How to Make a Mountain Out of a ‘Molehill’

BY SUE SPENCER

Big mountains are a blast! Their vastness and variety present virtually limitless skiing challenges. Whether you choose to cruise, bash bumps, dodge trees, or hop off cornices, you can find it all at a large ski resort. This wide range of terrain and experiences is the mother of versatility; a big mountain’s diversity encourages the development of solid, fundamental skiing skills. Lots of tough terrain has a way of rewarding a skier’s strength and balance while punishing technical weaknesses. This can present a problem to those of us who aren’t able to ski a big mountain as often as we’d like (and certainly less often than it would take for that mountain to shape our technique and skills).

Small mountains have their charm, to be sure, but the skiing is frequently too tame and forgiving to solidly mold skills that will stand up to the “big-mountain test.” New and novice skiers can readily benefit from the forgiving nature of small mountains, but you are no novice. Most likely you desire to ski at a very high level—for the thrill and personal satisfaction this elicits as well as the professional competence it instills.

If your area isn’t teeming with vertical feet and acreage, what can you do to reach this level of proficiency, aside from packing your bags and boards and moving? Thankfully, a more practical solution exists. Specific, focused skiing activities can help you develop accurate, solid fundamentals in a small mountain environment.

Given the “right” approach, small mountains can produce excellent technical skiers. Diane Roffe-Steinrotte, the Mahre brothers, and Ingemar Stenmark all developed their skill bases at small mountains.

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you can realize these same benefits at a small mountain.

The training suggestions that follow can help you begin to break through the limitations of “mellow” terrain. As you explore these activities, you will probably discover additional possibilities to expand your skiing skills beyond your favorite molehill.

DEVELOP A TRAINING ATTITUDE

A key concept is attitude. In order for training activities on a small mountain to have optimal effect, your attitude should reflect the following “principles.”

- An internal motivation to work on fundamentals. We rarely spend enough time on the basics, even when preparing for a certification exam. For starters, our equipment should be set up to maximize our ability to perform well, e.g., boot fit, binding placement, and canting, if necessary.

- A determination to perform each training activity to the very best of your ability. Never be satisfied that you have done an activity well enough. Approach training with diligence and persistence. Expect and exact perfection from yourself for each activity that you practice.

- A willingness to endure the uncomfortable and often lengthy process of breaking undesirable habits and movement patterns. Habits are intrinsic elements of most sports performance, and skiing is no exception. We fall back on our habits when things get dicey, yet they frequently let us down when we try to transfer small-mountain movements to big-mountain terrain. Where you ski usually defines your comfort zone.

For example, if you are able to ski from the top of the lift to the bottom without using a turn shape that facilitates speed control, that “habit” may become cemented into your skiing foundation. You must be willing and able to break ineffective habits to move your skiing beyond any terrain-induced limitations. Breaking habits is never a comfortable process, and it can be especially difficult for ski instructors. Because we are expected to represent good skiing, we are often reluctant to get “worse” before we get “better.”

If you are unwilling to regress before you progress, you will end continued on page 26
up frustrated. However, if you accept it as a necessary part of learning or relearning motor skills, you will progress.

**SKATE TO BE GREAT**

Skating drills are a great way to pump up the dynamics of your skiing and to sharpen your balancing and edging skills. They encourage you to move with your skis and to direct your movement efficiently. Accuracy is important in skating drills. Glide, don't slide, your ski to an edge. Also work on achieving accurate foot-to-foot movements. Try the following exercises:

- **Skate downhill.** Start on easy terrain and progress to the most difficult terrain your mountain has to offer. When you're accomplished at this task, try transitioning from downhill skating to skiing a series of short turns. Aim to maintain a good skill blend throughout the transition and to maintain your momentum and direction of movement.

- **Skate across the hill.** You can vary this drill by linking skating movements with small steps across the fall line (similar to the thousand-steps exercise) or by skating across the fall line.

- **Skate uphill.** Begin on moderate terrain and use your poles. Once your strength and efficiency improve, you should be able to do this on increasingly steeper terrain, without using poles. In addition to the benefits described above, this will strengthen your hamstring and help you develop more efficient skating movements.

To evaluate your progress, skate all the way through a turn: Begin by skating down the hill, then skate across and up the hill, and then downhill again. How smoothly and continuously you progress around this 360-degree loop is a measure of how well you direct your movements and sustain your momentum.

First just work on getting through the turn without stalling (if necessary, use your poles). Then try skating without using your poles.

**SKI LONGER TO SKI STRONGER**

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getting a real “burn” going in your legs improves your fitness. And being able to repeat a drill or skiing situation dozens of times continually results in beneficial reinforcement (assuming you ski the task correctly). Moreover, you have time and room to experiment and feel the correct movements before having to get back on the chairlift.

