

# Ski School

In our age of entitlement and instant gratification, has teaching a difficult sport become a contradiction in terms? BY GEORGE KOCH

**A** historical poster sits high up on the wall at Felix Ski Service, the Calgary shop where I take my skis for tuning. Hannes Schneider, in knickers and ankle-high leather boots, huge baskets dangling from bamboo poles, is bearing down on his eight-foot-long, inch-thick wooden skis. It's been 80+ years since the photo of the man remembered as the father of modern skiing technique was taken. Superficially, everything about skiing has changed—not least that boots are no longer short and soft, skis long and stiff. Yet the fundamentals, remarkably, have endured. Turning a pair of skis is still about edging, steering and pressure—plus balance to co-ordinate the three. I'm convinced Schneider, a great innovator as well as pedagogue, would easily recognize—and master—today's skiing. I also think he'd sympathize with a dilemma that has also endured: How do you get people to work on learning this thing called skiing?

A decade back I wrote a pair of pugnacious articles, one of which appeared in *Ski Canada*, about the failure of ski schools to satisfy the needs of skiers. I praised the proliferation of alternative approaches, especially little guerrilla outfits that focused on exploring natural terrain and showing skiers the joys of what was then called “extreme” skiing. As I wrote in *Ski Canada*: “The ungroomed, the wild, the steep and the uncontrolled have gone from the murky preserve of a privileged fringe to the urgent desires, if not the daily experience, of a huge if undefined segment of the skiing market.”

Meanwhile I sniggered at the “Lybra Priesthood”—the Level IV elite who controlled the Canadian Ski Instructors' Alliance (CSIA). Sure, they skied with Jesuitical perfection. But their “largely ritualized behaviour” seemed similarly detached from trends in the real world,

appeared oblivious to the needs of real skiers and didn't necessarily convey their own abilities to the hapless Level Is who formed the bulk of working ski school employees.

These alleged shortcomings led critics to claim the entire ski school business model, along with the traditional ski instructor, was doomed. Many wondered about skiing itself. There was good reason for the uneasy tone: the skiing world felt it was stagnating, being overtaken and rendered laughable by snowboarding. Shaped skis were brand new, widely misunderstood and still gimmicky. The fat skiing revolution remained unseen. Skiing seemingly faced a bleak future of decline toward an anachronism tended by a dwindling assortment of senile veterans—the mah-jongg of the mountains.

Little did we know skiing stood on the cusp of quadratic revolutions—shaped skis, wide skis, freeride skiing and the terrain park—that would sweep the sport and sweep aside its dystopic futurism. Skiing raged back into coolness, surprising to many. It was snowboarding that has since stagnated—and descended into farce.

So much has changed—what about the way people go about learning? Notwithstanding the profound changes in the skiing world—indeed, *thanks* to some of them—the ski school soldiers on. Ski instructors still cruise around the mountain in unmistakable uniforms, still gather at the meeting place at 9:00 or 9:15 or 9:30, and still collect their flock and shepherd them to the chairlift. The alternative teaching phenomenon, such as camps and clinics that were so cocky a decade ago, crested and saw lesser practitioners weeded out or marginalized. It survives, but in reduced form.

There's precious little Lybra hanging in ski

school locker rooms nowadays. But has the Priesthood merely donned new vestments, or has the church corpus also been renewed? I put this question to Norman Kreutz, a 30+-year teaching veteran, Level IV CSIA Course Conductor and until last season director of the ski school at Silver Star resort near Vernon, B.C. Kreutz now is the alpine director of Vernon Ski Club and remains involved with the national ski team. For years he was also one of *Ski Canada's* ski testers. No mere Sunday School minister, then—more like an archbishop.

“We reoriented from a teacher-centred approach of learning, in which the teacher is telling the student that this is what you have to do (whether or not the student wants to) to a student-centred approach,” says Kreutz. Appreciating the pressures that skiing was under, the CSIA studied competitors around the world, and decided to borrow some of the thinking pioneered by its U.S. counterpart PSIA. But only some. “The U.S. approach is very fluffy,” says Kreutz. “It's all about, ‘How do you feel? That's the feeling you want. Now go for it!’ There's a lot of pumping the person up emotionally. They don't apply a lot of technical instruction on how you actually achieve and maintain those feelings. In Canada we added the solid technical component and sought to harmonize the two.”

Today's approach, says Kreutz, “begins with asking the student a whole bunch of questions, centred on what they want to achieve, and in a collaborative effort come up with some realistic goals. A novice might say they want to learn bumps that very morning. That becomes the end goal and that's what we agree to work toward. But realistically you may not be skiing bumps today. We'll work on some fundamentals, some balance, and then we'll work to get you into the bumps.”

