



**2019-2020  
Parents Handbook**

Dear Parents,

Please know it is a privilege to be entrusted with the opportunity to coach your child and the rest of the alpine skiers of Mt Ashland. We at MARA are going to do all we can to help your child reach his or her full potential on and off the slope. We will be focused on instilling a love for skiing and an appreciation of, and adherence to, our core values: Integrity, community, effort, and teamwork. Through these, your child can best realize their athletic potential and develop character traits that will serve them throughout their lives. We want what is best for your child – their health, well-being, and future as an athlete and a person. You the parents will play a crucial role in your child's success with MARA. We can only accomplish our goals if we have your help. With that in mind, we've compiled some suggestions for you to consider. They are based on observations and reflections made over many years of coaching. The suggestions relate to a variety of considerations including our focus on your child's long-term success and the fact that children mature physically at different rates. Through these suggestions, we should be able to avoid the unnecessary tension that sometimes develops between parents and coaches. The suggestions are a work in progress and we welcome your insights on these topics.

## **GOLDEN RULES**

Here are a few overarching guidelines that will help immensely:

- Let's appreciate that we're all trying our best. We especially need to keep this in mind when we hear rumors.
- Let's communicate often. An established pattern of communication makes it much easier to work through challenges that arise.
- Let's clarify our definition of success. Sure we value results, but we also value the things surrounding competition that the athlete has control over: effort, attendance, improvement and sportsmanship.

## **SUCCESS IN SKIING IS A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES**

### **Taking the Long View**

Taking the long view applies to your child's development as well as to your own response to that. The training that will make an eight year old the area's fastest eight year old slalom skier may not be the training that will benefit that skier the most in the long run. Making decisions now that will benefit the skier over the long haul of a skiing career calls for prudence, and it can mean sacrificing some rewards now for huge gains later. Now we make them solid on the hill; now we make them fit; now we teach them to set goals and to expect great things, and later they will become super-fast. Our destination is not two weeks down the road, but several years. Your skier's career in the program will have many peaks and valleys. Usually, the new parent and skier come to the sport with little experience, so the first sign of a problem looks bigger than it really is. The same is true with the first sign of success; it's best not to get too worked up. You will see this again, over and over.

### **How They Do Versus What They Do**

Especially at younger ages, how fast a child skis and how well he or she places in a race have little significance for how that skier will do later in a more difficult series. Many national caliber athletes were not at all noteworthy as twelve year olds. Competition times and places often tell you not about the amount of skiing talent a child has, but about how early a developer he or she is. What is truly important in determining future skiing success is what happens everyday in practice: Are they developing skills and technique? Are they internalizing the attitudes of a champion? Are they gradually gaining powerful fundamentals and building for the future? The work done is cumulative; with every training session adding a grain of sand to what will eventually become a mountain.

## **THE INCREDIBLE INFLUENCE YOU HAVE**

### **You Are the Key to Your Child's Skiing**

A parent's attitude toward skiing, our core values, the program, the coach, and his or her child's participation is key towards the child's attitude and success. The young skier takes cues from his parent. If the parent shows by word, deed, facial expression, etc, that he does not value skiing, that he doesn't appreciate having to drive to training or stand along the fence at a race, that "it's not going to matter" if the child skips free skiing sessions, then the chances are very good that the child will lack commitment, have little success, and lose interest. Support your child's interest in skiing by being positively interested and a good role model of MARA core values.

### **Teach Them to Dream Big**

The possibilities are infinite. If we try to temper a child's dreams, if we teach them to settle for the ordinary, we may indeed save them from many heartaches and many a failure. But we also rob them of the opportunity of achieving great things, and the opportunity to plumb their depths and realize their full potential.

### **Allow Your Skier to Be Resilient**

Winning big means failing many times along the way. Each failure hurts, but these temporary setbacks create the strength for the final push. Instead of having children avoid failure by never taking risks, teach them how to think about failing: risk-taking and failure are necessary for improvement, development, motivation, feedback, and long-term success. Failure and responding to that failure are part of life. It's okay for your child to be upset about, disappointed, and even angry about having done poorly. Feeling lousy for a few minutes is natural, and is not a threat to self-esteem. Ideally this will motivate them to try harder and do better the next time. We will strive to teach them standards of good and bad performance, so that when they really do well, they feel an appropriate sense of accomplishment.

