



Alpine Ski Race Training

*-instilling values necessary
in both **SKIING**
and **LIFE!***



Dear Dan,

Sometimes I truly believe that coaches don't understand the incredible impact they can have on the life of a young athlete - or at least they don't get enough credit for it. I've always felt that way in regard to your relationship with Jack and particularly in the past year. You have been a huge part of his development as a person, aside from what you have done for him as an athlete.

Enclosed is a copy of an assignment submitted for his honors Literature class. He doesn't often share his work with me, but he gave this to me this morning. His teacher had told me about it in November and I secretly hoped that I would get a peek at it some time. It really says it all and although I know that Jack would probably be embarrassed if he knew I shared this with you, it's something I feel you deserve to read and understand. Thanks so much for all that you have done and continue to do for Jack and Pete.

Credit: Jandy Sprouse (Jack's mother)

Mettle vs. Medal

Monday, November 10, 2008

My breath bursts from my throat and regular blasts of icy crystals, rising outward and up, into the frigid December air, joined by the sporadic clouds of my competitors to be whisked up and away from the hill into the clear and infinite space above. The slap of P-tex and fiberglass on the squeaky compacted snow occasionally cuts through Chris Walla's "Archer and the Light," blasting from my ear buds as a racer nervously beats the cold from the exposed and brightly spandexed limbs. Everywhere, muscles tense and stomachs contort in anxiety and anticipation as the assistant starter barks names that have become as familiar as relatives: Hill, Zachary; Swineheart, Tyler; Marsh, Carter; Bobian, Michael; Braveheart, Gabe. Some are friends, some are not, but all are the constants from year to year, always waiting at the start, always watching from the finish.

As I enter the queue, between Tyler, a massive first year J2, or member of the second oldest two year age class in the Central United States Ski Association, and Carter, a lean second year, I shrug off my coat and fall into athletic focus. I absorb myself in steady breathing, eyes closed, purging the mind of all unnecessary and negative thought, only me and the music tuning out all the distractions around me. Each rival implements his own routine, staring into space, visualizing the run to come. Carter absent mindedly clinches his fists around his poles and rolls his wrists, while two places behind him, Michael mimes the course with his hands and knees mimicking their movements, living each turn in his head. After countless hours up here, together, waiting to run, alone, and their routines become familiar.

I notice none of this however. Folded away in concentration, my mind's eye turns inward, to the countless races past from seasons long since concluded.

I remember my first race as a J4, counting the names on the start order and figuring that all I had to do was beat two kids to get that glimmering medal on its crimson pendant, that pinnacle of achievement that would incarcerate my eyes and aspirations for the years to come. Climbing into the gate, all I could think of was that shining talisman and the two strangers who stood in my way. It consumed my mind even as I fought my way down the course, struggling just to hang on.

I remember finishing, and listening as my time was announced, and as the rest of my age group sailed down the course, hearing the muffled blare of the speakers as I was consistently beaten by 5 to 12 seconds by each of my peers. Each time, 45.07, 43.65, 39.00, was a physical blow, as my dream of metallic glory was torn to pieces by the edges of my competitors' skis.

I remember with painful clarity all through those first two years, my hopes of glory mercilessly crushed by the reality of my deficiency, each run, only to rebound, shrug defeat off as a fluke, and rise to be destroyed yet again. No matter how badly I did, the vision of sparkling hardware never seemed far out of reach. I simply didn't consider a matter as trivial as my lack of skill in my calculation of the probability of success. To me it was just a matter of time.

I remember the hardship of my first year as a J3, the anguish of coming to terms with my incompetence.

I remember after a good run, barely beating Michael, talking to him about it, and his question, "Yeah... I fell and had to hike the third gate... Where did you fall?" I hadn't fallen.

I remember, after running first, watching Carter angrily slam his pole into the ground following a "terrible" run in which he beat me by seven seconds.

I remember watching as a new kid to CUSSA, Jay Marshall, matched my times for a few races, before pulling away to join the rest of our peers while I still struggled to finish.

I remember every lonely chair ride, after my run, wind biting through the pathetically thin suit, tears flowing from my clenched eyes, fogging up my goggles with silent sobs of self-pity. My body slumped against the cold metal of the chair, I was glad that no one could make me out from below.

