



YOU DO SO MUCH MORE THAN TEACH SKIING AND RIDING

By Karin Kirk

We have all sorts of motivations for teaching skiing and snowboarding. Maybe you just want a free season pass and more time on the hill, or perhaps you crave being more involved in a sport you love, or you enjoy working with children in a fun environment.

All of those are perfectly valid, but they're far from the only reasons to be a ski or snowboard instructor. Have you ever paused to consider the societal benefit of what you do out on the snow all winter? Sure, instructors sometimes have an image of being vain powder hogs, but there is a strong element of service in what you do on snow, which often goes overlooked.

Snowsports instruction can open doors for people to enjoy time outdoors, set goals, overcome fears, and build confidence. In short, teaching people to ski and snowboard can offer lessons that extend well beyond the slopes, and, in turn, these deeper benefits offer deeper rewards for you as well.

HELP STUDENTS GROOVE ON GOALS... AND MANAGE FEAR

At times, snowsports can be entirely black-and-white. Did you ski that run? Did you stick that landing? Did you get off the lift without falling? There are all kinds of opportunities to help guests set goals, then work to achieve them.

Goals needn't be grandiose. Seriously, I skied with a person whose main objective was to walk up the stairs in ski boots! Regardless of the loftiness of the accomplishment, the process of setting a goal, chipping away at it, and achieving it is immeasurably valuable to a person's well-being.

Skiing and snowboarding can be daunting endeavors, undertaken in unfamiliar and sometimes unforgiving settings. If you've spent much time instructing, you understand that a big part of your job is to help people come face to face with their fears, understand them, and move beyond them.



After a vigorous hike to Bridger Bowl's famous Ridge, the author's class celebrates their climb and gets excited for the descent.

There aren't too many equivalents in normal life that stimulate tangible fear quite like gazing down from a snowy ledge. I am lucky to teach and guide on Bridger Bowl's famous "Ridge," where physical and emotional challenges are common. Last winter I brought my regular group of women Ridge skiers to one of Bridger's crown jewels – Hidden Gully. The entrance to this couloir is off-angle, pitched at 50 degrees, and peppered with rocks. Plus it leads directly to a rocky pinch that's barely wider than a 178-cm ski. While there is an easier entrance to the run, that's not what we came for. I was proud and impressed as each skier nosed up to the edge, took a deep breath, and committed to the terrain. Each had her own tactic for getting into the couloir, whether it was talking herself through it, working her way slowly and carefully, or setting fear aside and just following her instincts and her skis. When we reunited below the crux, the stoke factor was off the charts. I'm certain we would not have been nearly as giddy if the run had been mild-mannered.

A mountainside can be a powerful teacher, and the ability to act in the face of fear can strengthen any of us. It's an amazing gift to help your students deal with this raw emotion in a productive way.

VIEW VIDEO



As you use snowsports instruction to enrich your students' lives, PSIA-AASI is here to enrich yours. See how in this "Get to Know PSIA-AASI" video.

SET THE STAGE FOR STUDENT AUTONOMY

A good instructor is there for their students as much as possible, but the bottom line is that everyone needs to make their own turns, navigate their own obstacles, and land their own jumps. When push comes to shove, we teach people to rely on their own strengths – some of which they may not even realize they have.

You've probably had the experience where a child darts in front of you and takes off down the mountain. As you race to catch up, all you can do is hope that you've instilled the right instincts in them so they can avoid disaster. When you watch them bobble, weave, stutter, and then ultimately pull off a smooth turn to a stop you know you've done your job well. "That was so fun! Can we do that again?" is the usual response. "Phew," you're thinking. "Yes, let's do that again!"

BUILD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Perhaps this theme is overwrought, but we all know how much better dinner tastes after a day out in nature. Snowsports instruction offers opportunities to impart lessons on ecology, geology, climate, natural history, and more.

Last winter we had an unusual graupel event at Bridger. What is graupel, you might ask? It's a small, pellet-shaped snowflake that resembles popcorn. Also called "soft hail," it starts out as a regular snow crystal

YOUR SPACE

but as it falls through a moist atmosphere, it gets layered with rime ice. Graupel is fun to pronounce (it's "GRAU-pull"), painful to get pelted with, and sublime to ski through. It rolls downhill and flows like water, creating cascades of snow that falls over cliff bands. One afternoon we got three inches of graupel and every student on the hill got a lesson in the wonders of this snow – and, wow, was the skiing surreal!

The mountains offer natural phenomena and raw sensations that few people get to experience in their daily lives; each of those offers a glimpse into the workings of the natural world.

INSTILL A SENSE OF COMMUNITY LEARNING

A group lesson has the potential to create learning opportunities exponentially greater than a one-on-one setting. Group learning allows people to understand more about themselves and how they relate to others.

Skiing and riding already involve a certain degree of risk-taking, but learning with your peers requires social risks as well. What if I fall



Great instructors teach mechanics and instill the confidence students can take into other aspects of their lives.

in front of everyone? What if I can't keep up? What if everyone is too slow and I have to wait? With your guidance, students can overcome these barriers in the right setting, and can then be part of a much larger celebration of the success of the entire group.

My favorite example involves a group of six never-ever adults. Their awkwardness was palpable as we started the lesson. But before long they were cheering each other on, consoling whomever was struggling, helping retrieve wayward skis, and becoming

a cohesive – and hilarious – team. It stands out as one of the most fun and uplifting lessons I've taught. It's a huge lesson in learning to operate in a team, feeling safe to take risks, and knowing that everyone will be supported. Wouldn't it be great if everything in life were this way?

No doubt you've had experiences similar to these in your career, and you've already discovered unexpected rewards in teaching people the simple joys of arcing down a snowy slope. As you map out your plans for this upcoming season, take a moment to reflect on the greater good of your job, and strive not just to teach the mechanics of skiing or riding, but also to help instill lessons that may be unexpected, yet even more profound. ❄️

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