

Skiing Tips

Correct Worst Mistakes

Bending the Arms When Crossing the Wakes

This habit shows up when beginners first try to lean through the wakes. Bending the arms is a form of "security blanket" for beginners, and some skiers take this bad habit with them as they advance.

Bent arms make it more difficult to lean away from the boat and establish leverage. Bent arms are also a sign that the skier might be trying to pull rather than lean.

Your arms shouldn't start to bend until you let up on your lean. If your shoulders are back and your arms are held straight when you cross the wakes, you will find it much easier to initiate the edge change and pre-turn. Correct this bad habit by forcing yourself to straighten your arms as you lean away from the boat. You will feel immediate improvement, but don't stop there. Most skiers find it difficult to resist the urge to pull, and most also maintain some degree of arm bend - even when they know better.

Giving the Angle Back to the Boat in the Pre-Turn

A lot of skiers lose a lot of angle by letting their shoulders and torso get pulled toward the boat during the edge change and pre-turn.

Correct this by keeping your direction going outward to the buoy with your shoulders and torso until you're ready to turn the ski. Don't let your outside shoulder get pulled toward the boat in the pre-turn.

Leaning Without Tucking in the Down (Back) Arm

A lot of skiers with otherwise good form will sacrifice angle by keeping their "down" (back) arm across their chest rather than holding it lower on the body. Leaving the down arm across the chest opens the skier to the boat and reduces leverage.

Correct this tendency by consciously checking to make sure your elbows are touching your vest just before you get into your lean. In addition, you might want to accentuate the rotation to get your body into an even better position.

Not Edging Through Both Wakes

After establishing a great leveraged position behind the boat, a lot of skiers blow it by failing to stay on edge through both wakes. Coming off edge before the second wake will cause a tremendous loss of angle. The boat will drag you down course, and you will be narrow at the next buoy.

To correct this habit, focus on forcing yourself to stay on edge longer. Having your body closed to the boat will also help you stay on edge through both wakes.

Too Much Weight on the Back Foot During the Turn

Shifting weight to the rear foot during the turn brings the nose of the ski out of the water and causes a loss of angle and turning ability. As a result, the turn will be lengthened and the skier will drift down course.

To check for incorrect weight shift during a turn, watch where the water breaks on the ski as the skier is coming into the buoy. The ski will turn best when water breaks near or slightly in front of the front binding.

A skier with too much weight on the rear leg usually has his or her butt back, which will cause water to break near the rear binding.

If you are "tail heavy" during your turns, focus on your front leg and your hip position. Do this while skiing an easy pass, or move to open water to focus on this fundamental.

On your off-side turns, work on extending your front leg and keeping weight on it as you come into the turn. Don't straighten your front leg, however. It should still have a slight bend, and the knee should be slightly forward and have weight on it as you come into the turn.

On your good side, work on staying over the ski while keeping your hips forward as you come into the turn.

Too Much Weight on the Back Leg When Crossing the Wakes

Most skiers keep too much weight on their back leg. For most of us, this habit began when we first learned to slalom and made that first cut at the wake. Instinctively, we felt that the safest way to cross the wakes was by keeping weight on the back leg.

In fact, the exact opposite is true. Maintaining equal weight distribution on both legs allows the ski to stay in the water and cross the wakes with much greater security and efficiency.

When weight is left on the rear leg, several bad things happen. For starters, the front leg is often stiffened, causing the skier to lose leverage and balance. Even worse, a weight-back stance makes it almost impossible for the skier to get the hips to the handle - especially on the offside lean through the wakes.

To correct this habit, you must make a conscious effort to balance your weight equally over both legs, bend at the ankles, and keep your knees forward. When your weight distribution and lower body posture are correct, you will find it much easier to get your shoulders back and create leverage against the boat.

To remove the distractions and pressures of the slalom course, practice wake crossings in open water. Start at a speed slower than usual, then increase both speed and intensity as you gain confidence.

I. The hardest load.

Chris Rossi: When people use the term "pull," they are referring to the time from the finish of the turn to the edge change. I like to think about a pendulum. When you are on a swing, where do you "pump" to generate more height? The answer is the bottom quarter of the downswing. In waterskiing, this would be from the finish of the turn to the point directly behind the boat. Because you're traveling very fast into the wakes, make your hardest pull at the first wake to actually get it behind the boat. Do you know what happens when you "over-pump" on a swing? When you get to the top, the chains come loose and you feel like you're falling. The chains then yank tight and you do all you can to hold on. This is the most common mistake I see in slalom - skiers pulling too long and then getting loads of slack in the turns.



Terry Winter: Remember, this is not a tug-of-war. Pulling directly against the boat will get you nowhere, except maybe sore muscles and blistered hands. The objective is acceleration across the course. The faster you can get across the course, the more time you will have to make your next turn. The acceleration should begin immediately after the buoy, and the speed should increase progressively until the middle of the wakes where the edge change happens. It's impossible to pull the boat down with the speed control systems, so don't try. Get in a good body position out of the turn; leverage against the boat just slightly so your ski rolls onto edge and just hold that position. You'll be amazed at the minimal effort it takes to get the needed acceleration and speed. One thing to look for if you are trying to help coach someone is the muscles in their face. If you can see teeth and all the veins on their forehead, then they are trying too hard. Relax and keep the body calm. Utilize proper body position to get the needed leverage and speed, and keep all of the other muscles out of it.



