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# 32 DEGREES

THE JOURNAL OF PROFESSIONAL SNOWSPORTS INSTRUCTION | WINTER 2012



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Whitney was right;  
children *are* the future

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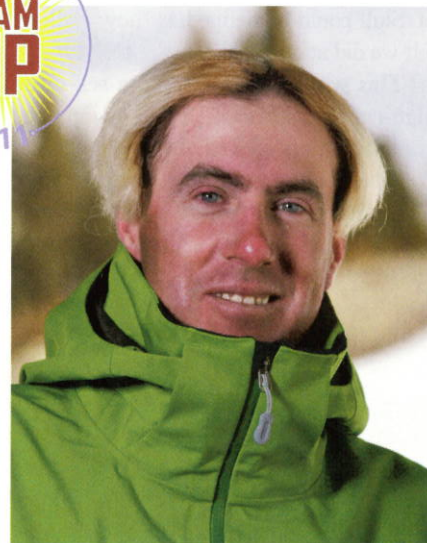
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Jonathan Selkowitz

## Explore, Play... And Get Out of the Way!

By DAVID A. OLIVER

**W**e all have our toolbox filled with fix-it progressions and we all can spin stories of how this tool worked or how that tool changed the lesson. After 20-plus years of teaching skiing to kids I would like to think my toolbox is overflowing for every situation. ¶ Sometimes the tools and the tech take over, and we lose touch with our audience—the kids. But tools are just tools. What happens when our tool box just isn't enough?



The author prepares to plunge a group of Austrian kids into exploration of the mountain.

Cesar Pionto

Never was this more apparent than in a kid's group lesson I taught at Interski. I was assigned a group of nine children—ages 10 to 18 years old—with skiing abilities from intermediate to racer. This was a group of local Austrian kids that I was to teach on unfamiliar terrain, while providing them with a lesson that was the best the U.S. could offer. This lesson completely took me outside of my comfort zone as I realized the standard tools just wouldn't cut it.

What next? How about mechanics? Instructors always love fixing the base mechanics. However, wanting to represent the U.S. as well as I knew how, I realized that getting technical is something *anyone* can do.

I needed to get out of my own way and remember *who* was important. This situation was not about me or my skills. I wasn't here to be scored or examined. I was here for this group of kids. They didn't care who I was or where I was from. They had just one question on their mind: Is this going to be fun or not? It was time to go back to the basics of kid's instruction. Fun. Let the kids have some fun and see where it takes us.

By generating a scenario where we became explorers of our environment, we found a common ground. Using the exploration of terrain and discovering teachable moments, we bonded. We explored parts of the mountain and movement patterns that we had never seen or done. From falling leaves and pivot

## Let the kids have some fun and see where it takes us.

slips to switch skiing and Polish donuts, to stem christies and tail press slow-dog-noodles. We played with so many different tricks and games that I still can't remember all the things we did. I was having so much fun I forgot to write all my notes down.

Taking the kids to the mountain to explore and giving them a chance to steer the lesson—not only in content but location—put the group in the driver's seat. Sure I was a facilitator of the content, but even *I* didn't know what was going to happen. I had a very rough, underlying idea of a rotary focus for the day, but I had no specific location or timetable for learning. Exploration of the concepts on the mountain was my lead for the day. It soon became clear that no one had ever done this type of teaching

with these kids. Feedback like "You're not a ski instructor, you're way too cool to be a ski instructor!" and "Yeah you're more like a friend than an instructor," meant that, in their eyes, we had done more than take a ski lesson.

After an exhausting day of mountain exploration and playing with tricks, I posed a question to the group, "Did we learn anything today?" What came out was unexpected.

They enjoyed learning without getting taught with the standard drills or follow-the-leader format. And, most importantly, they said, "You taught us by not teaching us as if we were in a classroom."

It's simple and yet so profound.

If I had gone with my first instincts and tools that we all have as instructors, this day would have turned out very

differently. I learned that sometimes instructors need to get out of our own way, and become more involved in the fun that is evolving in front of us. Be a partner in the lesson, not the dictator. We are not in a classroom, we are in the mountains, yet because of our depth of knowledge or our egotistical superiority complex we sometimes forget to get on the same level of our students. We were all kids at one time. If we can tune into what made us laugh or smile back in grade school, we will find that the kids we teach enjoy the same types of things.

After all, it's about *their* experience, not ours. And the more fun they find on the mountain means that we will have turned the kids on to a sport that they can be passionate about for life. The next time you are about to reach into your toolbox for some tricks, just close it—and open your eyes to fun. ☺

*David A. Oliver and his tool box can be found in the Breckenridge Ski & Ride School's Village Kids location, or generally exploring the resorts of the U.S. and beyond as a member of the PSIA Alpine Team.*



## INFORMATION THAT STAYS WITH YOU

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