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32 DEGREES

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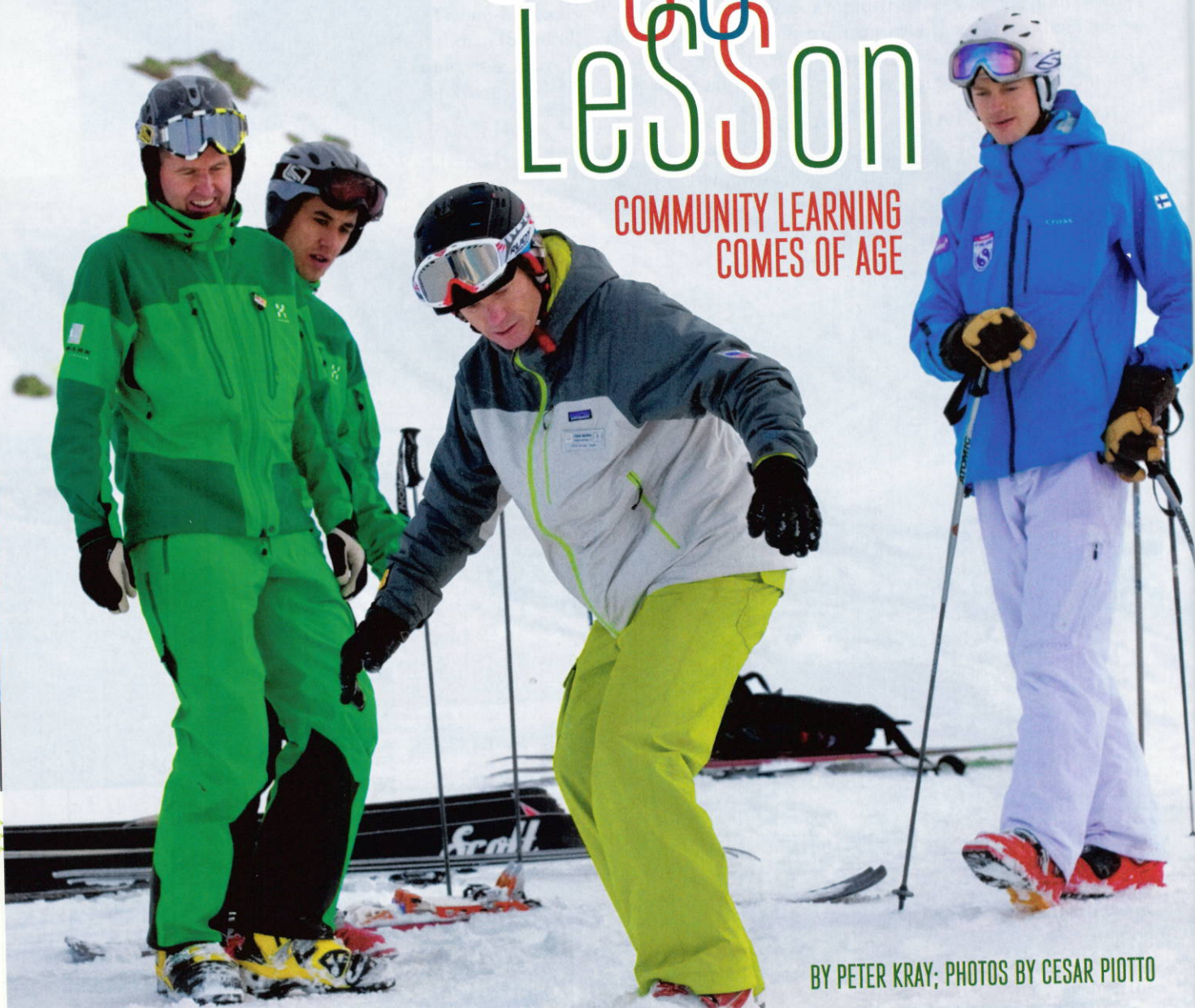
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THE Session Lesson

COMMUNITY LEARNING
COMES OF AGE



BY PETER KRAY; PHOTOS BY CESAR PIOTTO

If the 20th Century ended with the Information Age, then what we are living in now is the Age of Interaction. Not only can we immediately access newspapers, videos, and sports scores from our computers, cell phones, and iPads, but we can immediately react to that media as well, weighing in with our own opinions and additional insight on Twitter, Facebook, or in online chat rooms.

Long gone are the days when talking heads were expected to deliver the world's news in 30-minute segments every evening. Today, information comes from everywhere, all day long. And smart companies are harnessing that free-flow of

information, and using it to the benefit of their brand. Vail Resorts, for instance, stopped charging for its on-hill photo service this season, reasoning that many more guests will opt to get free photos, and then personally broadcast them in a

virtual explosion of grassroots marketing.

For ski and snowboard instructors, that same inclusive sense of give-and-take has resulted in the advent of the "session lesson." As much a change in mindset as it is in presentation, the session lesson takes more from coaching



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than it does from the traditional structure of the classroom. At its heart, it recognizes that each lesson is a group or team experience—an experience that is only improved by the active participation of everyone.

"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," PSIA Alpine Team member David Oliver wrote in the Spring 2011 Issue of *32 Degrees*, in an article titled, "The Road to Retention? Freestyle!" which previewed the rise of the session lesson.

In an interview for this article, Oliver stressed that rather than just assigning tasks in the hopes of achieving specific outcomes, the instructor has to be more of a facilitator, actively encouraging students to participate in the lesson, and the fun. "That kind of thinking just raises the involvement of everybody in the class," Oliver said. "We've always focused on that command-task way of teaching, and this changes the whole dynamic."

