manifest, of bringing it out into a concrete situation where we can get our hands on it, grapple with it, and eventually prevail over it.

—Jack Heggie¹

How do Alexander's insights apply to skiing? Do they result in a teaching method that is different from the instruction already available at most ski areas? It has taken me years to understand my own skiing in the light of the Alexander Technique and to craft a teaching method out of what I have learned. My path to discovery both as a skier and as a ski teacher is ongoing, but I have been at it long enough now to have two answers to the question of what makes my approach to skiing unique and new:

(1) The Alexander Technique can shine a light of awareness on each and every action we take. With an activity as complex as skiing, there are many dark corners to be illuminated, everything from how best to put on a ski boot to what to do if you find yourself skittering down over a steep patch of ice. Applied consistently, the Technique will improve something about your skiing every time you are on the slopes. This is what gives me confidence to put myself forward as a teacher of a new ski method. My claim is not based on my level of skiing skill, but on the fact that I have found a consistent way to keep improving. So many skiers reach a certain level of skill and just stay there. I almost stalled like that myself. But I found a reliable way to keep improving, and I want to share it.

(2) The more I teach what I have learned, the more clearly it seems to differ from conventional ski teaching methods. My method starts with the head, neck, and back; conventional methods start with the feet and legs. My method starts by teaching dynamic balance; conventional methods start by teaching stable stances. My method directly addresses fear reactions; conventional methods directly address mechanics.

Conventional ski teaching has been the norm for almost a century while my methods are only in their infancy. I am, nevertheless, convinced that over time, my methods will yield more consistent improvement in students, will result in lower rates of injury, and will significantly raise the average skill level of the skiing public. The current gulf between average skiers and experts and the corresponding need for special programs to help skiers break through into advanced skiing, will, I hope, become a thing of the past. Skills can be taught to complete beginners that will prevent their progress from stalling. Ski students can be given effective tools for taking charge of their learning process and for gaining and regaining control on the slopes. The courage and freedom that most skiers seek can actually be taught. That is my dream, and I know it is within reach.

At first my dream went no further than my own skiing. I was studying the Alexander Technique and trying out what I

learned whenever I skied. My experiments brought me thrilling results, but I did not have a clear understanding of why they worked so well. Now, with hindsight and more experience, it makes more sense. The Alexander Technique is a practical answer to general problems of fearfulness. It originally evolved, after all, as a way of dealing with a type of performance anxiety. One of Alexander's central discoveries was that human fear reactions begin at the neck. If these reactions can be prevented at the neck, they generally will not escalate, leaving the individual less prone to panic and more able to respond with intelligence.

Skiers are frequently in situations that demand quick responses and that easily trigger fear reactions. Every time a skier flinches or stiffens with fear, old movement habits are likely to be reinforced and a chance to learn new movement patterns may be lost. A method that can liberate the skier from the tyranny of fear reactions has the potential to also free up his ability to learn. The Alexander Technique is such a method. Courage is what many people seek in skiing, and the Technique gives them a practical way to find it.

The central challenge that skiers face over and over is actually quite simple: it is inherently frightening to slide downhill. The natural fear reaction to this is to flinch or stiffen back away from the direction you are sliding in. Teachers of the Alexander Technique call this reaction "pulling the head back." This natural fear reaction instantly makes the skier's situation worse: it makes his skis skid out from under him. As the head pulls back, the feet slide forward. That increases the skier's speed, which in turn invites further flinching and bracing, which creates even more loss of control and even more frightened reactions. This feedback loop between panic reactions and increasingly frightening experiences easily deteriorates into a most unpleasant experience.

Traditional ski teachers are well aware of the consequences of students throwing their *weight* back, but they have little training in observing the behavior of the *head and neck*. This puts them at a great disadvantage when it comes to getting at the root of the problem. They have devised many ingenious strategies focused on the students' legs and feet, but they must rely on whatever interpersonal skills they happen to have to cope with their students' evident panic and difficulty learning. Without understanding how to prevent fear reactions from taking over, their ski teaching methods must remain needlessly improvised and complicated. There is a simpler and less threatening way for both teacher and student.



Erik Bendix

Skiing is primarily a sport of balance and rotation, and only secondarily one of particular leg and foot techniques. If loss and recovery of balance are taught *first*, then the feet and legs move naturally to support balance and need less separate instruction. The same is true for rotation: if it is taught early, it solves many foot and leg problems before they arise. Skiing is rarely taught this way. Skiing is conventionally taught by starting beginners off in a snowplow or wedge stance that is as stable as possible. The ability to move off center and sway or rotate is introduced much later, often with great difficulty or against resistance.