Statistics kept by the Canada West Ski Areas Association suggest the new approach has generated positive results. Past skier-surveys virtually never mentioned ski schools as contributing to a positive experience. Nowadays they're regularly hailed as a key ingredient in making the guest's skiing holiday. “The client is feeling that they've taken ownership of that lesson,” says Kreutz. A further tangible

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outcome is that, "Ski school revenues are up substantially because we're getting more and more return clientele."

My travel-oriented ski writing has included the fringe benefit of skiing with some of the best skiers in North America and Europe—mountain managers or lift company owners or ski school directors who had long earlier careers in racing, coaching or teaching. Having my skiing improved through insightful analysis and practical tips, or simply through following someone who skis at the absolute pinnacle, is one of the sport's great pleasures.

I spent a marvellous day with Kreutz a couple of seasons back. He swooped down the groomers like a man possessed, both carving edges seemingly attached by electromagnets to the iciest surface. Over successive hours he coaxed my early-season sloppiness into shape—by day's end carving was triple the fun. People who wall themselves off from ski instruction are denying themselves a big part of skiing.

Still there are many who wilt under such direct scrutiny—or are just bored by it. As I wrote in the past, Western-based advanced skiers especially tend to be self-taught: *"If you can brand cattle, track a grizzly and catch trout, you can sure as hell slide around on two boards without orders from some prancing, leotard-wearing Euro."* The guerrilla shops of the '90s were aimed at those skiers. The alternatives proliferated around North America, their divergent foci typically reflecting the founders' tastes: former racers like Karen Stemmler and Liisa Savijarvi emphasized technique (and continued to wear one-piece suits!), former freestylers like the DesLauriers brothers sold agility and flair, while genuine mountain goats like the late Doug Coombs imparted survival skills on truly deadly terrain. The differences from regular ski school in philosophy, style, emphasis, manner—as well as clothing and equipment—were profound, ▶





Photo: STEVE GUFF

*Extremely Canadian guide Derek Foose cuts a line above this steep slope on Blackcomb.*

but came down to this: one was teaching the technique of the turn, the other was revealing ways of handling the mountain.

While many of these upstarts have faded or shut down, some evolved into solid operations. One of the longest-lived and most successful has been Whistler-based Extremely Canadian. Owned by husband-and-wife founders Peter Smart and Jill Dunnigan, Extremely Canadian offers a mix of steep skiing clinics on some of Whistler-Blackcomb's wildest, least-known terrain, and guided off-piste adventure trips to destinations like La Grave, France; Alagna, Italy; and Gulmarg, India. Today the company boasts 24 employees and contract instructor-guides.

"There was a certain element of stagnation in the traditional ski school. They weren't embracing the changing technology and the changing culture," recalls Smart. That happened just as a generation of experienced but still youngish instructors were chafing under ski school strictures and yearning to show skiers everything the mountain held. How have the survivors transformed novelty into something with staying power? "At bottom, we succeeded by being good at what we do," says Smart. "Having really top people is key, with great technical skills, great teaching ability, great people skills and infectious enthusiasm. We really have to work at maintaining the business model, keeping up the mix of ingredients that

work, making sure people don't stagnate or go off on some tangent."

One big advantage for the freeride-oriented alternatives is that there's vastly more natural terrain available at Canada's ski areas today. New resorts like Kicking Horse and Revelstoke have appeared, Whistler-Blackcomb has expanded and previously off-limits slopes at places like Marmot, Sunshine and Lake Louise, to list a few, were marked and opened. The overall offering continues to appeal to the advanced skier with a sense of adventure—and there are more of them than before. "People are looking to find some cool new places, have a good time and have a learning experience while they're at it. Very few of our clients are really the super-extreme, testosterone freak," says Smart. "The regular ski school is still ski school—even as they've adapted and evolved, they're still saddled with that negative aura. A small company like ours is agile, can go places and try things the ski school can't. We survive on repeat visits from a loyal clientele and grow by word-of-mouth."

I haven't skied with Smart in years, but I spent a day last season with one of his senior guides, Steve Mayer. Pounding every possible steep and lightly tracked or unskied nook and cranny of Blackcomb—all in a raging storm, with the alpine lifts spasmodically shutting and reopening—offered an on-the-scene reminder

of the alternatives' innate potential for greatness: the raging pace, the varied terrain, the infectious enthusiasm, the personalized attention, the extremely high level of skiing ability even in foul snow and weather—all without making the guest feel like a B-Lister. It was phenomenal. The day was crowned with an amazing beyond-the-ropes powder descent through the trees to the base area—untracked even at 3:30. Half the locals I told about this route had never heard of it. I doubt many 22-year-old Level I ski school employees from Mississauga on their one-year Western booze 'n' booty tour could have safely and confidently provided that experience.

