



# WHAT WOMEN WANT

## WISDOM FROM SIX WHO SHOULD KNOW

BY KRISTA CRABTREE

**W**omen-specific snowsports programs have taken the country by storm. Learning a few practical tips on how best to teach women will keep them coming back to your program or resort—and that's sure to pay dividends on down the line and throughout the industry.

One of the best ways to find out what women want from a program is to, well, ask them! Karen Suing, a former participant of Vail's Her Turn women's program had this to say about program: "I believe women's programs are fun, productive, and provide a truly supportive and comfortable learning environment for women looking to advance their skills as well as network with other ski enthusiasts."

Suing's feedback reflects what so many women are seeking in the snowsports industry: an opportunity to learn and have a great time on the slopes. The popularity of women's programs continues to grow and nearly every ski resort offers some type of class, camp, or weekend. Women's programs are good for business and present an added bonus: Exceed women's expectations and they will most likely return with their friends and families.

Here's the challenge: How do you engage women and keep them coming back to your program and resort for more? You don't have to be a woman to relate to one, but you do need to consider some key components of what the majority of women need or want from a lesson. Anyone who has worked extensively with women knows this is no small task. To say that all women learn a certain way, desire a certain thing, or even have the same body type is incorrect. But it's safe to say—particularly when talking about gear—that women are not small men and have different needs. Every woman is unique both physically and emotionally.

There are tendencies, however, which are backed by the anecdotal evidence of many pros who teach women, that shed light on how women learn and what they desire. The instructor's challenge revolves around one essential principal reflected in Suing's comment: how to best provide a supportive and comfortable learning environment.

Here, six pioneers and passionate advocates of women's snowsport programs share their advice on how to create the best learning environment for women. Instructors will find time-tested tips and



thoughts—as well as a few secrets—from these top female pros on the history of women’s programs, physiological differences between men and women, how to address women’s psychological needs, and how to conquer fear.



## ELISSA SLANGER

**Founder of Woman's Way Ski Seminars and early proponent of women teaching women.**

### HERSTORY

Twenty five years ago, Elissa Slanger worked her way up to examiner in a predominately male sport. After becoming concerned that women often found learning to ski to be painful and humiliating she founded Woman's Way Ski Seminars, which grew into a national program. She also collaborated with *Skiing Magazine* contributor Dinah B. Witchel to write *Ski Woman's Way*, one of the first books to make the distinction that women should be taught differently than men.

"In 1975, I was a fully certified instructor in the Squaw Valley Ski School, an examiner, and was on the board of directors of the FWSIA [precursor to PSIA-W]," says Slanger. "I was one of the very few women in any of those positions—which is hard to believe now. At that time women taught children—period. Squaw was one of the first places that let women teach everyone."

Two things caused her to recognize that women needed something different than the usual ski school lessons. One of these was that the handful of women instructors in the ski school did not feel comfortable in training clinics. "Secondly," she says, "many of the women I taught commented on how nice it was to take a lesson from a woman—that they felt I could relate to them—and a man or two said they wanted to sign their girlfriends up for lessons because they thought I could turn them on to skiing again."

In 1975, with permission of Squaw's ski school director, Slanger created a ski week for women taught by women in the school. "About nine women showed up and had such a great week that they asked me to do it again," recalls Slanger. "For the next ski week they all came back and brought friends."

Word spread and soon other ski areas were asking Slanger to run programs for them. "I started doing it all over the country," she says. "At each area I trained instructors. I tried to eliminate performance pressure, use self-discovery, and create a very supportive atmosphere."

Slanger developed an instructor manual, then her book—which was touted for its advice on self-discovery, creating a supportive environment, and alleviating performance pressure.

### PHYSIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Jeannie Thoren started working with women in the 1980s after realizing that by moving her bindings forward she for-

ever changed her skiing for the better. She has since worked with numerous ski and boot manufacturers and runs women's camps and seminars across the country.

A pioneer in women's skiing, Thoren developed the Thoren Theory as a way to help women improve technique through equipment modification. To explain the differences between many men and women, she uses the imagery of a pear. "Though some women have an athletic female body type with narrow hips, in my experience 80 percent of women have a pear-shaped body that is wider at the bottom than the top," says Thoren. "Men tend to be the opposite."

Women generally have smaller shoulders than men, explains Thoren, and because women are built to bear children, they usually have wider hips. "When most girls go through puberty, their hips widen and their weight goes to the rear in all sports for the rest of their life," she says. Wider hips mean that women's thigh bones angle toward the knees in a more pronounced angle—what is called the "Q-angle." The knees collapse to the inside and when they flex forward, the knees go in—causing the hips to go rearward. "That's why you see so many women in the sitting-back, chair position," says Thoren. "This can affect upper-end skiers, but it really devastates entry-level and early intermediate skiers."