Teaching a stable stance first tempts the lower limbs to lock into “correct” position. Students may think they are supposed to keep their weight dead center or they may do so in self-protection; the result in either case is that students may actively resist any kind of lean. The stiffness that results prevents them from learning the dynamic sway of losing and recovering balance that is fundamental to parallel skiing.

By contrast, I start complete beginners off learning what happens when they lean, and I build from leaning directly to the dynamic stability of parallel skiing. In that sense, my ski teaching method is the exact reverse of traditional methods. I start at the head; they start at the feet. The balance regulators of the human body are in the head, not the feet, so if balance comes first, the role of the head in skiing needs to be addressed at the outset. The feet can come later.

I did not have a clue how to teach anyone this different approach until I saw how my colleague Steven Shaw taught people how to swim. The challenges of swimming are quite different from those of skiing. In the water, there is no chance of plummeting downhill out of control. The water supports you rather than letting you fall. People fear water for a very different reason: they are afraid that water will not allow them to breathe. Steven Shaw’s genius as a teacher was to realize that this primal fear can undermine all attempts to learn how to swim well, and he figured out how to address this fear effectively in teaching all aspects of the sport.

The first class I took with Steven made no sense to me at all. “How can you possibly move through the water if you do what he is asking?” I wondered, but then I thought, “What do I know? He’s been working at this a lot longer than I have. Maybe I should just try what he is asking for and see what happens...” I followed instructions, and the next thing I knew I was at the other end of the pool with absolutely no idea how I had gotten there. Years later, after many more classes and much practice, his work has completely transformed the way I swim. It used to be a struggle. Now it is a streamlined joy.

Despite the obvious differences between ski slope and swimming pool, the human startle reactions to the two situations are remarkably similar. On skis, people tense their necks, retract their heads, and recoil from the direction their skis are sliding in. As the head is pulled back, the feet accelerate forward, increasing loss of control. In the water, people tense their necks and try to pull their heads out of the water in an attempt to get air. As the head is raised, the body sinks, increasing drag on the ability to swim forward. Steven has patiently dissected what this means for every swimming stroke, and has put together a step-by-step program that allows the student to progress toward mastering each stroke without ever having to panic or revert to desperate old half-measures. The comprehensiveness,

thoroughness, and effectiveness of his approach inspired me as I set about trying to do the same for skiing.

I devised a series of dry-land explorations that allow students to explore skiing movements without having to be in contact with slope or snow. In the safety of a comfortable indoor setting, students can learn to manage many balance challenges and explore many unfamiliar movements they will later need on the slopes. Next I teach students how to handle their equipment in ways that contribute to poise, helping them arrive at the slopes well-prepared and in balance. Then my program progresses to lessons on flat snow, where many basic ski movement skills can be experienced without the distraction of sliding downhill. When sliding downhill is finally introduced, students learn not to be distracted by it and learn how to come gradually to a stop. Knowing how to stop is a basic security on the slopes. We learn many different ways of stopping, and each becomes the foundation of a different way to turn. In this way, students gradually learn how to control their speed and direction, and then learn how to adapt their skiing to different kinds of terrain.

Each step in the curriculum is quite small and each phase builds on those that precede it. While all the steps are incremental and none are designed for spectacular effect, students do progress directly into parallel skiing with no need for snowplow turns or stem turns. This saves a lot of time. Foot and leg techniques (such as edging) flow fairly naturally out of the work we do with balance, and rarely need direct attention.

Instead, we make ample use of looking and pointing where we intend to go, employing these simple gestures of intention to generate the turns we need. In advanced classes, we explore finding natural skiing rhythms through the breath and developing smoothness of movement

through opening up peripheral vision.

My goal is to give my students freedom when they ski, and, as part of that freedom, to liberate them from restrictions of any particular habit or style. In the words of ski teaching pioneer Lito Tejada-Flores:

*...your final goal is not perfect textbook skiing, but rather your own skiing, your own style of skiing. There is no right and wrong on the slopes. Remember, even the most awkward skiers are having fun. Much more interesting is the fact that good skiers, very good skiers, experts, are all quite different in the way they approach the mountain, in the way they interpret the mountain.*²

Skiing requires an ongoing series of choices in ever-new challenges of terrain. These ongoing choices make it a means of personal expression and ultimately can make it an art form. Instead of a canvas, we have snow-covered mountains, and instead of paint and brushes, we have ourselves and our skis. Unlike painters, skiers leave no lasting record of what has been expressed. Our exquisite moments vanish back into the snow and air that made them possible, or they sink into satisfied kinesthetic memory, perhaps to reappear in our dreams, perhaps to open new perspectives on the steps we take when back on solid land.

"The courage and freedom that most skiers seek can actually be taught."

