

INSTRUCTION: Slalom

Strong Mind



Chris Rossi skiing in the moment.

Written by Chris Rossi

Photography by Marie Bolusset at Swiss Ski School

Slalom water skiing is a crazy sport. With rope-line tensions reaching 800 pounds and beyond, we need to be in very good physical condition. Even so, this is only half the battle. We also need to be mentally strong. The brain gives us the ability to see where we want to go with our skiing and helps us to be disciplined enough to reach our goals. Here are a few places you can improve your game.

1. Pre-season/ off-the-water continuing education – I call this the evolution stage of skiing. It is important to learn as much about the sport from a theory standpoint as possible. I not only want to learn about what makes me successful, I love to learn about what makes others successful. I try to take little pieces from everyone I talk to and apply it to my skiing philosophy. The best way to find out your strengths and weaknesses in your skiing knowledge is to write it down. What I mean is to write in as much detail, what you believe happens in all phases of the course. The

more detail you can write about, the stronger your knowledge base. The areas you jump over, or are vague, are areas you need to spend more time investigating. The Internet has become the main tool for advancing knowledge off the water. There are water ski forums like *ballofspray.com*, *thewaterskiforum.com*, *proskicoach.com*, and my site, *slalomguru.com*, where professionals and amateurs discuss the latest techniques. The biggest thing to remember is that there are no right or wrong ways to do things. Everyone has an opinion, but it is just that. Another

way to advance your knowledge is to take lessons from professional coaches. I am a strong advocate of early season coaching. My reasoning is that you can start implementing new techniques while you are still developing that season's muscle memory. Why spend three months practicing the old technique and building muscle around it? I do 90 percent of my new technique learning in the first six weeks of the season, and then I spend the rest of the season practicing it.

2. Pre-ski mental preparation – This is a very critical aspect that all professionals utilize. There is no one way to prepare, but in order to peak perform, your mind must be calm and clear. Some pros lay out a towel, put on their favorite music, and stretch. Others throw a football or kick around a soccer ball to get warmed up and forget about



all the other events that are going on in their life. Still others tie a ski rope to a tree and visualize their upcoming set while walking through the motions. I like to go for a run. I do this before every set. The run lets me get away from the tournament and sneak into my own world. When I first start running, I allow my mind run wild. A lot of thoughts go through my head. The trick is to just let them fly. It doesn't matter what pops into your head, just do not give it any merit or attention. As I run farther, those random thoughts get less and less. As I get toward the end of my run, my mind is calm and I start to focus on what I want to accomplish in my upcoming set. This clarity is what we are looking for. I then go to my ski bag and lay out a towel. For the next 10 minutes or so, I just look over my equipment and chill. I'll spend a few minutes visualizing myself skiing. I know that I have done

everything I can to prepare for the upcoming set, so I relax and take in the scene around me. I do a few high jumps while on the dock just before I ski. This is just to make sure my fast twitch muscles are ready to fire. Now there is nothing left to do but go ski.

3. Focused, on-the-water training with goals – This is another very important tool that most accomplished skiers do. Before every ski ride I set goals of what I want to accomplish. I have a very clear plan of the passes I am going to run. I do not fly by the seat of my pants. Some days I plan to do back-to-back passes, others are down the line. These are performance goals and should be made before every set. I also set focal points on specific techniques that I would like to improve on. These technique keys come from the early season and need to be stressed every set. A great teacher once told me that you do not truly know something until you have done it a thousand times. I believe this. So I take every set as a chance to move that much closer to my goals. I cannot stress enough the importance of skiing in the moment. Try not to think about something that has already happened and do not ever predict what is going to happen. If you come into buoy one and pop a wheelie, forget about it and focus on where you are and what you can do to be in the best position possible. Do not try to compensate for the bad turn. You do not need to make up for mistakes. You have to just deal with making the best of where you are. My mantra is, "You can only lose ground in the course." I have spent many practice sessions focusing on this thought and I believe it has made me a better skier.

4. Post-ski mental training – It is extremely important to take the first 10 minutes after your ski set to evaluate what has happened. Your mind will never be clearer than it is just after skiing. I keep a ski log that I write in after every set. I write about my ski settings, the conditions, the passes I ran, and what I worked on. I also write down how well I did at accomplishing my goals and focal points. This is accountability and it is very important. It is not always going to go the way you plan. Account for what has happened and learn from it. We need to train our brain just as much as our body. The log is a way to see how that is all progressing.

5. Off days visual training – Water skiing is an extremely demanding

sport from a physical standpoint. It is impossible to ski every day and ski at a high level. Without rest, an injury or slump is inevitable. We can, however, train our brain every day. My suggestion is to find a time during the day that you can spend 15 to 30 minutes in a quiet, comfortable location without disruption. Spend the first few minutes letting those random thoughts run through, paying no attention to them. Once those have slowed down, you can start to visualize yourself skiing. If you have never done this, don't stress on what happens at first. You are a beginner and should not expect to have the ability to visualize yourself skiing through the course. You must spend time training your brain to visualize just like you spend time training on the water. So start with skiing at your home site. This should be the easiest place to visualize because you have spent so much time there. See yourself putting on your ski and hopping in the water. See the driver as the line comes tight. Say, "Hit it" and see yourself getting up. See the course coming at you just as you do every day in real life. Now edge out for the gates and turn in. You should be visualizing this as if you were actually skiing. Like you are looking through your own eyes. Now ski your way through the course. If something happens that you do not like, for instance you see yourself using poor technique or if you miss or fall, start over. Keep doing this until you complete the pass to your liking. Success could happen in one session or it could take a week or longer. Do not be stressed about your progression.

Stay focused on implementing this new training tool and over time you will improve. As your ability to visualize develops, you will be able to ski an entire set, skiing through each speed or rope length as if it were actually happening. As your skills develop even further, you will be able to visualize yourself skiing at other sites; skiing line lengths that you are not able to yet complete in real life; seeing yourself winning events; and even setting a national record. A main advantage to this new learned tool is that you will be able to visualize new techniques before you are able to accomplish them on the water. Once it is clear in your mind, it is only a matter of time before it materializes on the water.

Chris Rossi is sponsored by Radar Skis, Tige Boats, Performance Ski & Surf, Billabong, and pumpRocker. Be sure to check out his new Web site slalomguru.com for more on this and many other slalom skiing topics.