



2009 End of Season SOV Alpine Skiing Report

2009 Program Overview

Planning began in 2008 for the Special Olympics Victoria Alpine Ski program with the selection of Mt Buller as our 'home'. Mt Buller is the perfect partner as it is not only the ski field closest to the majority of Victoria's population, but is home to the Olympic Winter Institute.

Being the first year of the program we needed to focus our operations on achievable goals upon which we can build in subsequent years. Given that one of the tasks put before us is to contribute to an Australian Team for the 2013 World Winter Games we concentrated on assembling athletes that were already interested in Alpine Ski competition.

Mission

The mission of the Alpine Ski Program is to provide an athlete-centred program dedicated to providing opportunities to develop physical fitness, to be part of the skiing community, to experience the joys and responsibilities of team membership and to compete.

In order to make that mission a reality we worked to make sure every decision taken was actually in response to athletes' needs and not for administrative convenience. It can be a challenge to get the balance right, but it is imperative to make the effort and develop a truly responsive and individualized program.

Program Goals

We worked on four major goals:

1. To allow SO athletes to enjoy the fun of alpine skiing,
2. To source and develop a pool of SO volunteer guides,
3. To develop a team spirit among the participants of SOV Alpine Skiing, and
4. To develop and prepare athletes for competition.

FUN!

This is a hard goal not to achieve. Alpine Skiing is FUN! All of the athletes from the first camp were enthusiastic about coming to the second camp.

Simply through the introduction of Alpine Skiing as an SOA sport we are providing the opportunity for athletes to have fun skiing. It is a particularly difficult sport for our athletes to access independently. Some athletes have had exposure through their families. For these athletes the enjoyment of skiing is extended. Our program allows for more rapid skill development and provides the chance to ski with friends.

One of the unique qualities of Alpine Skiing is that it occurs in a camp setting. This provides a wonderful opportunity to expand on the fun provided by the sport. Athletes enjoy all the benefits of going away with friends like:

- Increasing their independent living skills through helping with meal preparation, sharing household duties and enjoying a greater degree of independence than they may have at home.
- Socializing in an unstructured way with their peers – chatting, watching TV, going for walks, eating together and even skiing independently with their friends. Our athletes can have difficulty accessing some of these ordinary pleasures in their home setting.
- Being part of the wider ski community both on and off the slopes.

Of course on the slopes our athletes were perfectly integrated with the wider skiing community, but back at Melbourne University Lodge some very special things happened. During our exercises, games and relaxation times, some of the other residents of the Lodge joined in. Also, in the evening, our athletes were made perfectly welcome in their activities.

VOLUNTEER GUIDES!

Our goal this year has been to identify appropriate Ski Guides to help athletes on the snow.

We have begun to assemble our volunteer Guides. We used five different Guides this year with four others registering their interest for the future. It is an attractive and unique volunteer position. This year's Guides were able to enjoy a week's Alpine Skiing, both with and without their athlete, for only the cost of their food. This makes it easy to attract Guides – and never compromise on quality.

During our camps we also have one off-snow support volunteer which is a critical role. It is more challenging to recruit people for this role as it is more work and less play, although they do have free time when the athletes are skiing. During non-ski time our Guides can help with the athletes.

We certainly are assembling quality Guides. All guides related well to the athletes and the standard of skiing was also high. All our Guides voiced their interest in next year's program. Not only are our current needs met, but we have the immediate capacity to expand the program.

TEAM SPIRIT!

We want all athletes participating in the Alpine Ski program to identify with the sport and the team. Team membership and all it entails bring great benefits to the participating athletes.

Because team practices are camps, they get to know each other well and identify as a team. It was heartening to see them support each other and negotiate decisions. When goal-setting, we recognize not only personal goals, but each athlete's responsibilities towards the team. During our camps we have a team meeting each day to discuss ski skills, individual goals, fitness and the camp in general.

On the first camp a pygmy possum got into one of the flats and we adopted this little endangered animal as our team mascot. On the second camp we had the task of naming our mascot. After a great deal of discussion we decided on 'Thunder'. On this camp we had a storm with thunder – and, of course, we thunder down those slopes!

A particular challenge for the Alpine Ski Team is to maintain the team spirit during the long off-season. We publish a quarterly newsletter distributed to all our athletes, volunteers and friends of the program, as well as a special addition after the last camp. Thunder will have a regular column in the newsletter from now on.

We have a dedicated team. We sent an email invitation to get together and form a table at the SOV Awards Night in November. Within hours of emailing out the suggestion we had enough responses to do so. Every team member and nearly all the volunteers are coming. (One volunteer responded with a yes, but then remembered it was her birthday and she couldn't. Fancy forgetting your own birthday!)

