

Coach Nancy Goes to School

Part Two: What Far West can Learn from the Nation's Top Programs

The 2009 USSA National Coaching Conference offered a wide variety of topics for coaches to go home and think about. Just as varied were the coaches and the programs they represent in attendance at the conference. I sat at the lectures with a mix of college coaches, club coaches from programs large and small, high school coaches, and parent-coaches. Two impressive presentations came from Sverre Caldwell, who coaches the Stratton Mountain School program, and Eric Flora, who coaches Kikkan Randall and the APU program.

I am putting summaries of these two programs together not because they are so alike; rather, while they do have much in common, the two programs are distinctly different. The two programs resemble one another in the theory of long term athlete development and they share the similar goal of producing internationally competitive cross country skiers. Both programs are so well established and respected that they are attracting the top up and coming skiers in our country (along with other programs like Sun Valley). Stratton Mountain School caters to junior skiers from the J3 (maybe even younger) level to PG students (although former SMS skiers are always welcome to come back and train with the program), while APU has both a junior program and a senior program.

The Stratton Mountain School model is based on the following:

- There are many different plans to success.

- Assess your area and decide what you can do with the area.

- Assess your goals.

- Make a plan based upon what is realistic.

Sverre has done all of that and formed a unique program in Vermont.

Success requires enthusiasm plus a strategy, according to Sverre. He stresses the importance of setting both short term and long term goals. Key ingredients for long term success are:

- Train well

- Have good technique

- Get good exposure

- Extend the season

- Support each other

- Promote the sport

These sound like simple things, but we all know how difficult it is to make all of that happen for every single athlete. SMS is on top of age group development, and caters to each age group in terms of training and goal setting. Every skier is part of a bigger picture; the bigger picture of being part of SMS and the bigger picture of where the years of training might take them. Sverre describes goal setting as a

pyramid. At the base are short term goals and at the peak is the Olympic Gold Medal or some other large long term goal. In between are layers of intermediate goals which can get checked off the list on the way to the pinnacle.

Sverre's Training Progressions:

- J4/5 Lots of activity
- J3 Active 5-6 days a week. Hard easy training by "feel". Start a training log
- J2 Start using a training plan.
- J1 Increase specificity
- OJ's More individual cycling

Emphasis on Technique:

- Develop balance, agility, and coordination at an early age.
- Build balance and body position drills into every workout.
- Teach skills through games.

Sverre uses the large parking lot at Stratton Mtn. Ski Area to do games and drills on rollerskis. He had slides depicting groups engaged in skill games. He also starts the youngest rollerskiers on grass! This is a great idea, and any park could be used.

SMS Race Exposure

- Expose skiers to good competition!
- J3's should race regularly at the regional level.
- J2's should race regionally, aiming for Junior Nationals.
- J1/OJ skiers need to race nationally and begin international exposure.

SMS enables skiers to be exposed to good training partners and good technique.

Stratton Mountain School is a Team

- Make team goals
- Keep the door open for alumni to come back and train.
- "Once a SMS skier, always a SMS skier"

Making XC Skiing "Cool"

- SMS skiers help with local youth league
- Promote heros
- Exposure through articles in local paper
- Hold training days locally
- Give talks at elementary schools
- Host races
- Get on the good side of the locals

SMS Measuring Sticks

- Uphill running TT
- 800 meter uphill double pole test

Bottom Line at SMS

Get rid of excuses!

Kid, parent, and coach all have to be on the same page!

Sverre runs a successful program at SMS. He admits SMS attracts good skiing talent and has a near perfect set-up. They have great facilities, a supportive community, good terrain in the mountains of Vermont, and plenty of kids whose parents will pay for the SMS experience. He offers good, consistent training and is always looking at the big picture. Last winter, he took a group of juniors from SMS to Germany to race.

After hearing this presentation, I wanted to quit coaching! What kind of a program can I offer here in the Eastern Sierra with all the good athletes playing soccer in the winter, no facilities for the team, limited funding, and limited community participation or awareness (it is decidedly “uncool” to be a nordic skier at Mammoth High School).

Well, I got over it in about a minute and a half. I might not have a school (or even a place to change clothes and store a backpack) or a lot of kids or money for a trip to Germany, BUT I can offer much of what SMS does in my own way and using the resources at hand. I can write training plans, make goals, teach technique, and try to get my kids to show up regularly to practice. I can keep promoting the sport and maybe, just maybe, what I do will be cool one day.

Then I started thinking about what we can offer here that SMS doesn't have. We usually have groomed tracks in Mammoth from mid-November until mid-April, plus backcountry skiing for at least another month. We have a great climate and a huge mountain range to train in right in our back yards, not to mention traffic-free rollerskiing. We in Far West can all learn from the SMS model, but we need to keep developing our own right here and keep working together to produce a competitive cross country ski program. We need to stop worrying about what we don't have (limitations, excuses...) and start working with our assets. Stick with me for a summary of the APU program in Anchorage.

Eric Flora Talks About Coaching APU and Kikkan Randall

I was very impressed with Eric's confidence and professionalism. He has recently become the head coach at the APU program, and talked to us about his program, which has become one of the most respected programs in the country. Look for more athletes like Kikkan Randall to emerge from APU!

APU Structure (a Pyramid):

- Development Group (10-14 years) has 35 athletes

- Junior Group (15-18 years) has 25 athletes

- Elite Development has 10 athletes

- Elite Group has 10 athletes

Eric stressed the importance of having training partners. It is critical for internal assessment, is motivational and fun. He likes having a group of 10 at the elite and elite development levels for the best possible training.

How to Start a Ski Program:

- Identify Goals
- Assess
- What needs to be done?
- Make a plan
- Action
- Measure
- Repeat the process

Kikkan Randall:

- Talented
- Motivated
- Opportunity: Alaska (lots of skiing)
- Good base of training (good all around athlete, high school running and skiing background)
- Excellent acceleration and shorter course performance

Goals for Kikkan:

- Economy
- Aerobic development
- High speed and fatigue resistance

Eric's Plan:

- Increase the amount of training, both aerobic and anaerobic
- Increase the amount of cycles at sprint specific speeds
- Increase L4 (max training speed)
- Increase specificity through more skiing and more L2 training. Eric is working off how runners train and trying to apply it to skiing (at the elite level)
- Technique refinement
- 60-90 hours on snow May through September (consistently 7 days a month on the glacier).
- 74% of training on snow per year
- Don't take time off in the spring. Rather, two weeks off; one of complete rest and another easy training.

Main Points to Remember:

- Train hard. Ski a lot
- Work on all muscle fiber types all year
- Plan for sea level and special altitude camps
- Individualize training plans
- Consistency

Record and measure
Enjoy

Eric/APU Tests: Heart Rate, Time and Lactates
90 second double pole speed test
L3 test (he did say this is hard to manage)
L4 test (max bounding for 4.5 min)

In the words of the great Tor Arne Hetland:

“There is no secret of training; you become what you do every day”

To conclude, there is much for us to learn from the two models I have outlined. We need to be careful how we view and use the information, as what works for someone in Alaska or Kikkan's rare ability might not work for a Far West skier. Our job as coaches is to find out what does work and plug in the plan. We need to be confident in our abilities to do this, and to use information wisely.