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The race starts now...

To find a few more hundredths this winter, start preparing your skis this summer

By Dave Peszek

This is the first in a series of articles on ski and snowboard tuning that will appear this season in Ski Racing. Each issue, we'll tackle different topics that arise in the preparation and maintenance of alpine and nordic skis and snowboards.

Have you ever thought about your overall preparation as an athlete, and how it relates to your equipment? Your coach may talk about specific times in the annual cycle of athletic training as "preparation periods," but how does that relate to your equipment?

Summer glacier training, dry-land camps, on-snow training time and the endless devotion of friends, family and coaches all help to ensure your success on the race course. Add some desire and plenty of dedication, and you should be able to meet your goals -- but not if you neglect the role your equipment plays.

We can't overstate the importance of spending quality time with your equipment now, in the last stages of your preparation period. Perhaps you know someone who gets new skis in the fall, trains on them, then frantically tries to prep and tune them a night or two before the first race series of the season. Think of this as akin to skipping summer camp, ignoring your strength, balance and coordination training, and only taking a couple of warm-up runs before your first race. It's not a recipe for success!

"Many racers are simply impatient and don't pay attention to the subtle but continuous changes happening with their skis," according to Jeff Butz, a second-year ski technician for the women's squad of the U.S. Ski Team. "These changes can be positive or negative. Ignoring the maintenance of your skis will be detrimental to consistency in training; spend time with them, and you can actually watch the bases get faster as you wax and ski them into prime shape."

Before we get into specifics on what to do with the time you devote to your skis, there are a few general guidelines to keep in mind. First, keep all of your equipment tuned the same way, and at the same high level. Second, a little work every day prevents a huge panic effort before a race. And third, care for your skis when you're training the same way you do when you're racing. (Train the way you race: You've probably heard your coach say this before; it applies to your equipment, too!)

So, what can you do for your skis right now, at the end of summer, which will make them faster during ski season? Here's how to start, whether your skis are fresh out of the wrapper or trusty old friends from last season:

Clean 'em.

If your skis are brand new, the bases will be dirty from the manufacturing process and usually have emulsion residue in them from base grinding. Skis that were last skied on back in the spring or over the summer were most likely used on extremely dirty snow and will also need a good cleaning. Use the hot-scrape method with a very soft wax for this

process; iron on a coat of wax and then scrape it from the base while it is still liquid. You'll actually see the dirt that's pulled out of your bases by the hot wax. Repeat this process until the wax comes off completely clean.

Check 'em.

It is also a good idea at this point in the cycle to have your bases checked to make sure they're flat, and to have a qualified stone-grinding technician look at the structure to make sure it's right for you and the conditions in which you typically ski.

Wax 'em.

We'll cover full-blown ski prep in a future article, but for now, just wax 'em. Use a soft hydrocarbon wax (as opposed to the much pricier fluorocarbon waxes). Allow the wax to completely harden overnight, then scrape, and brush out completely. Use a series of at least three brushes: for soft wax, it's brass, then nylon, then soft nylon. Spend at least 10 minutes brushing your skis out, from tip to tail, with long, overlapping strokes.

Wax 'em again. And again.

Top technicians, like the USST's Jeff Butz, will wax giant slalom and slalom skis at least three times before the skis ever touch the snow, and speed skis at least 10 times. From then on, says Butz, "The process of waxing them in and actually skiing them in will contribute equally to their rapid gain in speed." He manages more than 60 pairs of skis for six athletes, and spends most of his summer between camps simply waxing skis. Butz considers skis ready for time testing -- during which he identifies the skis for racing and those for training -- after they've been skied 10 times and waxed 15 to 20 times. Sound daunting? "Simple attention to detail is all it takes to be successful," says Butz.

So, make it your goal to completely wax all of your skis, using the process described above, three to four times between now and the next issue. Remember, the race to win starts now!

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