RACING!

This year we have concentrated on ski skills and forming the nucleus of a competitive ski team. Emphasis was placed on getting to know our athletes. This proved an important step as we learned a great deal about what an expanded ski program should look like.

Although the focus this year was not on developing specific racing skills, all the athletes had informal instruction on racing skills during their lessons. Through the generosity of Mt Buller, they had the opportunity to ski a timed slalom race at both camps – complete with electronic starting gate and finish line. Race times improved by between 24% and 36%! All the athletes are hungry for more race training next year.

We have three skiers who are race-ready now. Only one of those skiers had ever raced before. Another skier may become interested in racing in the future, but is now more interested in social skiing. It was apparent, by looking at specific skills, that each athlete made significant progress during each camp. [To measure progress we use the SOI skill sheets used for divisioning. It is important that the race schema is transparent and athletes understand how their skill levels feed into the competitive arena.]

Camp Format

Five athletes, representing three regions, went on the Skills Camp from the 12th to the 17th of July.

- Jenny Bowden Northern Region
- Prairie Maughan Southern Region
- Andrew Negrelli Southern Region
- Ben Pearce Southern Region
- Ian Stamp Inner-eastern Region

These athletes were joined by four volunteers.

- Charles Kennedy Ski Guide
- Hannah Kennedy Ski Guide
- Candy Maughan Team Coach & Ski Guide
- Anne Ross Off-snow support

On the Team Camp, from the 9th to the 14th of August, we had four athletes participating, representing two regions:

- Prairie Maughan Southern Region
- Andrew Negrelli Southern Region
- Ben Pearce Southern Region
- Ian Stamp Inner-eastern Region

The volunteers in August were:

- Janelle French Ski Guide
- Hannah Kennedy Ski Guide
- Candy Maughan Team Coach & Ski Guide
- Robert Stamp Ski Guide
- Ann Stamp Off-snow support

All athletes and volunteers arrived on Sunday afternoon. We settled in to our accommodation and rented the necessary equipment for the week. The athletes skied each morning with 2-hour lessons on both Monday and Wednesday. Each ski guide was responsible for one or two athletes. Instructors were qualified instructors from Mt Buller Ski School. On the July camp, we first put the athletes into two groups, but the range of abilities proved greater than expected so on Wednesday we added a third instructor. All athletes had 5 days of skiing. The length of that ski day varied and depended on the fitness of the individual athlete.

One feature of the camp was daily Team Meetings. Besides a time to debrief about the day and talk about plans for the day to come, we discussed many important topics. With their ski guides the athletes discussed their ski skills and abilities as well as their goals, both as a team member and as a competitive skier. Also at the final Team Meeting we had the opportunity to critique the camp.

As a group we discussed fitness and nutrition. For example, the athletes felt too much Coke was consumed during the first camp (a couple athletes made a Coke run in the afternoons!) They voted to only have Coke, or other soft drink, at the evening meal and ban all independent purchases of soft drinks for the August camp and beyond.

The camp menu worked out very well. In brief:

Breakfasts were a choice of cold cereal, porridge, Toast, tea and orange juice.

Snacks and sweets were fruit, cakes, ice cream and biscuits.

Lunches were mostly foccacias and soups. Packed lunches were also provided for the drives to and from Mt Buller.

Dinners were soup, roast chicken, pizza, spaghetti, lasagne and sausages with vegetables.

Conclusion

2009 has seen an exciting beginning to the SOV Alpine Ski Program. Some of the highlights have been:

Successful Skills Camp and Team Camp with a total of 10 days skiing for all the athletes and the benefits of living for a week on the mountain.

Team Meetings held each day of camp to review the day, set goals and discuss skills. Each athlete went home from the Team Camp with a report covering their own skill development, race times and goals.

A **Racing** opportunity on an official slalom course with electronic starting gate and finish line, giving us race times to the hundredth of a second.

Enthusiastic Athletes with 3 athletes that are race-ready now. All athletes contributed greatly to the program through their positive attitude and desire to progress the program in the future.

Quality Volunteers have joined the team. All Ski Guides want to be part of the program and we have enough interest from others to double the program.

A **Newsletter** is published quarterly so that we can all keep in touch and maintain the momentum in the off-season.

Partnerships are emerging. We have a relationship with Mt Buller upon which we can build. We hope to formalize and expand on our relationship with Melbourne University Sport. We also want to include DWA in the program.

And, of course, *Thunder* has joined the team.

The future looks bright. We have many initiatives in mind for the coming year – and for years to come. From everyone in the SOV Alpine Ski Program, I would like to thank SOA and SOV for making it possible to include our sport. As SO athletes we plan to make all of SOA proud of us in the competitions to come.

“Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.”