

Professionalism: What Does it Mean to You?

By John Armstrong

When instructors hear the word “professionalism” on a regular basis. Despite the references to it during exams, in clinics and lessons, and even when asking snowsports school directors for a raise, you’d be hard-pressed to find within PSIA-AASI’s written materials a code of conduct for instructors or even a definition of professionalism. There’s no better time than the present to think about remedying this situation for our associations.

Many professions have formal codes that include guidelines of behavior, often calling for a high quality of service and a commitment to the ethical treatment and safety of their clients. Both PSIA and AASI have a variety of these kinds of statements scattered throughout the associations’ literature: there’s a “Responsibility Code” for mountain practices, and an emphasis on “safety, fun, and learning.” Our association’s manuals contain chapters on etiquette and best practices, but there is no clearly defined and formal professional code of conduct at this point.

Although it’s probably a safe assumption that the vast majority of the membership shares a basic, integral code of professionalism, perhaps it is time that the membership collected its thoughts into a single statement. It’s hard to live up to the promise of the associations as a professional snowsports teacher if the expectations of the job are unstated, unknown, or simply assumed.

All conversations must begin somewhere, so let me use this opportunity to get the ball rolling in print. Anyone who wants to chime in can take up the topic in the “Professionalism” thread I’ve started in PSIA-AASI’s online Member Forum. (For members who’d like to get involved in the discussion—and I want to encourage everyone interested to do so—please

log onto the PSIA-AASI member forum at www.thesnowpros.org).

When we think of a professional, we often consider *how* the work or performance is delivered at least as much as *what* is being delivered. We know that the way in which ski and snowboard teaching is done affects the outcome of the lesson tremendously. A lot of work in PSIA and AASI instructor development has focused on student-centered methodology, atmosphere, and experiences. In fact, PSIA has led the way for many ski-teaching nations in the world with its presentations on methodology at Interski since at least 1975.

The content of the *Core Concepts* manual illustrates the strength of our methodology. We have studied relationships, experiences, and learning, and have focused on such areas as knowing ourselves, being honest with ourselves about teaching, connecting with our students, and knowing who they are and how they prefer to learn. We have come to understand how emotions affect learning and have structured our lesson plans to make the most of these ideas. We have been concerned with developing trust, breaking the ice, and communicating expectations to our students in addition to interpreting behavior and getting the student involved in his or her lesson on a number of levels.

Our style of feedback reflects what we have learned about our students, and this information becomes meaningful and effective. In the end our focus on methodology has helped us develop lasting memories and meaningful experiences our students want to repeat time and time again. If they don’t return to our school and our mountain, we’ll be out of a job eventually. For these reasons we should incorporate the above aspects of our methodology as part of our code of professionalism. While it may be acceptable in other countries to teach skiing and snowboarding without asking instructors to embody these qualities, that’s simply not acceptable in our associations.

When, in 1961, the founders of the

Professional Ski Instructors of America formed and named our organization, they were making a clear statement about the quality of the teaching to be offered by its members to the skiing public. After all, as early as 1952, Bill Lash (one of PSIA’s seven founders and PSIA’s first president) opined that the very existence of skiing in the United States could well be dependent on quality personnel in its ski schools. Lash and his fellow founders—Jimmy Johnston, Paul Valar, Doug Pfeiffer, Don Rhinehart, Max Dercum, and Curt Chase—were concerned with the quality, safety, and consistency of the lesson experience for students who had begun to travel to different resorts around the country.

As I see it, those PSIA pioneers were already giving a lot of serious thought to what it meant to be a professional all those years ago. They were focused on service to others, developing entry



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requirements, forming systems of testing based on theory, problem-solving, and applying technical principles on the mountain. The fledgling profession of snowsports instruction demonstrated early on a culture of professionalism.

Basketball legend Julius Erving, a.k.a. “Dr. J.,” once said that being a professional means “doing all the things you love to do on the days when you don’t feel like doing them.” While that’s certainly true, I’d add that professionals who are also snowsports teachers need to be responsible, accountable, ethical, and have a well-developed sense of risk management. Such individuals are typically courteous, good listeners, and can actually be very entertaining—at least some of the time, if not the majority of the time. Indeed, professionals are known for their enthusiasm and pas-

Your Space

sion for their sport and the act of sharing it with others. When many or all of these characteristics are present, the professional instructor becomes not only a role model (or even a mentor), but one who—to borrow from PSIA-AASI's vision statement—is a source of inspiration for the mountain experience. In other words, a member of the associations not only practices what the profession does but what the *profession is*.

In PSIA-AASI "professionalism" signifies conduct and performance consistent with the principles of ski and snowboard teaching as demonstrated by an instructor's character, enthusiasm, competence, ethical conduct, service, and respect for the student. If we are to be considered professionals, we should be known for:

VISION

We will inspire a lifelong passion for the mountain experience in our students by creating enjoyable, positive learning experiences in a spirit of service to others.

SAFETY

We will know the hazards of the mountain and follow safe teaching and class-handling practices with our students. We will strive to never place our students in danger during the course of a lesson. We shall follow the intent and detail of "Your Responsibility Code" in every respect with our students.

METHODOLOGY

We will focus on forming lasting relationships and positive learning experiences with our students. We will work to understand our students, their emotions, learning styles, and their reasons for taking a lesson in the first place.

In addition, we will structure lessons that are fun and provide an accelerated learning environment by developing trust and confidence. We will present feedback in clear, positive, and meaningful language. We will strive to help students create lasting memories that will hopefully make them want to repeat their on-hill experiences again and again.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

We as instructors will need to practice personal mastery of our disciplines, and

remain current in our educational and certification requirements. We will be knowledgeable in the most current PSIA-AASI national and division directions of technique and methodology.

SUMMARY

To my way of thinking, professionalism means exhibiting conduct and performance consistent with the principles of ski and snowboard teaching as demonstrated by an instructor's character, enthusiasm, competence, ethical conduct, service, and respect for the student, the mountain and the snowsports family.

What do you think? To share your perspective on this discussion, don't forget to visit the "Professionalism" thread on the PSIA-AASI Member Forum. I'll look forward to finding out what professionalism means to you. **32**

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