The role of equipment has also been huge—on the groomers and out in the wild terrain. I wondered about whether shaped skis had been all that helpful. Most people today *still* skid their turns—only, it's harder to do on a shaped ski! Kreutz insists they've been an unalloyed boon. "Being wider at the tip and narrow at the waist, the steering angle is built into the ski," he explains. "It wants to turn, on its own, whether you're in the back seat, front seat or in the middle. It makes the initiation easy, which used to be so difficult. We can get to the parallel phase much quicker. Far more people can put their skis side-by-side and feel like they're almost as good as buddy who got them into skiing."

Other CSIA veterans report the organization had a rocky transition to shaped skis—not through denial of the trend, but by attempting ▶



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to rush the pedagogical adjustment at a time when 80 per cent of students still had straight skis. While that’s now in the past, contrarians point out today’s equipment is so good at hiding incompetence that legions of skiers who need lessons no longer know it.

Fat skis have profoundly reshaped off-piste skiing, of course. When I first wrote about *Extremely Canadian*, the standard all-round tool for ungroomed surfaces was the GS race ski—up to 210 cm in length. Soon after that story appeared, wide skis conquered the skiing world. They continue to improve and diversify. Nowadays, you can find a ski of virtually any waist width—plus select your preferred turning radius. The hardest part is choosing the right ski for a particular type of terrain and snow density.

On my day with Mayer, for instance, I’d hit the mountain on an Atomic Metron B5, an all-mountain ski. They were great in tight entries and on the windblown snow partially filling in Blackcomb’s bumps. But in the deep snow I was wallowing while Mayer floated along on super-wide Rossignol pro models. Still, in the old days we’d have had to manage on GS skis. Not one of the day’s runs would have been as fun. Who knows if we’d have even skied until day’s end?

Peering into the future of ski instruction in Canada, one sees a mixed landscape, a combination of improved strengths, solid positioning and annoying, intractable challenges. Canada’s ski instructor community still essentially consists of three broad groups. At the pinnacle stands a tiny band of truly amazing skiers: fantastic technicians, fast and capable under any conditions, irrepressibly impassioned about skiing and about teaching skiing, and devastatingly effective at imparting what they know and transforming it into success for any customer. Then comes a slightly larger group of veteran journeymen/women—typically Level IIIs or particularly solid and keen Level IIs—enthusiastic and effective under nearly any circumstances. They ought to be the industry’s backbone—but there just aren’t enough of them.

The largest group, the one that provides the vast majority of lessons, of interaction with the public, of ski school revenue and of social

presence in the resort community, are Level IIs and Is. A staggering 20,000 of the CSIA’s 30,000 members have only their Level I—which requires exactly 30 hours of formal training. The very people with the least experience and, generally, the weakest commitment to the craft—who are merely in the process of *learning how to teach*—are the backbone of the teaching world. That’s just bizarre.

“We don’t have a huge group of instructors who are totally dedicated, life-long people,” says Kreutz. “The reason is simple: there’s no money in it. Ski areas look at the ski school as a profit centre. You can put a lot of Level Is in there and you’ll make more money.” At Silver Star, Kreutz maintained an impressive nine Level IVs and half his complement were Level IIIs. But few ski schools can manage that—the talent pool is too small, costs are too high. Most Canadian ski schools are no longer privately owned concessions paying a fee or commission to the resort, but a department of a ski resort corporation whose goal is to maximize profits. As one industry veteran puts it, the teaching giants of old have been replaced by “corporate department heads who spend all day in blue jeans and a ball cap scurrying from one meeting to another or in their office preparing the budget.”

Canadian ski instruction remains dominated by the proverbial 22-year-old who’s in for a good time, not a long time. And why wouldn’t they be? Their job pays next to nothing and earns proportionate social respect. Instructors pay for their own training and even equipment (or waste days grubbing up pro deals and sponsorship). Decent employee housing is scarce or absent. Many ski schools have been *reducing* pay and benefits precisely amid the strongest economic run Canada has ever experienced—with record low unemployment, general labour shortages in skiing markets like Alberta, oodles of career opportunities and rising incomes with bulging benefit packages. Nowadays instructors at the nation’s biggest resorts can spend all morning “on call”—only to be sent home with not a dollar to show if no clients materialize. Not a great formula to create a new generation of Norman Kreutz’s.

In addition, certain ambitions to remake the ski school proved laughable. Among these was the U.S. PSIA’s technocratic Vision 2001. It was concocted in the mid-’90s to transform the ski instructor into a kind of post-modern shaman dispensing local secrets and providing guests with a “total experience” that would boost skier-visits and resort profits—a written vision that omitted, literally, any mention of the word “ski” or “skier”. Nearly 15 years later, American ski schools look remarkably similar to the way they’ve always been.