### **Your Support is Needed**

As they succeed then fail then succeed again, kids will ride emotional roller coasters. One of your most important functions as a skiing parent, and as a coach, is to provide emotional support during the tough times, of which there will be many. Kids also have few previous experiences to tell them that confidence is well founded. They will get this self-confidence from outside the realm of their own experiences, from the coach or parent. Let them believe that you believe they can succeed! Let them know that they are still loved, no matter how poorly they think they skied.

### **Success**

Only one skier can win the race. Often in the younger age groups, the winner will be the one who has bloomed early, not necessarily the skier with the most talent or the most potential to ultimately succeed in skiing. It is expected that every parent wants his or her child to succeed, wants his or her child to learn from skiing. Success really means being the very best you can be, striving for improvement in every aspect of skiing. It leads to lasting enjoyment.

### **Responding to Successful Results**

Don't get too impressed, or shower praise too highly for successful results – leave room for when your child gets a lot better. Ask how they feel and what they are proud of. We discourage treating the young athlete like a superstar, because the more you treat them like a superstar, the less likely they will become one. Pampered kids aren't tough. Similarly, be careful not to brag about your skier to other parents. If your skier is really good, it will be apparent to everyone without your having to tell him or her.

### **The Danger of Bribery**

Bribing your skier to perform well by promising presents, money, special meals, etc. for meeting various standards is highly discouraged. It may work in the short run – the skier may indeed ski fast this afternoon – but the long-term consequences can be harmful. You have to keep upping the ante, and it can affect your child's motivation.

### **Work and Fun**

Persistence and work ethic are the most important qualities leading to success in skiing and life. It is critical to create and cultivate that work ethic when a skier is young. The meaning of fun is very much an open question for children. We will emphasize that fun means working hard and challenging yourself, taking pride in accomplishing difficult goals, and discovering talents you didn't know you had. Ski racing is fun!

### **Your Reaction to Mistakes at Races**

Kids make mistakes at races. It's going to happen. When it does, please handle it gracefully. Complaints and excuses are uncalled for. The official generally has a much better vantage on your child's race than you do, and is looking on dispassionately. If a DQ is questionable, as is sometimes the case, the coach will take the proper steps. But please realize that DQ's are almost never overturned.

### **Home and Hill Must Dovetail**

Traits of discipline, respect, high expectations, and commitment at home directly influence the child's approach at training and races. Parents should carefully consider our core values and other formative memos about the values the team espouses. Parents should also reinforce suggestions from the coaches. A skier must have trust in his coach and in the program, and will not if parents suggest something different or something in a different volume. If you have concerns about the coaching or the coaching advice, talk to the coach directly, or the head coach or a board member. If in the end you feel that you cannot support the coach or the program, your best course is to find a team whose coach you do trust.

### **The Next Mikaela Shiffrin??**

In order to make it to the Olympics, many things over a long time have to go right. Therefore, be cautious of getting your hopes too high and try not to judge every run by Olympic standards. The most important factors will be practice, practice and practice. Howard Gruber is a psychologist who has made a life's work out of studying great achievers. He argues the difference between the very good and the truly great isn't talent, but much harder and more consistent work.

## **HOW KIDS WORK**

You as parents already know a bit about the development of children. The following suggestions address child development as it pertains to alpine racing.

### **Kids are Inconsistent**

There is nothing that any coach or parent can do to change that. A ten-year old skier who knows better will in the pressure of a race ski over an under gate. Another young skier will take twenty seconds off her best time in a race this week, and next week add it all back, with interest. One week it will seem that G.S. is mastered, and the next week that it's never been introduced. It's enough to make your hair turn gray. Learn to expect it and even to enjoy it.

### **Early Specialization is Discouraged**

Young skiers frequently change their favorite or “best” disciplines. Slalom will click suddenly, and then later just as suddenly un-click. There is no explanation for this phenomenon. An event the child hated becomes his or her favorite by virtue of their having done well at yesterday’s training session. Thus it’s important to have kids ski all disciplines in practice and races.

### **No Cookie-Cutter Skiers**

Kids learn at different rates and in different ways. One skier picks up cross-blocking in a day; it takes another skier a year to master the same skill. Be extremely careful of comparing your skier to others, especially within his or her hearing. Please take great pains to avoid measuring the continuing success of your child by his performance against a particular competitor, who may well be on a completely different biological timetable from your child. Some factors are completely beyond anyone’s control.

