

# Start The Season Out Right – Five First Day Tips for Coaches

By Jon Nolting, USSA Sport Education Director



The tone you set at the start of the season will have a lasting effect on your athletes and their parents. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. You will be taking on a group of individuals, each with their own unique experience, motivation and perspective toward skiing and riding. Each comes with a set (or two) of parents, with their own experience and agendas, and they are ultimately your customers as they are paying the bills and making it possible for their child to be part of your program. A good start to the season for both of them will make the rest of the year go much more smoothly for you. Here are five keys for a successful first day that may not have been at the top of your list, but should be.

## 1. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.**

Communication is your most important tool as a coach, and it doesn't start on day one. It starts before. You need to help your athletes and their parents prepare for the first day. A simple email to the families beforehand should be the minimum standard (see example). If you don't receive your roster until day one, request the names and contacts sooner. Stop and put yourself in the parent's shoes and try to anticipate what questions they may have up front and address them right away. Demonstrate that you are approachable and encourage communication, though feel free to set ground rules, such as no phone calls after 8:00. With your athletes, make sure you communicate at their level. That is, use words that are easily relatable to them, keep it simple and concise with instruction. If you are a tall coach, or are working with young kids, get down on a knee and talk with the group at their level. You have a better chance at commanding their attention this way. When real problems emerge between coach and athlete or coach and parent the trigger usually isn't a sport-specific issue, the root of the problem usually stems from a communication breakdown. Coaches that are pro-active in this area have many fewer negative interactions with parents. Make improved communication a high priority for this season!

### SAMPLE INTRO LETTER

"Hi, my name is *Chris Snowcoach*, and I'm looking forward to working with you and your child this season. We're going to meet *here* at *starting time*. I attached my picture to help you find me. I'll be wearing a *green hat*. Make sure you bring *all the right gear for day one* (list it out). We're going to work on *xyz*, get to know each other, and have fun! We'll be done at *ending time*, be sure to meet us *here*. If you ever need to reach me, please contact me *this way* and at *these times*. Please let me know if there is anything special I need to know about your child – past injury, learning challenges, or other concerns that I can help with. I look forward to meeting you."

2. **Get to know your athletes and their families.** There is a popular saying in coaching circles that your athletes don't care what you know. What they need to know is that you care. This is partially true, but more clearly stated it should say that your kids need to know that you care before they'll care what you know. A substantial part of your first several sessions is getting to know your athletes and demonstrating that you care about them. The first step is learning names. If you need, buy stickers they can write their name on to put on the front of their helmet. Play name games during a warm up routine that help you and the other members of the group learn names. Make sure you ride the chairlift with each of your athletes on the first day. Ask them questions, both about skiing and riding and about school, family, and their other interests. Learn about each child's goals and learning styles as early as

possible. For a successful coach-athlete relationship, you must be able to relate to each individual in your group, and this starts on day one.

3. **Have a good plan.** We cannot understate the importance of good planning. Every coach from volunteer working with six year olds to national team level coaches need to use daily planning to guide their [training session](#). It doesn't need to be complicated. Establish a goal for the day and plan the details to achieve that goal. Write it down and stick it in your pocket. The first day plan should maximize group interaction while minimizing individual comparison. Often the first day presents marginal conditions. Be creative to make the most of what you have to work with. Team building, communication, and fun-oriented skill development exercises should be part of the first day. Leave time at the end of the day to be available for parent and athlete questions.
4. **Set expectations and discuss with the group.** The first day is an important day to go over ground rules for the group. This should not be done in a one-way lengthy talk, but rather covered as the session rolls along. Follow up with written expectations and rules for the group. How do you handle late arrivals? Disruptive behavior? What are important club rules and ski area rules? Letting your athletes know their boundaries and consequences early should make them more comfortable and will make it easier for you to address infractions down the road. There are other rules and expectations that should be established collaboratively with the group, especially for coaches working with adolescent and older athletes. Getting your athletes involved in decision-making, where appropriate, enhances buy-in and engagement with the team goals. As a coach, it is important to set high expectations for your athletes. You must believe in your athletes' abilities. If you don't, it is likely your coaching will reflect that attitude and they will not succeed. Start from day one demonstrating a positive and optimistic outlook for the group, and live up to those expectations yourself.
5. **Start with the FUNdamentals.** Perhaps the most frequent mistake made by coaches is to spend too little time on the fundamental skills before moving into competition-like training environments. When considering your training plan, first take into account the developmental phase of your athletes as described in the [USSA Training Systems](#). Then consider the year-long goals for the group, which ought to be focused on the skills they will have learned or mastered rather than based on results. Now work backwards. With this approach, you would spend a lot of time on fundamentals in the early part of the season. But often we base our plan on the first race on the calendar. Where is the time to develop the fundamentals? If we build training around that first event, our season-end goals would be compromised. Instead, let the early competition can take on a different focus, a rehearsal for the big events ahead. The other important aspect for early season fundamentals work is that it is done in a way that is FUN! Drills can be boring, but they don't have to be. Mix up drills with freeskiing or riding. Make certain drills more game-like or introduce a competitive element or a challenge. Rather than doing the same drill over and over until everyone does it right, do different drills that emphasize the same skill, adding some challenge, then go back to the original drill again and see the improvement! It takes just a little creativity, but it is essential to turn your fundamentals into **FUN**damentals. As long as they are fun, you can come back to them again and again throughout the season. Challenge yourself this season to spend more time working on the basics, and to make this training fun and rewarding.

**Looking for some fresh ideas for your coaching? Take time to attend a USSA Coaches Clinic. [Click here](#) for schedules and details. You can also see drill examples on our [Center of Excellence TV website](#), or purchase educational DVD's and CD's at the [USSA Education Shop](#).**