But the alternative ski school has also fallen short of its—admittedly absurd—expectations. In eschewing ski school strictures, the new model created new internal risks, chiefly a lack of discipline that could lead to abandoning any teaching model at all. Alternatives can be havens for professional geniuses—and equally dumping grounds for weirdos gone off the deep end. “Getting out in the terrain” and ignoring boring norms can easily degenerate into glorified tour-guiding. Guests soon notice they’re paying hugely to be dragged around the same old routes.

Those avoiding that pitfall often bump up against their model’s natural limits. Skiing produces a limited number of experts and dedicated advanced skiers. Meanwhile, the more technically focused alternatives spun off into almost cult-like movements existing as much to tear down their former peers as improve pedagogy. They tend to draw self-selecting acolytes. Little wonder they report stunning teaching “success”: they attract precisely those willing to work hardest. These are dream clients to any veteran ski instructor—who could probably also deliver success if handed such material to work with.

At bottom, every alternative must buck the tremendous built-in advantages enjoyed by the traditional ski school. These include size, financial resources, centralized physical presence at a base area or midstation, lift-line-cutting privileges, competitive pricing, reserved seating in restaurants, and large numbers of employees who accept easy schedule changes and lessons for all levels, including kids—plus the public’s simple inertia of habit and numbers.

Acknowledging that most skiers “don’t want to stand in single file at the side of the run with the instructor barking at them,” as one veteran instructor put it, some ski schools also began playing to the public’s yearning for novelty by offering superficially alternative products—like “steep camps”—or renamed themselves “academies”. Notes Smart: “Ski schools, too, have evolved. They’ve incorporated alternative programs and new outlooks. Pretty much every ski school is trying

to fill those different niches.”

Over the years many have sought inspiration from Europe. With its emphasis on individual professionalism, life-long career dedication and social respect for the craft and the craftsman, it seems like a superior ski school model for practitioner and customer alike. Historical weaknesses like poor language skills and local monopolies that eroded customer services were being driven out of the system throughout the '90s. Where the European approach works, it does so admirably.

But it, too, has internal weaknesses, including a hierarchy that relies on sexism and ethnic nationalism. Standing in for Canada's teeming masses of often-incompetent Level Is are young foreigners with anything from excellent to nonexistent skills and training. They're routinely relegated to teaching beginners—precisely those who need the best customer care and meticulous instruction. Young female instructors, meanwhile, handle the majority of kids. This reserves the interesting work for the locally bred men. If Canada has its Lycra Priesthood, European ski instruction can be a kind of Alpine Mullahcracy.

Over the years I began wondering whether it wasn't unfair to have blamed ski schools for

failing to meet skiers' needs. Sure, if people aren't returning to ski school or are dropping out of skiing altogether, then skiing isn't giving them what they want. But wants and needs are two different things. What if the wants—the demands—of skiers themselves were unreasonable? Could the combination of our culture's obnoxious entitlement mentality—in which virtually all problems are expected to be solved by governments or other service providers—combined with not only the desire for but the routine fulfillment of instant gratification, create incompatibilities with skiing itself?

Skiing is *difficult*. Carving well isn't like thumb-punching an X-Box, and a ski lesson isn't like a McDonald's drive-thru (where even the title words are shortened!). You don't learn to ski in one season, let alone half a morning. Becoming proficient takes years, and becoming really good a solid chunk of one's lifetime. Staying on one's skiing game requires dedication and practice. Its very difficulty is what makes skiing so immensely satisfying. The almost limitless permutations of its challenges are one reason it's never boring.

“One little golfing tip isn't going to make you a par-shooter,” sighs Kreutz. “But I

think that's a lot of the way people view ski instruction.” Even after all the service improvements of the past 15 years, only 20 per cent of beginners stick with skiing after taking one lesson. Many report they won't take another—not because the instructor was a jerk, but because skiing is actually difficult! Says Kreutz: “The onus has to be put on the learner, in some way, to adjust his or her expectations and not be disappointed if it's more work than they anticipated.”

A sport of that nature isn't for everyone. But nor is skiing the exclusive domain of experts. Ironically, you don't need to be good to enjoy it. Certain sports impose a minimum skills threshold. You can't be truly crappy at scuba diving. You'll just drown. Nor is fly-fishing ineptly the least bit enjoyable. But skiing is both non-lethal and fun for the easy-going dilettante. Millions can remain perfectly content to just skid their way down blue groomers for five days a season for the next 40 years. The disconnect afflicts those who want to be better—but aren't willing to mount the required effort. For them, skiing well isn't an objective, it's a fantasy. For ski instructors and ski schools—conventional or alternative—that dilemma will probably be with skiing forever. ❧

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