Thoren's discovery helped create what is now commonly referred to as a "woman-specific forward mounting position,"



## JEANNIE THOREN

**Developed theory to help women improve technique via equipment modification.**

and most ski manufacturers move the ski binding mounting position forward by 1–1.5 centimeters to help put women in a more aligned position relative to their body shape.

The Minnesota-based Thoren doesn't stop at the Q-angle, however. She advises that other factors, such as the tendency for women to have lower calf muscles and thinner ankles than men, can be addressed by women-specific boots made with lower-cut, scalloped boot cuffs. "That's why it's so important to look at your student's equipment and make recommendations or send them to a qualified bootfitter," says Thoren.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

Annie Emich Black is a 33-year veteran ski instructor, examiner, and lead trainer for Keystone's Betty Fest Weekends for Women. In the summer, she runs women's mountain bike clinics.

"Unfortunately many women don't think of themselves as athletes and, therefore, don't have a lot of confidence in themselves," says Emich Black. "The primary goal when teaching women should be to increase their confidence." She asserts that, as caregivers, women are typically "givers" who likely were busy taking care of their family long before they even got to the

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## ANNIE EMERICH BLACK

**Believes the most important goal for instructors who teach women is to help them increase their confidence.**

slopes. Or, says Emich Black, “they may have been injured in the past or may not be in as good as shape as they’d like and may have some fear that they may or may not be able to articulate.”

Emich Black says that women have different emotional needs than men, and instructors can help them achieve their goals by considering the following tactics: Build a relationship. Knowing and using your student’s name is critical when teaching women. Women want to be looked in the eye and feel like they are connecting with you. Ask open-ended questions and sit back and listen. Find out why they’re here, where they’re coming from, what happened the last time they went skiing—and really find out. Practice guest-centered teaching. After you develop a relationship, identify and facilitate motivational needs—then address movement needs.

Be compassionate and empathetic. If your student seems frightened or expresses fear, identify with her fear and say “I understand what you’re saying; I’ve felt the same way.”

Make realistic goals. Break your student’s goals down to attainable steps. Together, build a step-by-step progression, which will lead to her desired outcome.



## MERMER BLAKESLEE

**Instructs with a focus that women want to improve each day, yet they often pull back when on snow with men.**

### OVERCOMING FEAR

Mermer Blakeslee is an examiner in PSIA-AASI’s Eastern Division, a former member of the PSIA Alpine Demonstration Team, and director of the Power Learn Program at New York’s Windham Mountain. She also authored *In the Yikes! Zone: A Conversation with Fear*, a groundbreaking work on how fear impacts snowsports lessons.

According to Blakeslee, studies show that women want to learn and be better than they were yesterday. “Women push themselves really hard in an all-female environment,” she says, “and yet often the same women who get really courageous with other women tend to retreat in a co-ed environment. Women want to feel comfortable while learning, but also tend to want to be pushed.”

There are times, she says, when even the most courageous student freezes with fear. Here are Blakeslee’s suggestions to help students through a fearful moment:

Acceptance. Don’t question or dismiss your student’s fear. Help her accept her feelings for what they are without judgment. Don’t say, “You can do it, it’s easy. We did it yesterday.” Sometimes that can work, but it can create even more of a chasm between what the student feels at the moment and what she is supposed to feel. Instead say, “I know you’re frightened, but we’re going to deal with it right here.”

Lower the task. In this step, the technical aspect is to protect your student’s fore/aft balance. You don’t want the person’s fear to put her in the back seat because then she’s actually in trouble. The psychological aspect is to lower the perceived challenge, but not the skill.

For example, if your student is frozen at the top of a cornice, suggesting a sideslip can protect her fore/aft balance and maintain forward momentum. This is not to say she sideslips all the way down, but she does so until she feels comfortable and starts skiing again. If she is still frozen, try this last-resort panic technique: encourage her to breathe hard and audibly. It also helps if you stay in front of her and lead the way.

Raise the task in small increments: Let’s say you’ve gone off a cornice in a sideslip. Instruct your student to slowly turn her sideslip into turns. Usually this happens naturally as she gets more comfortable.

Go back into the comfort zone. Let her relax and take her into easier terrain so that she can feel good and build up a little desire for another “yikes” experience.



## INGIE FRANBERG

**Recognizes that women seek instruction to gain confidence, improve, and have fun.**

### SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES

Ingie Franberg has worked for Vail Resorts for several decades and is the general manager of the Lionshead Adult Snowsports School. She is also the director of Vail’s long-standing women’s program, Her Turn.