### **Why Doesn’t He Ski Like a World Cup Skier?**

Little kids are not strong enough or coordinated enough for their technique to look like older skiers, no matter how many drills they do. Parents shouldn’t stress about a little thing that a skier struggles with for a time, such as a proper pole plants. Kids seem to get these things when they are ready, and not until then. We are winning the game if they steadily improve their motor control, steadily improve their conditioning, and steadily improve their attitudes. They will look like the “Hermanator” soon enough.

### **The Rubber Band Effect**

It would be easier for the skier, parents, and coaches if improvements were made slowly and gradually, if all involved could count on hard work in practice to produce corresponding improvements in competition every month. Most often improvements are made in leaps, not baby steps. Improvement happens by fits and starts, mostly because improvement results as much from psychology as from physiology. It is harder this way, because it is less predictable. Skiers and parents tend to become a bit discouraged during the short “plateaus” when the improvements the child is making are not obvious. Likewise, when the rubber band has snapped and the skier makes a long-awaited breakthrough, one cannot expect the nearly vertical improvement curve to continue. This does not happen.

### **Terminal Technique**

Often young skiers, especially “successful” younger skiers who are very strong for their age, have terminal technical issues– i.e., techniques that are inefficient dead-ends, a technique that will not allow for much if any improvement, techniques that consist of bullying through a turn and not getting much for the huge outpouring of effort and energy. For kids with terminal technique, it is time to throw away the stopwatch, slow down, and learn to ski all over again. Often this adjustment period is characterized by slower times, which is difficult for the skier and for the parents. Difficult, but necessary, because this one step backwards will allow for ten steps forward soon enough.

### **Being Coachable**

For technical improvements to be made, the skier (and parent, supporting the coach's decision) must be **coachable**: they must trust that the coach is knowledgeable and thinking of the skier's best interests, and they must be willing to trust that the changes that can feel awful at first will help the child be a better skier.

### **Early and Late Bloomers**

The subject of early and late bloomers is a sensitive one, but nonetheless very important for parents to understand. Early and late bloomers each have virtues and challenges.

Early Bloomers get bigger and stronger earlier than the other kids. Consequently, they are more likely to win their races. That early success is the virtue. However, because they can often win without having to work on their technique or training very hard, they may not develop a solid work ethic and their technique might be poor. From the child's immediate perspective, NOT working hard and NOT working on technique is a rational choice. After all, "if it isn't broken, don't fix it." Unfortunately, the size and strength advantage doesn't last and unless the athlete has technique and work ethic to fall back on, other athletes begin to catch up to and beat this athlete at ages 13 to 15. Many early bloomers quit when their easy successes dry up. We avoid this by not allowing the early bloomers to bask in the temporary limelight. Instead we train them for their long-run benefit, and educate them about how they should judge their own performances both in races and in training. Late Bloomers are smaller and weaker than the early bloomers, so they often don't do so well at ski races. If the coach, skier, and parent emphasize results and winning, then there is little chance that this late bloomer will stay in the sport. This, too, is rational: "Why should I keep skiing? I'm obviously lousy, even though I'm working my guts out and doing everything the coach asks. I'm still getting killed! Coach is a bozo and I'm just not meant to be a skier." However, if the coach and parents can help the skier find enough rewards from skiing, for instance improvement, meeting personal challenges, friendships, etc., to stick it out through the lean years, and if the skier relies on technique and hard work to overcome the temporary physical deficit, then the late bloomer is in the driver's seat in a few years. It is usually the case that the late bloomers end up bigger and stronger than the others - it just takes them longer to get there. Meanwhile, the qualities developed on the hill and in their heads serve them well as the mature.

**Note:** it is almost impossible to tell how talented your skier is, or how much potential your skier has for racing, by looking at age class race results. Races will often just tell you who is bigger, stronger, or more coordinated and that probably won't last.

### **The Challenge of Puberty**

You would think that because they are getting bigger and presumably stronger, your skiers would be getting faster. Yes, and no. In general, puberty is highly beneficial to almost all boys, but with girls its benefit can be more ambiguous. Boys lose fat and gain muscle, getting bigger and stronger. Girls, too, gain in height and strength, but they also add fat deposits. With proper nutrition and proper training - lots of conditioning and consistency, these changes can be kept to a minimum, with no long-term harmful effects. During puberty kids are growing, but they are growing unevenly. Arms and legs and torsos don't have the same proportions as they did last week, either of strength or length, so coordination can go haywire. Technique may fall apart, or come and go. Also, various

psychological changes are affecting skiing and everything else. Interests change and priorities are re-ordered. All these changes can cause the child's athletic performances to stagnate. It can be a highly frustrating time for all involved. Extra support and encouragement from parents and coaches is critical in helping athletes cope. Fortunately, this period doesn't last long. Many parents comment to us that thanks to our program they "have a new child who is ready to take on the world, who is confident in his abilities, and who has new and much higher expectations of himself."

