

# **The Art of Side Slipping and Course Inspection**

By Sean Florian

One of the necessities of putting on a successful and fair ski race is a thorough side slip. Over my 34 years of ski racing I have seen just about everything in the realm of good and bad side slipping techniques. Here is a quick outline of different snow conditions, and the side slipping techniques that should be used with each. I will also describe what happens when improper techniques are used. The goal is to instruct all Racers on proper side slipping and course inspection techniques. This will make life easier for the race organizers, as well as make the course safe and fair for everyone racing.

My first point is that course inspection should almost always be done by Side slipping and NOT SNOWPLOWING. Both of these terms are self descriptive but I will define each with their pros and cons.

## **Side Slipping**

Side slipping is performed by slipping down the hill with your tips and tails perpendicular to the fall line, slipping over the snow leaving a smooth track. This method is the least disruptive to the snow surface and leaves the best possible track to race on.

The best method of side slipping is to pick one side of the course and go straight down the hill. You do not want to follow the gates or the line. You should have two or three of your race buddies follow you tip to tail. Each skier will leave a small pile of snow on his tip or tail. Each person in your group should overlap the person in front of you in a staggered formation, slipping out their trail in the snow. With 4-6 people in a slalom, you can slip the whole track and not leave one pile of snow if there were no piles to begin with. If everyone performed inspection in this manner, there would be little or no work at all to prepare the course.

## **Snowplowing**

Snow plowing is performed by pointing your tips straight down the hill in a wedge position plowing the snow off the sides of your track. This will leave large piles on the sides of your path which get larger and larger as each racer goes by in the same manner. In most cases, our racers are inspecting the course using this method following the line through the gates. The disadvantage to this method is the amount of snow piled up on the sides of the course and at the base of the gates is very dangerous. If you are on course in the right line, it is no problem. But if you get out of kilter (we all know that how easily that can happen) and get into the soft snow, your chance of blowing a knee or even breaking a leg are pretty good. Since we have a few diligent racers that make sure everything is safe, we rarely start a race with those conditions, but it is a great deal of work to

get it that way. In some cases we will have to send down 10-15 racers several times to perform quad burning efforts to push the piles off the course, or we even have to resort to using a shovel and rake. As you can see snowplowing causes more work and a less desirable track to race on. The only case where a snow plow becomes necessary is when the section of the hill is too flat to sideslip, and you have to snowplow by pushing or pulling yourself along with your poles.

### **Inspection by Climbing**

Inspection by climbing is by far the least disruptive and the most controllable of all inspection methods. Most FIS level slaloms are inspected by climbing, however most USSA organizers have steered away from this practice. The main advantage to the racer is that he or she will get a very thorough look at the course and see things you may miss in a faster descent inspection. In the event of heavy snow, inspection by climbing may be the only way to salvage a course. By climbing in side step fashion, each racer packs down the track and all around the gate eliminating the loose snow and pile problems that occur with snowplowing.

### **Snow Conditions & Inspection / Course Prep**

Different types of snow require different preparation. Below I have outlined the main types of snow we will run into and how to tackle inspection and course preparations for each.

#### **Hard Snow (Machine Made or Natural)**

This is the easiest type of snow to deal with as well as the most desirable to race on. Side slipping is the method of choice for inspection and course preparation, using the tip to tail method. If snowplowing is used, it produces a sugar type snow that piles up at the base of the gates and in the low line. As we all know carving a turn in sugar is almost impossible and slow as well.

#### **Hard Crust over Soft Snow**

This type of condition occurs after a warm spell or rain, and one night of cold. Small controlled groups should be allowed to do a tip to tail slip, but the main inspection should be performed by side slipping outside the course. To get a look at the line, stop in each section, outside the course, and glide in on a railed edge to look at the line. When you are done with that section or gate, glide back out. If we don't follow the glide in and out method, we will scrape down through some of the crust. The first few racers will get by ok, but by the mid 30-50's holes will start to develop, and people will start pre-releasing from their bindings. In some cases salt or fertilizer will be applied to the surface 30-40 minutes prior to starting. No one should be allowed on the course during that period to allow the chemical to

set up. If the hill was not groomed prior to the snow setting up, then we will have a mess on our hands, with lots of slipping and chemicals.

### **Fresh Powder Snow**

If it is a light dusting of snow, following the methods for hard snow will work fine. If it is more than 2-3 inches, then organized slips need to be performed. Groups of 6-12 people should perform tip to tail slips with all skiers letting the snow out the same side of the hill. If the snow is real deep (so you can't see your skis) then you will need to walk your way through by moving your skis up and down and shuffling your feet. This will free you up from the snow and push it at the same time. In extreme cases we will have to hand pack the snow with our skis in a side slip / side step fashion, or even climb as mentioned in an earlier method.

### **Fresh Heavy Wet Snow**

This is the most difficult situation to deal with in racing, and needs to be controlled by the race organizer and the TD to ensure proper course conditions. In some cases a light slip over the top of the snow by several experienced slippers followed by salt will work. In other cases, repeated tip to tail slip groups will gradually push all the soft snow to the side of the trail. Snow plowing in this situation will result in extremely heavy piles of snow that are very difficult to remove. In these conditions, it is very important to follow exactly what the organizer and the TD recommends.

### **Soft Spring Snow**

This type of condition is very common in March, but since we live in New England, wait a minute and it may happen in January. With this type of snow, you are usually dealing with areas that have thin cover. Those areas will normally be blocked off with gates. Please stay away from those areas to prevent premature break through. Again the tip to tail method will work best here to prevent piles and the usual "Bob Sled Run" that we have seen so many times. With a smoothly prepared tip to tail slip, and proper salt, you could have mid winter course conditions in 50 degree weather.

### **Summary**

As you can see, Side Slipping is almost always the preferred method of inspection and course preparation, and Snowplowing produces nothing but grief for the organizers, course workers and racers. If we all follow these simple guidelines, we will keep the organizers happy, and have World Class race conditions at every race. Let's all have a great race season.

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