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DAVID A. OLIVER
PO BOX 5534
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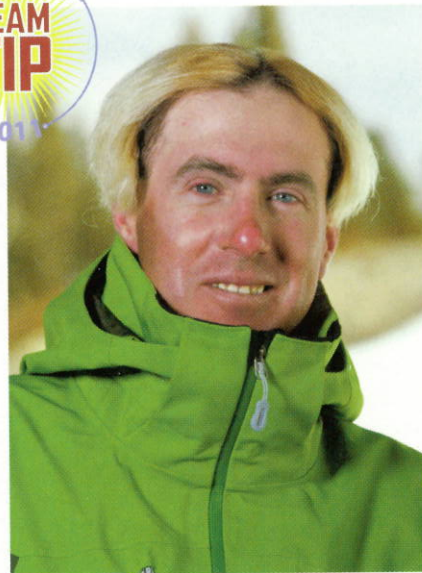
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Jonathan Selkowitz

The Road to Retention? Freestyle!

By DAVID OLIVER

Across the country there is a growing trend by instructors to spice up lessons by using freestyle elements. ¶ While not everyone may be onboard with incorporating freestyle into traditional lessons, freestyle has been around since the first instructor decided to add unconventional

movements to their teaching tool box. At its heart freestyle means that anything goes; there are no rules or boundaries. And that's one of the messages the PSIA-AASI Teams took to Interski 2011 in January.

Freestyle elements allow guests to be more actively involved in the learn-



Interski attendees take a turn at using an upturned ski as a rail feature during boot work.

Cesar Piotto

ing segment of the lesson. When it comes to skill development, thinking outside the box is essential to change—and enhances the guest's experience by using a teaching style that *includes* the guest in the development of the presentation. The upsides? Guests gain a stronger connection to the action, while the instructor creates more interest in lessons, growth in returns, and greater retention.

One of the freestyle elements being added to the lesson package is the idea of *sessions*. This is a group vibe that freestyle skiers and riders create in the terrain park. Anyone who has spent time near your resort's terrain park, local skateboard park, coastal surfing break, or kayak-friendly eddy or river wave has caught a glimpse of a session in action. Sessions involve group dynamics where there is no clear leader and it's all very exploratory. For instructors, generating the session mentality is where we move into a realm where we don't know exactly where the lesson will take us.

While there is no clear leader of the session, the most skilled of the group (usually the instructor) tends to become a facilitator as to what is happening. That said, students still look to the instructors as the leader. What changes is the instructor's behavior and group-management tactics—moving toward a much looser format—but there is still structure, just not as obvious.

Pose games of skill and, more important, use those games to test skills in a fun way. Your role becomes that of the person who's loudest and most stoked for what is happening, being energetic and vocal for the performances of the others in the session.

Regardless of skill proficiency, those involved in the session explore movements and define their own experience. By establishing this session environment we create energy that includes everyone participating as a unified exploratory group. Everyone is experiencing the same thing equally and on their own terms as skills are developed.

FREESTYLE AND ATML

Another freestyle contribution to focus on is the ATML Method™,

which forms the foundation of park and pipe skiing and riding. As you explore using ATML as a teaching style (breaking the freestyle tactic into the approach, takeoff, maneuver, and landing) focus on the task or skills in many different ways instead of using it to break down park features. Establishing a skills focus becomes the maneuver. Guests don't care how they get to the maneuver; they just want to get there. Instructors become a facilitator of the approach, takeoff, and the landing of the learning segment with everyone experiencing the maneuver together.

Boot work is a fundamental for a

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Level 1 progression, setting the guest up to develop skills that are needed for the transition to one- or two-ski movements. With boot work as a focus, play with some drills that are traditional and then add a freestyle element to them to create a freestyle boot drill.

For example, traditional and freestyle techniques both focus on balancing movements, rotation, edging, and pressure management. If we go through a traditional boot drill presentation we find a command/task type of scenario where the instructor is showing the guest a movement pattern and then having the group perform the task. Examples of traditional boot drills are bow ties in the snow, balancing on one foot, or even carving the half circle in the snow.

Taking the boot drills as the "ma-

neuver," you can begin to repackage the presentation and add a freestyle element, such as "the ski as a rail feature." Simply flip one ski over and stick the bindings in the snow (tie the brakes with rubber bands so skiers don't get stuck on them).

See if the guest can slide the ski with their boots. Can they hop on it, over it, slide it forwards or backwards—or sideways? When they can do this on one foot or both feet you can even have them try to spin them around while on the ski. The options and possibilities are endless.

Incorporate the exercise in a session setting, allowing guests to experience the boot drill with those group dynamics. Let the guest pick what maneuver he or she feels comfortable with, and encourage every attempt with enthusiasm. With this example of having the focus of boot work and generating a session you make the guest feel like an equal player in the lesson and recognize that there was no wrong way to complete the task.

When you take your lesson tactics outside of the traditional methods and look at the mountain as a playground or a space to be explored with enthusiasm and energy, you will bring the freestyle experience to your clients. This allows for a greater number of possible outcomes. It becomes an endless experience that the guest can join in on at any time. After all, what we are ultimately giving the guest are options that help them generate as many positive experiences as they can.

Throughout PSIA's 50-year history of instruction, one thing remains consistent: We got here by teaching people well and progressing our sport along the way. The growth of the industry and our sports depend on our instruction remaining grounded in the skills concept, but also in being innovative in finding new ways to engage clients and keep the lessons fun and fresh. ❧

David Oliver is a member of the PSIA Alpine Team who recently participated in the 2011 International Ski Instructors' Congress (Interski) held in St. Anton, Austria. He instructs at Colorado's Breckenridge Ski & Ride School.