I remember countless awards ceremonies in which I sat among my friends and watched in silent anguish as they were called up to receive the brilliance of acknowledgement. I secretly and fervently maintained the hope, always, that there would be some mistake that my name would be finally called, and I would be able to walk up to the stage and claim the prize. Even when all logical possibility of medaling was extinguished, after my age class was done, I still maintained the faint glimmering hope, which would remain tortuously lit for over an hour, until the ceremony was completely over and we would load into the gear-packed Volvo for the long defeated trip home.

I remember slowly learning to pour the anger and frustration of my defeats, my utter failures into practice, fueling a passion to learn and absorb everything I could from my coaches. My constant heartbreaks continued every race. In the days between, I threw myself at the drills, the practice courses, with an intensity that I'd never known before. Every run, every practice, every week, from December to mid-March, I saw in my mind's eye the gilded trophy that would prove that I could ski.

My second year as a J3 began, and I could feel the effects of my impassioned practices. I could feel my skis carve in graceful arcs – the synchronized movement of my knees and legs, the strength in my athletic stance, and the rhythm of the courses in practice. I avidly watched myself on video, and began to see the similarities in technique evolve between my peers and me. I felt myself closing the technical gap, finally catching my fellows.

But still, the ultimate and gleaming prize stayed so far out of my reach. Every race, I consistently placed well below my capabilities, continuing to finish behind all my peers. No matter how well I did in practice, it seemed I would never medal, never be recognized as one of the best, even for a single race.

Worse still, as my frustration mounted at my underachievement at races, were the comments of sympathetic parents, trying to encourage a flagging racer. After losing by only a second or two, being told that I had run “a good race” felt like the ultimate insult. I didn’t want to merely do well for my usual race standards. I wanted to just do well.

All that year, I continued to improve in practice, and my skills began to surpass those of my contemporaries, but still, on race day, never could I even begin to match their times. For all my passion and practice, it seemed that my only goal, a single medal, just one piece of hardware from one race would forever be beyond my reach. At times, my frustration was inconsolable.

And so, I found myself at the start of yet another year, facing the same prospects of another year failing at the sport I love.

As I move up to the gate for the start, I put previous years behind me. I clear my mind and focus only on visualizing the run to come, every turn, every pin, every dip and roll, imagining completing it perfectly. In my mind, there is no one at the top of the hill with me; I am all alone. It is just another practice run. Nothing rides on it, I just have to ski it as well as I can. The starter’s radio crackles and I know that Tyler is on the course. I don’t look. He doesn’t matter. Only my run matters.

I slide into the start, looking straight ahead at the first gate, breathing steadily, my legs each tensing and relaxing, as I set my poles on the other side of the wand. I dimly hear the starter begin the countdown but ignore it. Taking a deep breath, I slide back a couple of inches, and grip my poles as every muscle in my body tenses. I wait, taking the couple of seconds to make sure my mind is set... and explode out of the start.

Less than thirty seconds later, I fly through the finish line, my thighs quaking, my arms stinging from brushing by the gates, and my breath deep and heavy. I can still feel the run, every perfect turn, every precisely timed poleplant, every roll and fallaway. I can’t stop smiling as I slide out of the finish arena and over to my coach, completely ignoring the looks of surprise on the faces of the kids that have been crushing me years. Dan looks at me, his eyebrows raised practically to the edge of his hat.

“Well?” he asks.

“That felt GOOD,” I reply, grinning widely, and he smiles.

That coach’s smile is all that I need to tell me how far I’ve come. It says to me: “Finally! Now get up there and do it again.”

I never checked the leader board after that run, or the next. I didn’t stick around after the race to see if I had won anything. I didn’t have to.

At the next weekend’s race, I was sitting at the top of the hill brushing out my skis, when my coach came by. Reaching into his pocket, the shadow of a smile playing across his face, he tossed me a small plastic bag. All he said as he skied off to slip the course was, “You left this last weekend.” I could see through the plastic the dull bronze and white ribbon of a third place medal. Standing there with that little piece of metal in the palm of my hand, I wondered at the

immeasurable value I had bestowed upon it, such a simple and diminutive item. It now weighed so light in my hand, when compared to the long hours of dedicated practice that had earned me the golden prowess that won it.

My intended dominant expression in this piece was that the goals I struggle so hard to achieve are often unimportant in retrospect; it is the struggles and the fight to achieve those goals that are worthwhile.

The significance of this piece is that after years of struggling as a skier, this one race marked the dramatic turning point where everything fell into place and my hard work paid off.

Credit: Jack Kerby Miller (author)