
Backcountry views

by Nils Larsen

Balance

Nils Larsen lives in NE Washington. He teaches freeheel skiing, works as a consultant in the industry, and recently, completed the backcountry tele video, "Beyond the Groomed" you have seen Sunday night and will see Friday 5,30 pm at the cinema

Nils Larsen vive negli Usa, è maestro di telemark e ha prodotto il film "Beyond the groomed" che avrete visto Domenica sera e che avrete la possibilità di rivedere Venerdì alle 17,30 al cinema

We humans have a built-in desire to be in balance. As children learning to stand and walk we are introduced to balance, often in a painful way. Balance isn't something we're taught at home and isn't a subject in school. No, we learned the old-fashioned way, the Darwinian way, the Unconscious Way. For most of us, our only real awareness of it when it goes astray. Our sense of balance is buried deep in the unconscious: for skiers, this is a big problem.

There are many technical elements to learn as you hone your skiing skills: telemark turns, parallels, pole plants. In all the hubbub of techniques, what often gets overlooked is something that's taken for granted: balance. The quality of balance determines the learning curve for skiing and the absence of good balance is the great wrecking ball of all technique.

The centre of balance is located around your belly button. This is the center of your body weight and so it's the focus of balance. I like to think of my centre as a suspended object, independent of terrain, speed, and weird snow. A good image for me is a seal balancing a ball while manoeuvring around an obstacle course. The ball is your centre and remains balanced because of the constantly adjusting movements of the seal beneath it. So what's the seal? The seal is your lower body and the seal's movements are the perfect image for what our lower bodies must do. Every manoeuvre must be accomplished within the framework of keeping our centre in balance.

What makes it possible for your lower body (as well as the rest of the body) to do this is flexibility, the essential ingredient in every skier's stance and movements. This may seem obvious, but many, in fact most of us, become stiff and tense at times when skiing (generally right before you take a big plunge)!

This is often not a technical lapse. Hurling down a slippery, uneven, tree-studded slope in snow of variable depths and consistencies just isn't something daily life on this planet can prepare us for. Hence the mental tension. Mental tension becomes physical tension and turns muscle energy inward instead of outward, reducing the ability to steer and pressure your skis. Worse, it stiffens joints, limiting flexibility. A stiffly frozen skier moving down a hill will quickly be thrown out of balance (like the dummies in a Dummy Downhill).

The most common place for skiers to be tense is in the ankles. Stand up with your hands on our hips and sink a bit, keeping your centre over your feet. Your ankles have to flex to stay centered. Try flexing your knees without flexing your ankles. The centre moves behind the feet, an unbalanced position. So, loosen the ankles! Good ankle flex is the key to strong steering (knees driving over the feet) and the ankle is the joint to use to keep your centre in balance over your feet.

In contrast to the lower body's active role in keeping your centre in balance, the upper body's role is more passive. The upper body needs to keep a quiet, relaxed posture over the centre. Don't rock the boat. Pole movements should establish timing and help direct the centre into the new turn. Just as the lower body needs flexibility for its active roll, the upper body needs flexibility so it can maintain a calm, neutral state.

So how do you keep your joints flexible and your upper body calm, especially if tension comes from anxiety? Work with your sense of balance. Be aware of your centre and where it is in relation to your feet. Don't focus all your attention on technique: be aware of your body and where you hold your tension, starting with your ankles. Slow down and lower the bar a bit, and when you raise it, do it in small increments. Remember, if your joints are stiff, you are balancing (bracing really) against the earth, a somewhat functional situation when you're sober and standing still, but completely unworkable when you're rushing down the hill on skis with whatever trickery in slope and snow the earth can throw at you.

Una poesia di Lito Tejada Flores

Lito Tejada Flores's poem

Il giornalino è redatto da White Planet. Per informazioni sui programmi di WP: gaspa@livnet.it

Neve
roccia
cielo
respira profondo e poi scia

Cielo
neve
roccia
in piedi, muto, guardi

Roccia
cielo
neve
e ciò che rimane sono solo le tracce.

Snow
rock
sky
breathe deep then ski

Sky
snow
rock
stand dumb & look

Rock
sky
snow
only tracks to show