

Training Plans

It's the beginning of a new ski season and whether your goal is to get fit(ter) and enjoy the fresh air, sunshine and companionship that comes with cross country skiing, to break 2 hours in this years Nickel Plate Loppet or to place in a few races this year, you need a training plan to get you there. A training plan can be simple, such as increasing the time or distance or speed you ski over the course of the season; or complex with many mini and maxi training cycles built in to maximize energy systems, strength, power mental and tactical preparation, timed for multiple peaks at key periods and races. It could be a seasonal plan, a yearly plan or a quadrennial plan as is the case for those aiming for the Olympics. The point is, the plan can be as simple or as complex as you need it to be. And while the axiom "failure to plan is to plan for failure" it's corollary "paralysis by analysis" is also true. So start simple and add as needed. And remember, to ski well you have to ski! And have fun, so you keep on skiing.

If you are looking at a training plan, it implies that you have a goal in mind. You should check your goals to make sure that they are realistic and can be met. While your goals should stretch you, they should not be unrealistic. So, a reality check: how much time and resources can/will you devote to reaching your goals? Where are you at now? Are you a multi year endurance athlete or a weekend warrior? What are your strengths and what are your weaknesses? If you are just beginning, then huge gains can be made quickly and relatively easily, but for the experienced, skilled skier, the law of diminishing returns bites you and you need to carefully analysis where you can get the most gains for your time and resources. So for a beginning skier a goal of improving by 15 or 25 percent (faster) may be realistic but for an accomplished skier an improvement of 5% may be a stretch. And while you should have a stretch intermediate time bound goal, you should also have a longer term 'dream' goal to keep you motivated. And finally, give some thought to how you measure success in reaching your goal. So while it may be to break two hours in the loppet, that's in February and you only have one shot to make it. So how do you measure success in any given ski session and are you still successful even if you don't break two hours (missed the wax, slow conditions) but you did finish strong before someone who usually finishes before you.

So with the goals and the parameters of what you can do (note, not limitations) before you, you can plan back from your goal. Say your goal is the Nickel Plate Loppet in Feb 11th. That's 30 km. in under 2 hours. That's +15 km per hour times two. And it's Dec. 1 now. So how many actual ski days do you have between now and Feb. 11th? Say you've set aside 2 days/week to ski. With Christmas etc. you figure maybe 20 actual skiing days. You've been active all year but have not really done any ski specific training. The first day out you wisely decided not to overdo it so an hour and a half ski maybe 15 km covered. The next day you're sore and you think, I've ski 10 km per hour and I have to go at least 50 percent faster and ski an half hour longer, how do I do that? Well the answer is by incremental steps. Remember you are up about 5,000 feet in elevation higher at Nickel Plate then the valley. You have to give you body time to adapt and adjust to that and the workload. You have to be able to figure out how hard you can push your body and how fast it adapts. As we age generally it's harder to push your body and it adapts slower. Too much, too soon and your body tells you in no uncertain terms. Not enough and you don't optimize your training. The most successful athletes are those who have learnt

to listen to their bodies. Remember improving is about training loads and recovery and adaptation. Unfortunately it's not a linear relationship and there are time delays. So the harder you push it and closer you are to the edge of optimizing training, the more closely you have to monitor what is going on.

Some basic principles apply. You need to comfortably ski the distance. So to comfortably ski 30 km, you should be able to ski 40 plus km several weeks before Feb. 11th. Preferably a couple of 40 plus km skis 5 and 6 weeks before the event (to give yourself plenty of time to recover). You need to be able to ski faster than 15 km/hour and keep it up for at least two hours. So you need some speed training where you ski faster than 15 km/hour for a bit (working to longer distances). When to do that? Well if you are increasing distances drastically, you should not be thinking of increasing speed drastically at the same time. So a build up of slow distance training with bouts of faster skiing is the order of the day. Too many skiers train and race more or less at the same pace. They don't have that extra gear when they need it so they are relegated to being pretenders rather than being contenders. You need to train long, easy and slow (aerobic so you should be able to carry on a conversation) 90% of the time and then faster than race pace (can you say anaerobic lactate or anaerobic alactate training - that is 10 second and 1 to 2 minute all out repeat sprints) the other 10% of the time. Towards the last two to four weeks before the race day you need to do some tempo skiing, where you are going at or above race pace for up to maximum 70 percent of the race distance/time. Keep up the speed training in moderation and plenty of rest and recovery especially the week before the date.

So that takes care of the physical training. That's a big part of the training plan. Elite athletes are racking up to 450 + hours (women) to 700+ hours (men) yearly. After the race season they've had a bit of a break of from a few weeks to a month from training to let their bodies recover. They've assessed what they needed work on. They've started a strength training program for a few months (as lean muscle mass and strength deteriorates over the race season). They are doing general training on speed, power, agility, flexibility and endurance. Gradually increasing one or more components of fitness and emphasizing those that they need to while decreasing other components with careful monitoring along the way so as not to overtrain. Towards the end of summer they've maximized general training volume and are gradually increasing intensity while decreasing volume. Towards the fall they are increasing the ski specific dryland training while maintaining the gains they've made over the spring and summer. At the end of fall the intensity of the dryland training have increased while the volume have gone down a bit. By early November late October they try to maximize the time on skis by doing two times a day skiing sessions of up to 6 hours total with good technique, while trying to maintain flexibility, power and prophylactic maintenance. Depending on their goals, they may be doing more intensity, some time trials and early season qualifying races or if they have already qualified, they may be concentrating on quantity and technique and saving the quality and intensity for nearer their race season.

All that is pretty standard, but what separates the great skiers from the rest is the other parts of the training. Beckie Scott did all the physical training, but she said that it was not until she concentrated on all aspects of her preparation that she experienced consistent success. She examined every aspect of her preparation and left nothing to chance. So mental training, tactical training, pre-race preparation,

equipment preparation, race plans, nutrition etc. where all fair game. A fascinating discussion of some of this could be found in Terry Orlick's book "In Pursuit of Excellence - 2nd edition where an entire chapter is devoted to Beckie Scott. If you want a training plan designed specifically for you, or if you're just interested in some of the aspects touched upon here, talk to a coach or join the masters ski group. And have fun skiing!