

Periodization, Competition and Racer Management

Short Summary

W. Evans – December 2, 2009

Overview

Based on the recent "best practices" review of the most successful skiing and snowboarding nations in the world and other high performance sporting organizations the following principles have been condensed in an effort to review and refine the USSA competition model for skiers and riders.

Optimal competition planning involves three (3) important concepts:

1. Periodization
2. Alpine Competition System
3. Racer Management

This report is intended to assist USSA sport leadership in designing the best possible "high performance competition system" for USSA competitors while providing a viable educational tool to help inform athletes, parents and coaches of the appropriate balance of "training and competition".

Periodization

Periodization is TIME MANAGEMENT: the practice of segmenting the calendar year into appropriate time intervals for preparation, competition and rest and recovery. Athletes at different stages of their development require different training plans to optimize their development through their growth and maturation. The science behind periodization has been used on the international stage to great success in many sports.

Unfortunately, sometimes a sport's traditions, such as major events being scheduled in November and December or Championships being scheduled in the early winter are placed in front of the athletes needs when planning a periodization schedule. This has an impact on maximizing the athletes' development.

Periodization - Threats

1. **Regional schedules** - Due to different regional climates, the principles of periodization are often poorly applied. This may be the case in regions of the USA that have very short seasons lasting only 6 weeks due to snow coverage. This can also be the case in Regions that have adequate snow well into April, but the period of February 15 – March 30 are so busy for the major resorts that competition is difficult to schedule. The difficulties can be further compounded when either of the competition schedules are not aligned with the international schedule. Throughout this process, the result is over-competition.
2. **Over Competing and Under Training** - Many athletes spend too much time resting, traveling, competing and recovering from competition and not enough time preparing for it. This is the case when athletes may have multiple performance tracks such as high school competition as well as USSA competition.

3. **Winning at Young Ages** - Too many coaches and parents focus on the result, rather than performance. This attitude leads to long-term failure as coaches forgo the development of skills to focus on specific race day strategies.
4. **Pressures to compete** - Underlying over-competition and under-training are the attitudes of parents and coaches. Coaches making the excuse that "players like to compete, and are not motivated to train" is only a reflection on their inability to offer quality training. In training, intensity depends on the coach's ability. Parents expect 'competition when they register their children to a sport program. Their lack of appreciation for the long-term positive effect of a quality training programs needs to increase. No parent would expect their child to become literate by taking grammar tests most of the time with very few lessons. Parents must be educated to appreciate that physical literacy is obtained in the same way; lots of practice with the occasional testing of oneself in a competitive situation.

Periodization - Best Practices:

Skiing and snowboarding revolves around a general periodization plan of the 12 month cycle beginning in May and ending in April. The summer and fall period is referred to as "preparation" and the winter and spring is the "competition" period.

1. **Peak Performance** - The cycle will include a blend of essential components based on the maturity and skill level of the athletes. Athletes will have elements of conditioning, general preparation, specific preparation, pre- competition, competition and recovery designed into their annual periodization schedule. Key to the planning for the various age groups is the number of times athletes are expected to be at or near peak performance.
2. **Planning** – Sport leaders must design competition schedules that adhere to the principles of periodization always striving for a focus on skill development. Children athletes (14 and under) should peak once annually, typically in March in order to keep them focused and having fun. Junior athletes (15-19) will typically have two peak performance opportunities that should be at least 3 weeks apart in order for them to rejuvenate between these marker events. Senior athletes may have situations where they are required to peak 3-5 times during the competition season.

Competition System

For USSA sports to have sustained high performance, the importance of designing the system of competition cannot be over-emphasized! It is our hope that this dialog will ensure that the focus on competition in USSA shifts, enabling competition to become a powerful servant, rather than a poor master!

This report is not saying competition is bad; however, it is acknowledging that too many competitions can inhibit athlete development. As well, not enough competition hinders development; therefore, USSA sports must design the optimal number of competitions at each stage.

Often times USSA leadership has been lured into the undesirable environment of: qualify to qualify to qualify to qualify for the qualifier. Our systems must be streamlined to provide appropriate competition at appropriate times in a systematic and periodized plan designed specifically with the long term athlete development model as the foundation.

Competition System - Threats

1. **Competition is a Good Servant, but a Poor Master** - Competition should serve the development of the athlete. While athletes should always try to win, winning is not the most important factor – learning from competition is. Athletes who compete too much often train too little. Competition also increases costs.
2. **Existing competition structures are costly** - The USA is one of the largest countries in the World with a width wider than the continent of Europe. Traveling across the USA for National Championships is costly as well as damaging to the environment! While National Championships are exciting and necessary at some stages of development, they are not a cost effective investment in our children's athletic development.
3. **Emphasis on competition at an early age**, two situations occur:
 - The amount of quality deliberate practice time is reduced.
 - The focus becomes more outcome-based (winning) and less process-driven (learning the fundamentals).
4. **Narrow the pool of athletes too early** - Another issue with the traditional National Championships is the dramatic narrowing of the pool of athletes, especially in our larger Regions.

Competition System – Best Practices

1. **Calendar Planning for Competition** - Optimal competition calendar planning at all stages is critical to athlete development. At certain stages, developing the physical capacities take precedence over competition. At later stages, the ability to compete well becomes the focus.
2. **Integrated Calendars** - The FIS and USSA calendars are usually well integrated, however a systematic competition review needs to be undertaken. Design and implementation is a significant challenge for the USSA Competition System in all ride and ski sports.
3. **Training: Competition Ratios** - Through a child's growth and maturation the athletic development needs change through different stages. The appropriate training-to-competition ratios need to be adhered to in order to maximize the skiers time and potential.

Racer Management

Racer Management Threats - Unfortunately, parents and coaches in many sports still approach training with an attitude best characterized as “peaking by Friday,” where a

short-term approach is taken to training and performance with an over-emphasis on immediate results.

Racer Management Best Practices - We now know that a long-term commitment to practice and training is required to produce elite athletes. A specific and well-planned practice, training, competition and recovery regime will ensure optimum development throughout an athlete's career.

Summary – Programming for USSA skiers and snowboarders must be designed for the athletes. An appropriate balance of rest, training, and competition is essential to the development of our athletes as they progress through the system.

Club leaders and coaches have a great opportunity to review local programming for content and balance. Athletes will thrive in a system that takes into account:

1. Periodization
2. Competition
3. Racer Management

While keeping these essential retention strategies in the club program foundation:

1. Fun
2. Fitness
3. Fundamentals