You can realize these same benefits at a small mountain. You simply have to know how to make the mountain “longer.”

Stand at the top of your practice slope and visualize a series of super-G turns down the slope. Then ski down the path you’ve visualized, making short turns. Continue to make short turns on this long-turn path all the way to the bottom of the run. You will have made three to four times more turns than if you had skied short turns in the fall line from top to bottom.

This approach to making a small mountain “longer” provides both the “burn” and added practice time and can be used with a variety of activities, such as skating or skiing on one ski.

**HAVE FUN ON ONE SKI**

Skiing on one ski is a great way to increase fitness and develop correct, accurate skills. In addition, any glitches in the body-ski relationship throughout the turn or skill deficiencies will become apparent, providing an opportunity to correct these problems. If you have never tried or never been successful at skiing on one ski, start out by keeping both skis on the snow and weight one more than the other. Once you are able to keep virtually all of your weight on one ski for most of the time, lift the unweighted ski off the snow.

Little by little, you will gain the ability to ski a long series of turns with one ski totally off the snow. Then try the specific drills that follow. When you practice these drills, be aware of your balance and the accuracy of your movements. All your body parts should be in the same relationship as when you ski effectively on two skis. Your non-dominant leg (with or without ski attached) should complement the movements of the other—don’t just let it dangle. Also incorporate the same bending and stretching movements as you use on two skis.

- **Ski a series of short turns down the fall line.** Focus on maintaining good speed control and turn shape.

- **Ski a series of medium-radius turns,** alternating which ski you use from turn to turn. First ski the turns using only the inside edge of each ski. Then ski the turns using only the outside edge of each ski. Vary the turn radius during runs.

- **Ski the previous drill but vary the place in the turn where you switch skis.**

- **Take one ski off and ski several free runs.** If this seems like a quantum leap, try wearing a Big Foot or a figl ski on the non-dominant foot as a kind of training wheel.

- **Ski a series of garlands.** Try one series using the uphill ski only on each pass and then one series using only the downhill ski.
GET THE HOP HABIT
You may be groaning at the thought of hop turns. Believe it or not, hop turns are relatively easy when you use proper technique and practice them. You should also have boots that allow your ankle some flexibility.

Although small-mountain terrain usually doesn’t require hop turns for survival, it’s the perfect playground for learning them. At a big mountain, you’ll find that having hop turns in your repertoire is extremely beneficial for negotiating steep, narrow chutes or tough snow conditions.

When you first learn to hop your skis off the snow, stand with them across the hill. Flex your ankles, turn your upper body so it faces more downhill than do your knees and thighs, and plant your downhill pole without leaning on it. Then rapidly extend your legs to hop in place (ankle flexion and extension is the key).

Try to hop from the center of each ski and lift the entire ski equally off the snow. As you hop, allow the skis to align naturally with your upper body. As your skill develops you should be trying to use enough rotary to turn the skis, in the air, across the fall line. Keep your upper body facing downhill so that you will have considerable upper/lower body separation throughout a series of hop turns.

Timing is a key factor in hop turns. Plant your pole in the fall line at the same time that your skis come to rest on their edges. To be most efficient, immediately start the next turn.

Try simultaneous hops, one-legged hops, and sequential hops. Vary the sequential hops by alternately using only the inside edges or only the outside edges, and then a combination of both (for example, inside-inside or outside-outside).

SKI THE SPECTRUM
On some small mountains short turns can seem almost like an affectation. We may ski them because the slope is crowded or because they give us more to do during a short run, but they are seldom a required tactic. Tough, narrow terrain on a big mountain, however, reminds us how essential short turns can be.

At a small mountain, take one short-turn objective and ski the spectrum—that is, practice it at one extreme and then the other. For example, work on your speed control. Ski maximum braking as one end of the spectrum, like the hop turns extreme skiers do in steep, narrow chutes in deep snow. At the other end, ski accelerating turns, like the ones racers make in a slalom drill described earlier.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER
You now have probably more than enough ideas to start turning your molehill into a mountain. And you’ll likely come up with more. Above all, be full of ideas. As you try new activities at your small mountain, you may even discover that it wasn’t the mountain limiting your skiing potential—you just needed to create challenges to make the mountain “grow.”

Once you’ve conquered these challenges, you will be well on your way to making a molehill out of a big mountain. But remember that the mental aspect of dealing with a big-mountain environment as well as the tactics necessary for success, need to be learned “on-site.” In the meantime you can learn to ski big on a small hill and have a great time doing it!

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