Series on Falling Forward

by Erik Bendix

Exploration A: Slight Falls with a Partner

Skilled skiing is a series of deftly guided partial falls, and it takes practice to fall just the right amount. The most universal mistake made by unskilled skiers is holding themselves too rigidly upright, never letting themselves tilt and lean. We are going to experiment with letting go of this rigidity in as safe a manner as possible, a manner that builds your confidence rather than frightening you. Let's begin with a partner.

Standing face-to-face, place your palms against your partner's shoulders and step one foot back to be in a secure position to catch your partner's slight fall. The person losing balance should leave both feet quietly resting on the floor and simply topple toward you like a falling board, all of one piece, hinging only at the ankles and without any other fancy bending or buckling along the way. It is only the ankle joints that need to bend, not actively, but just by letting them go. There is no need to topple very far at all—it is the initial moment of letting go that counts. You can try the same experiment with falling backwards, this time with your helper stationed behind you. You can even experiment with these falls on your own, standing so close to a wall when falling back that it catches your fall before you pick up any momentum or so close when falling forward that a light touch with your hands is enough to stop you. The forward fall will become a useful way to initiate a forward glide on skis.

Exploration B: Falling Forward on Skis Without Stiffening

The basic fear to confront in skiing is the fear of falling, so a first movement to explore with skis on is falling forward. You can fall forward on skis without actually falling to the ground. Your boots will stop you before you go very far. Start very gently: just lean forward a little toward the tips of your skis. Your boots will catch your fall and you can just stand there tilted forward, noticing how you react to that. Possibly the most important thing to notice is your feet. Are they gripped? How much can you let them quiet down and spread out inside your boots? Now check if your knees are locked. No need for that either. What is your neck doing? Are you still breathing?

Exploration C: Initiating Fall from the Head

Try Exploration B again, this time seeing if you can *initiate* falling forward just by letting your head nod forward to start your fall. Make sure it is just the weight of your head that drops forward. It is easy to confuse this with dragging the neck down in front or poking the chin forward, which is not what I have in mind. If your neck muscles engage, your head is more likely to tilt back. You may need to tell yourself to leave the

back of your neck soft, open and uninvolved. Just let your head fall—that is all. Take time to notice what happens. Does your breath remain quiet? Do your joints loosen? These quiet little explorations can become the basic way to start every descent down a ski slope: they wake up your ability to be moveable as you fall, and they are a basic key for unlocking your potential as a skier. Simply let your head topple forward first, just of its own weight, and then keep releasing it as it takes you into a forward lean. It takes trust to let your head go this way, and that is the real lesson.

Exploration D: Racing Start

Ski racers use racing starts to explode out of the starting gate. I am recommending a version of racing starts not just for racers, but for complete novices. Why? Because racing starts teach you to let go of standing too rigidly upright, to use your weight as you ski, and to fall forward to improve your control. These skills are essential to good skiing.

A skier's basic situation is sliding forward over snow. Sliding forward over *sloping* snow can come later. First, you should experience sliding over level surfaces, propelled only by yourself. This puts you in control of the movement, a reassuring place to start. But I am not suggesting that you stand stock upright and push with your poles, as if you were rowing a stiff boat. No, I want you to *fall forward* and learn to use your falling weight to help propel you.

If your bindings are set too lightly, your fall may just pop your boots off your skis and land you with a face full of snow. It happened to me once when I was demonstrating this move. It is not likely to happen, though. More likely, the bindings and

boots will hold, and you will not be able to fall far before the boots and skis catch your falling weight and suspend you in a forward tilt. I want you to experience how safe it is to really fall forward on skis. It will give you confidence to use your body weight when you ski, and that will inform everything else you learn.

You may find as you topple forward that your skis do not slide forward at all. If you stiffen your ankles a bit as you reach the end of your fall, your falling weight can latch or snag onto your boots and pull them forward to glide over the snow. This bit of ankle stiffening helps you get started on flat snow. You will not need it for starting down slopes unless you are actually trying to pick up speed as a racer would. Most of the time you can just fall forward into a start, letting your toppling weight do all the work. Letting your

weight topple is exactly what makes skiing easy. Letting it topple *forward* is the best direction to start learning how to use your falling weight, and it will become a movement you return to over and over to maintain and regain control on skis.

"The basic fear to confront in skiing is the fear of falling."



Let yourself lean forward a little and let your boots catch your fall.