## **PARENTS AND COACHES**

### **Jekyll and Hyde**

Coaches often undergo miraculous transformations. It is interesting to watch parents' changing attitudes and behavior towards the coach when their children are "succeeding" or "failing." When the child skis well, the coach is a good chap and everyone's happy. When the child does not do well, the coach's abilities and motives are suspect. We encourage you to treat coaches the same no matter how your children perform.

### **The Wisdom of Solomon**

Coaches make many decisions. You won't agree with them all, and with the benefit of hindsight we often refine our thinking. Trust the coaches to act in what they consider the best interests of your child and the team as a whole, and understand that this sometimes will conflict with what you see as the best interests of your child at a specific moment.

### **Coaching versus Over-Coaching**

It is possible to over-coach. Inexperienced coaches have a tendency to do this, especially at races. Such coaches are in the kids' faces all the time, giving them too many instructions before they race, correcting them incessantly during the warm-ups of a championship race, and controlling every little thing. Many times the coach's speech is actually directed to a nearby parent rather than to his or her athletes. Parents might be impressed by this show of active coaching. However, over-coaching is destructive. At training, skiers need instruction. But they also need to be allowed to try things, to watch other skiers, to feel things, and to find out what works and what doesn't, with perhaps a few leading questions from the coach. You don't teach an infant how to walk; he watches you, he tries it, he falls, he falls again and again, and in no time he is charging around the house making mischief. When you get to a race, the general rule should be the less said the better. In a stressful environment, the more information you try to force into a kid's head at the last minute, the more likely you are to jam his circuits entirely (similar to "cramming" for an exam in school). If a coach has been doing the job in practice, the skier will know how technically to ski before he gets to the race. Once at the race, we will focus on tactics and motivation almost exclusively - a couple of cues or reminders, and only a couple, and the skier can get into the start gate without his mind cluttered by distracting details.

### **Keep us in the Loop**

We often don't understand why a skier is responding to training as he is. Why is he so tired? Why is he so inconsistent? It is easy to forget that everything happening in the skier's life during the twenty-one hours a day when he is off the hill affects his skiing as much or more than three hours of training when we are ostensibly in charge. Let us know if there are problems at home or at school that will affect your skier's training and racing performance. You don't need to give us all the details, but in order to coach your skier individually; we have to know what is happening individually.

### **Talk to the Coach**

It is most effective to communicate with the coach regarding your concerns about the program or your child's progress within it. Please do not burden your child with such topics. The last thing ten year-olds need is to be caught in the middle between two adult authority figures. Likewise, it can be detrimental to disparage a coach or the program to other parents. Talk to the coach involved. We as coaches will welcome dialogue that makes us better and thus more successful in our careers. It can also be helpful to ask yourself: "What am I doing to help the situation?"

### **Treating your child the same**

As your child begins to race more and qualify for higher races the expectations from the athlete, parents, and coaches seems to increase. This couldn't be farther from the truth. We as coaches, you as parents, and the athletes themselves need to have the same routine for and put the same emphasis on each race whether it is the local Siskiyou Cup races or the Junior Olympics. Extra expectations or preparations for a major event only puts more pressure on the athlete, if we can treat all races the same and have the same expectations for the athletes to do the best they can at each event they will be much better prepared for any event no matter how big.

### **There are no "Age Class Parents" and "Ability Parents."**

There are only MARA parents. Once a portion of the team's parents begins to think of itself as having a different interest from that of the group as a whole, the team becomes less strong than the sum of the parts.

### **SUMMARY**

In closing, let us reiterate how privileged we feel to be a part of your child's development as a person and their career as a ski racer. We believe that by instilling a love for the sport and emphasizing our core values we can positively affect all participants in a positive manner, and pave the way for athletic excellence at the same time. We will need each other in this process, and by working together, we can help your child best realize their athletic potential and develop character traits that will serve them throughout their lives. As this manual mostly covers our philosophy please take the time to also read the Athlete Manual for details of every day club operations as well as our codes of conduct and athlete expectations.