FREESTYLE FOR EVERYONE

The session lesson atmosphere certainly thrives in settings where instructors are focusing on freestyle riding. Snowboard-born (see page 38), the term itself comes from the free-form

way in which boarders tend to hit the halfpipe or terrain park, everyone encouraging each other to try new tricks, and pushing each other while still providing a support group, as well as plenty of high-fives and stoke.

"There's this level of mutual inspiration—like you find when skateboarding with your friends—that I don't think you can find in too many other sports," said PSIA-AASI Professional Development Manager Earl Saline.

Saline said that, frankly, that kind of dynamic creates a situation in which "learning is more fun, because you don't really think about it as it's going on." It also helps strengthen the sense of on-snow community, to which every aspiring skier and snowboarder wants to belong. But most importantly, it creates an environment that encourages imagination and involvement, and according to Saline, "the idea that there really is no right or wrong."

That session lesson mentality was an important aspect of PSIA-AASI's freestyle presentations at Interski 2011 in St. Anton, Austria, which showed how to work freestyle concepts into any level of lesson. Along with PSIA-AASI's early embrace of rocker technology, and also its focus as much on technique as on a culture of connection, it may also be an example of another venue in which U.S. instruction differs significantly from what and how other countries are teaching.

That's not just because so much of snowboarding's innovation and style come from America. But also, according to PSIA-AASI Executive Director and CEO Mark Dorsey, because, in the U.S. especially, back in the 1980s ski schools were the first venue for skiers and snowboarders to join forces. "The first place skiers and snowboarders ever really came together was in snowsports schools," Dorsey said. "As far as learning from each other and perfecting technique was concerned, snowboarding just breathed new life into that whole process."

Mixing the new energy of snowboarding with the tried and true student- and skills-based focus of the American Teaching System provided benefits to both, most immediately in the way it created a standardized instruction method for getting more riders on the lifts. But now, decades later, in new innovations such as the session lesson, that longstanding relationship continues to deliver new ways of improving instruction.

MIXING THE NEW ENERGY OF SNOWBOARDING WITH THE TRIED AND TRUE STUDENT- AND SKILLS-BASED FOCUS OF THE AMERICAN TEACHING SYSTEM PROVIDED BENEFITS TO BOTH

And as the popularity of freestyle skiing and snowboarding booms, it may also provide an important basis for instructors who are helping to steer the sport toward what's next. That's because the two categories are growing so quickly that in the past year they have achieved the kind of recognition that many old hotdoggers might not have expected to see in their lifetime.

Just days after the PSIA-AASI Teams arrived home from Interski, the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association announced the launch of a U.S. Freeskiing brand in order to capitalize on the accelerated level of freestyle competition. "Freeskiing is a distinctly different and growing segment of our sport," the USSA's Chief Revenue and Marketing Officer Andrew Judelson said in announcing the launch. "Millions of young skiers worldwide are being drawn to this new genre of skiing."

Then in April, the same week PSIA was celebrating its 50th anniversary in Snowmass, Colorado, the International Olympic Committee announced that halfpipe skiing would premiere at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, as a medal event. Finally, over the summer the IOC also added new medal events in slope-style skiing and snowboarding.

That kind of exposure will certainly help market a lot more freestyle-based session lessons. And with the excitement freestyle can bring to any terrain—from rail riding in the city park to shredding Alaska's steepest slopes—it could also introduce a lot more kids to the snowsports. But for David Oliver, to say that session lessons are only applicable to freestylers would be to sell the idea short of its full potential.



**"THIS IS THE NEXT BIG STEP IN
STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING"**
—DAVID OLIVER

STUDENTS FIRST

"This is the next big step in student-centered teaching," Oliver said in explaining the true impact of the session lesson. "The fact it comes from the roots of what U.S. teaching is all about only makes it that much cooler for me. It's really just taking it to the next level in the whole experience."

Oliver does acknowledge there are instructors who will have trouble adjusting to a more free-flowing style of teaching that deviates from a strict A to B to C progression. And he said some of the more open-ended aspects of the session lesson were hard to grasp for a few of the international instructors who did attend PSIA-AASI's freestyle clinics in St. Anton—particularly the Austrians, who, Oliver said, kept asking him, "But when do you tell the students what they need to have learned?"

For Oliver, it was a question based on an even deeper philosophical difference: "Are you teaching students what they want to learn, or are you only teaching what you think they should be taught?"

"I think that some of them are so command-task focused that they couldn't really wrap their brains around the whole message," Oliver said. "Part of that could be from having a fairly narrow definition of what good skiing is, and only trying to get to that one perfect image that looks the same for everyone. To me, good skiing is defined by being able to have a positive, selective effect on your equipment at any given time in any given condition—whether that's in the moguls,

the powder, or the terrain park—and that's really the point that we were making."

Which in the end, Oliver said, is the ultimate aspect of the successful session lesson—that each lesson continues to evolve based on exactly what each student wants to learn.

GOOD SKIING IS DEFINED BY BEING ABLE TO HAVE A POSITIVE, SELECTIVE EFFECT ON YOUR EQUIPMENT AT ANY GIVEN TIME IN ANY GIVEN CONDITION.

By soliciting constant interaction, input, and ideas from the group, good instructors can more easily focus on introducing tactics and techniques to benefit the people they're teaching. Whether that's for beginners, intermediates, or experts looking to uncork the next big trick that helps them win gold at the X Games won't matter. The important thing will be that each lesson makes students the center of the class, all while giving them the opportunity to create their own level of interaction, and their own definition of satisfaction. ☑

Pete Kray skis, telemarks, and snowboards out of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is the founder of Shred White and Blue (www.shredwhiteandblue.com), a media and apparel company celebrating American boardsports.



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