“Most women join a program because they want to improve, gain confidence, and have fun,” says Franberg. Here is her advice to help instructors meet these common goals:

- ◆ As the organizer/manager, assign instructors to the program who love to teach women and are truly committed.
- ◆ As instructors, give individual, specific feedback often and encourage feedback to you as well, as you are there for them.
- ◆ Involve the group in helping each other. This can make them feel important and foster a supportive atmosphere.
- ◆ Be flexible with your lesson plan and have Plan B, C, and D

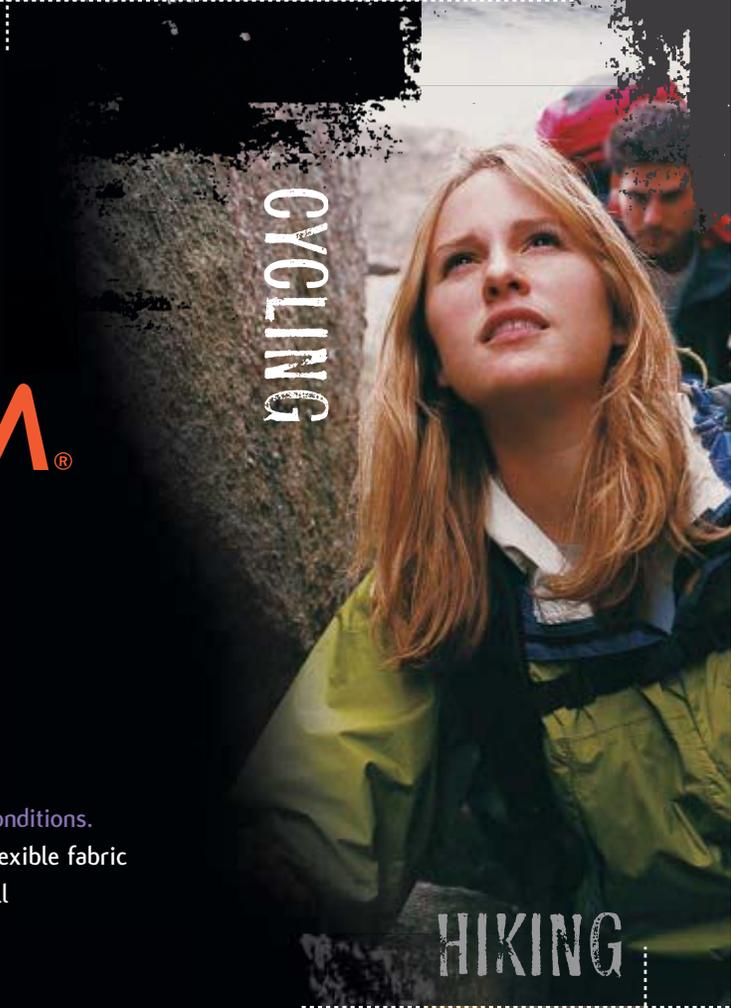
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### EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

A fully certified instructor/trainer at Heavenly Resort in California and Mt. Hotham in Australia, Heidi Ettlenger organizes



### HEIDI ETTLENGER

**Focuses on creating the right environment to help instructors deliver "mini-makeovers" with clients.**

PSIA-Western Division's Women's Camps for instructors.

"Instructors who understand how to create an optimal environment for 'mini-makeovers' are the most successful," suggests Ettlenger. Here are her five tips to enhance the experience for participants in a women-specific program:

1. As a staff, share the same fundamental teaching strategies. Work as a team daily to check in on splits and customize the plan for the day.
2. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your program. Often the weakest link is the initial administrative piece of

taking the reservations and compiling the necessary details to make sure you have enough staff for potential splits in ability. Assign a single point person to answer questions.

3. Word of mouth is your strongest arm for marketing. Make every effort to meet and exceed women's expectations and they'll bring their friends to the next event.
4. Plan après-ski sessions. Bring the group together with drinks and hors d'oeuvres, a video medley, or equipment chats.
5. Prepare a special closing to the event. A simple "award" presented by each coach is a great way to let women know you valued their commitment to the program and look forward to seeing them again.

No matter if you're teaching an hour lesson to a female never-ever or a week-long women's program, top pros agree that women are looking for a supportive environment where they can learn, have fun, and feel like they can connect with others. If instructors practice guest-centered teaching, as Emich Black recommends, then women will most likely feel as if their emotional needs are met on the slopes and be open to challenging themselves and improving their skills. That is a common goal shared by all, no matter what their body looks like. ☺

*Krista Crabtree directs the women's program at Colorado's Eldora Mountain Resort and the She Skis Women's Ski Testing Clinics held each February in Vail, Colorado. A PSIA Level I instructor, Crabtree is a former SKI Magazine editor with 11 years' experience as a club-level USSA race coach.*

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