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My favorite blog this week is a MUST read for parents, coaches and athletes!

from

VARA's Youth Coordinator Alex Krebs

Hello VARA Members!

Over the past few weeks I have visited several VARA U12 and U14 skills events and races. The most impressive event I have been to thus far is the SVC U14 Stubby Slalom held at Willard Mountain. Hopefully you have already read my report from the event but if not, please visit the VARA website and go to the specific VARA Youth Coordinator tab <http://www.vara.org/resources/youth-coordinator/12/>



Firstly, Willard Mountain did a fantastic job running the race and secondly, I have never seen so many pole plants and athletes trying to arc their skis from initiation to finish and I will say it had a lot to do with the fact that it was a stubby slalom as opposed to tall gates.

As coaches we all hear a focus on tall gates and gate blocking. These questions and conversations reminded me of one of my favorite articles written by my friends former US Alpine Ski Team Olympian, Edie Thys Morgan. Edie clearly states the proper direction for our young athletes.

Below is an excellent blog by Edie!

Thank you Edie!

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VARA VISION:

.... to keep ski racing 1st in Vermont..... and Vermont ski racers 1st in the world!

"When can I cross block?"

Once the slalom gates are set in the snow that is the most common and the most cringe-worthy question a ski coach for junior racers gets asked. The answer? "How about never?"

First off, the term cross-blocking is misleading. It is often referenced as a good thing, a sign of advancement, while in reality it is quite the opposite. "Blocking" is simply clearing a gate out of your path. "Cross," well it has no possible upside here.

If your skis are arcing hard around the gate, your feet are close to the gate, and your body is angled so far into the hill that it actually passes on the inside of the gate...if all that is happening, then your outside hand is the closest one to the gate, and is therefore the one to "clear" the gate. Look at a top NCAA skier, or watch a World Cup and that is what you see. Calm, disciplined, upper bodies with arms, hips, knees always pushing forward and down the fall-line. Like a metronome the outside hand ticks the gates out of the way without creating any extra movement or influencing body position.

If your skis are not arcing hard around the gate and are not very close to the gate, the outside hand is nowhere near the gate. To clear the gate with the outside hand you would have to reach across your body. In so doing you lose all pressure on your outside ski and any prayer of carving a turn or generating any power from the ski. It is rare to see a U14 who can consistently carve clean turns while running a tight enough line to warrant outside clearing. I have yet to meet such a U12. They simply do not have the strength or technical ability.

Armor is good. It saves on orthodontic bills, bloody knuckles and bruised shins. Better safe than sorry, and besides armor looks cool. It makes us feel stronger and more powerful. But put a kid in armor and all of a sudden he or she feels the need to hit something. Who can blame them? It is hard to resist the siren song of guard on plastic, the satisfying thwap of a gate bowing from our assault. But if you listen more closely, you will also hear another, less heroic sound. It is the rasp of edges skidding around a turn.

Here's what's happening, and it happens every day, every run, with every kid who wants to "cross block." Skier sees gate, skier goes straight at gate, skier blocks gate with outside hand. The act of reaching over to the gate releases pressure from the edges before the turn is anywhere near completion. Skier must complete turn after the gate by skidding skis around and is already too low to make a good turn on the next gate. So, skier goes straight at that gate, whacking it out of the way, and again releasing any pressure and negating any turn initiation that might have been started above the gate. Pattern repeats until skier passes through finish and wonders, "Why am I so slow? After all, I hit all the gates!"
What do we do?

First: Accept that cross blocking is a Faustian bargain. One you reach across your body you are trading the long term prospect of clean powerful turns and engaged edges, for the immediate gratification of plastic-on-plastic impact.

Second: Ditch the term cross blocking altogether and use the proper term for getting gates out of your way-**clearing**.

Third: Refocus on the one core skill that will never fail you-**pole plants**. Even when you are so awesome that you are carving and clearing with your outside hand, you'll

still be planting your pole. It's what completes your turn, what allows you to get off one ski and on to the next, all while moving your body down the hill. If you can't plant your poles, something is wrong (hands too low, timing not right, poles not in correct position, etc.) Figure it out with your coach, and get back to planting those poles.

Fourth: When you are planting your pole every turn and making clean turns above the gate and a gate gets in your way...CONGRATULATIONS! You can ski a line close enough to the gate to have to clear it. So knock it out of the way, without bringing your hand across the body. If you do that, you will automatically be clearing with the "correct" hand, be that inside or outside. You've got the armor-use it! And worry about your feet not the gates.

Fifth: Give it time. The above situation will happen sooner on flatter terrain, easy snow or on a straight course. Don't expect to be able to run the same line on steep, icy or turny course. You will eventually be able to, but only if you take the time and go through the steps to master the basics of clean skiing first.

Thank you for reading. That will be all.
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