

The Importance of Downhills

By Kelsey Dickinson



Winter is fast approaching and with that comes the imminent competition season. Long days of training are exchanged for speed workouts and race simulations. For Biathletes and Nordic skiers alike, this means it is time to hone in on the race process, both on the range (for Biathletes) and the course. Once the snow flies, take the opportunity to revisit building confidence on downhills, especially since summer rollerski training usually means avoiding technical descents for safety reasons.

I am very fortunate to have had coaches that made downhill skiing both a priority skill and also *fun!* As a junior skier on the Methow Valley Nordic Team, practice often devolved into laps on homemade jumps. My young teammates and I always thought that we were so clever, using organized practice time to take turns trying to get as much air as possible. However, the joke was on us because that was exactly what the coaches wanted.

I spent a brief period training in Sun Valley, ID where the coaches always made a point to have multiple practices a winter dedicated to downhills. They would unhook the tiller from the grooming snowmobile and attach a long rope to it that they used to tow us to the top of the trail now called Torin's Tucker. We would try and see how much speed we could carry through the technical corner at the bottom of the descent. Thanks to the big, soft snow banks in Sun Valley, we were free to fail as much as we wanted with little consequence, and I remember falling into the snow almost every time I tried. Later that winter when we raced on those trails I skied the corner without incident. I wouldn't have been able to do it without all that practice.

When I moved to Duluth, MN to attend The College of St. Scholastica, my coaches also found a way to practice downhills. The highlight of our Thanksgiving training camp was the infamous downhill TT. The CSS coaches would seed the team using the chairlift to the top of Giants Ridge in Biwabik, MN. The race started as soon as the chairlift dropped you at the top of the mountain and the goal was always to beat the coaches (seeded in the final chair) to the bottom (not an easy feat). It was always a great event for building confidence on skis and encouraging healthy, silly, competition.

Building comfort on skis at speed is a key skill that can be worked on at any level, whether you are a U8 or a Master. Here are some drills that I think can help anyone get better at downhills:

1. **Make it fun!** - Whether this means building a jump or a slalom course, don't be afraid to be silly and mix it up.
2. **Encourage friendly competition!** - Get your teammates or friends together and race each other down the hills. Play around with seeding the fastest in the back and the least confident in the front and see if you can get to the bottom at the same time. Or try having a less confident skier follow a faster one, mimicking what they do and what lines they take as they descend through corners.
3. **Add in drills!** - My favorite is the one where you pick a gradual downhill and the goal is to reach down to take a ski off, hold it over your head, and then reattach the binding to your foot all while balancing on the other ski. Other ideas: Ski backwards! Practice tele turns! Anything to make your brain find new pathways of comfort.
4. **Extracurricular downhills count too!** - Be it alpine or backcountry skiing, learning how to make turns and control your speed is very important. I highly encourage safe alpine adventures as a means for downhill cross-training.

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