About Stopping

by Erik Bendix

*In all this crazy movement—
tumbling, falling, flowing
down the mountain, exploding
through cornices, jumping
over sudden bumps & smashing
the edges of our skis into hard ice—
there is something inside us
which moves less & less,
slows & finally stops.³*

We live in a quick and accelerating culture. Speeded-up, super-charged, fast-talking dynamos of urban energy are what set the pace of our lives, dominate our entertainment, and sell us most of the goods we buy. Skiing is meant to be a vacation, but it is often promoted at the same feverish pitch as everything else. Many skiers arrive at their mountain destinations still plugged into frenetic soundtracks and convinced that the ultimate high would be to go even faster down the slopes than they do zooming around in their everyday lives.

It is indeed thrilling to go fast on skis. But if that is all you see in the sport, you are missing something. The something you are missing might have a chance to catch up with you if you take time to stop. If it is not too cold, you might try stopping at the top of the mountain. Look around. Notice the weather patterns and how the snow has piled up or been carved by the wind. Notice the shapes of the land and the quality of light around you. Above all, notice how much space there is around you. You will move through that space in a new way when you become aware of it.

Taking time to stop gives your nervous system a chance to readjust. This can clear your thoughts to make room for new experience. If you want to learn anything new as a skier, it is crucial to give yourself time to let old movement experiences sort themselves out. They won't sort out by being ignored; they need time and you can give them time by just stopping. Otherwise you will force yourself to rely on old movement patterns that are already in you. To find a new path, you must learn to stop going down the old one.

Suppose you take time to stop at the beginning of a ski run. You could use that time to mentally rehearse what you plan to do as you ski down the mountain. Athletes often employ techniques like this to prepare for the complexity of what they are about to do, and there definitely is a place for such preparation in skiing. It is like memorizing lines before performing a play. It helps you to be well prepared. But there is another kind of stopping before activity that goes beyond preparation and is in many ways its opposite. If what you want is to be optimally able to respond to the unexpected as you ski

down a mountain, then planning and preparation at some point become counterproductive. When your lines are already memorized and you are about to step out onto the stage, when your long hours of training are behind you and you are about to step into the starting gate, the last thing you need is more rehearsal. What you need is a clean slate, your senses open and undistracted by inner agitation, your mind clear, and your muscles available but not prematurely engaged. It was F.M. Alexander's genius to figure out how to cultivate and achieve a clean slate like this on a reliable basis. He called it *inhibition*.

Inhibition is a term borrowed from neurology: nerve impulses can be either excited or inhibited, either turned on or off. Most people live with chronically overexcited nervous systems. Too many messages are flying around inside of them altogether, many of them conflicting or contradictory. Contradictory neural messages are bad for coordination. It is better for your nervous system to have far fewer messages flying around inside and to reduce their number by consciously discarding unnecessary ones and choosing among messages that conflict with each other. One way to reduce your internal chatter is to keep giving yourself opportunities to stop anticipating what you think is next. Give yourself time to settle down. Just look around at where you are. Take time not to do anything at all. If you are skiing, take time not to ski. Catch up with yourself. A minute of such calm can be worth hours of training.

The end of a ski run is another excellent time to stop. Every descent

down the mountain is different from all others, and will leave you with a flood of new sensory input. Take time to let that flood sort itself out. Many new insights may have occurred to you on the way down. If you rush right back onto the ski lift the minute you get to the bottom, you will bury your new experience in yet more new experience, and your chance to process your experience and learn from it may be lost.

Among the glories of this sport are the mountains that surround you when you ski. Take time to notice them. Let their silence and size and the shifting moods of their weather work on you and get under your skin. How much time you take to reach the finish line is not the only reality when you ski. Notice the wind on your face, or the shifting texture of snow underfoot, or the particular way the alpine crows soar up and dive on updrafts blowing up through the pines. As you cultivate turning off your inner soundtrack and noticing where you are, you may even find it possible to ski for a while in complete inner quiet, listening only to the hiss of your skis making tracks, and letting gravity do the work of carrying you gently down over immense fields of snow.



"...letting gravity do the work of carrying you gently down over immense fields of snow."

Endnotes:

1. Jack Heggie, *Skiing With the Whole Body* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1993), 87.
2. Lito Tejada-Flores, *Breakthrough On Skis III: The New Skis* (video liner notes, Sedona, AZ: Western Eye, 1998), 12.
3. Lito Tejada-Flores, *Breakthrough on Skis II: Bumps and Powder* (Sedona, AZ: Western Eye, 1995), 16.

Erik Bendix trained as an Alexander Technique teacher with Frank Ottiwell and with Joan and Alex Murray. He spent 15 years working out how to apply the Alexander Technique to his own

skiing before deciding, with encouragement from Steven Shaw, to offer public courses in the Art of Alpine Skiing. His next course will be held February 25–27, 2011 in Grassau, Germany. For more information, please contact erikbendix@hotmail.com or go to www.movingmoment.com/ski.

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