II. The second wake.

Rhoni Barton: We've all heard it time and time again - hold on long with two hands. However, have you ever stopped to think that you could be hanging on long with two hands, but your hands might not be anywhere close to your body? And, as you can imagine, if you have two hands on the handle but the handle is out away from you, the boat is probably pulling you to your inside edge. The optimal position off the second wake requires level shoulders, knees coming up towards your body and a ski that is moving out in front of you. Staying compressed and tight like this off the second wake will pretty much guarantee that your back arm is in close to you. What you don't want to do, however, is attempt to keep the handle close by pulling in on your arms. Focus instead on moving your hips and midsection towards it. Optimizing this position is a sure way to keep the line tight at the finish of every turn.



Terry Winter: Slalom skiing is dynamic. It is full of constant movements that should all flow smoothly together. Right at the center of the wakes is the area where your body is most compressed. As you are making your edge change, your knees should be coming up towards your body, allowing the ski to transfer from behind you out to the other side. As the ski swings out, you should begin rising up on top of your ski by bringing your hips forward over your front foot. It's critical to keep a strong body position throughout the edge change so that you get a good approach to your turn. You should feel a connection between your elbows and hips, but you don't want to be pulling on the rope with your arms. Keep the arms relaxed and think about keeping the hips centered over your feet. As the ski continues to swing out, the legs are going to extend to reach maximum width. This is not bad! Having straight, relaxed legs will allow your ski to reach its full arc. Many assume it is necessary to approach the turn with bent knees, but this only takes away from your body's extension. Let the ski swing out naturally.

III. The Reach.

Chris Rossi: If you have focused on step two, this stage should be easy. When you let go with your outside hand, just think, "stand up tall" (extending the legs) and reach with the handle in a more forward direction. At the apex of the turn, just let your body relax and fall toward the handle that's out in front of you. When stage two is not done correctly, the skier will feel like they have to make the ski turn by pushing it around and falling back. Also, most skiers reach with the handle facing the wakes. This is a result of pulling too long and/or letting your arms fly out away from you too quickly after standing up.



Rhoni Barton: Since we just spent so much time talking about having the handle close to our bodies as we leave the second wake, what we do with the handle as we begin our reach is obviously critical. The most important thing I can tell you is that you should never reach (i.e., throw the handle out towards the course). If you do step II correctly, you will actually ski up to the widest possible point beside the boat with two hands still on the handle. When you can't get any wider, it is time to let the handle out slowly and slightly in front of you, feeling a little tension at all times. The speed that you've created through steps one and two should allow you to simply ski back around to the handle. Be sure to ski back to it at the same speed you left it. If you do it correctly, you will feel like your free hand, the one you let go with, will gently reunite with the handle after the entire turn is completed and you are already skiing in the opposite direction.

IV. Vision.

Rhoni Barton: This is still where I struggle the most. It seems too easy to whip my head across the lake to try and get going in the opposite direction quicker. The only problem with this is that my upper body gets ahead of my lower body. When this happens, I accept the pull too soon off the buoy and end up pulled out of position as I hit the wakes. However, if you're anything like me and looking down the lake seems impossible, here's a good way to get started. Pretend that the handle and rope form a wall. Remember that we just said you should always reach slightly in front of you. Now, don't let your eyes or head for that matter cross the wall. Instead, initiate the turn by dropping your lower body to the inside. It may take a little bit of practice, but if you commit to keeping your eyes to the outside of the line in the turn, we'll guarantee that a tight line turn is just around the corner.



Terry Winter: When turning to the left, keep the eyes to the right side of the rope. When turning right, keep the eyes to the left side of the rope. The idea is to keep your upper body facing down the course, or towards the boat. Your vision is crucial because the upper body tends to follow the eyes. If you are turning to the left and you turn your head in that direction your shoulders will follow your head. When you rotate your shoulders, the hips are unable to complete the turn and the hips actually determine where your weight is positioned. Your body weight should be over the front of your ski, and to the inside of your turn ready to move in the desired direction of acceleration. To have leverage against the boat, you need your body's weight applying force to your ski so it will roll onto its cutting edge. As you continue to arc the turn and begin accelerating, keep your eyes facing in the direction of the boat. When you reach the middle of the wakes, then you can look across and spot your next turn.

Running The Full Course

Step 1: The Gates

The secret to the gates is consistently getting maximum leverage and lean at the right-hand entrance gate buoy, and it starts with the pull-out. A skier's pull-out is much like a golfer's address of a ball: There are certain things you must do to position yourself correctly before you even initiate a movement.

The pull-out - not the gates or No. 1 buoy - is where the slalom course really begins. Start by pulling out to the left side of the boat. During your glide, as you settle into your ski, use your knees, hips and shoulders to turn smoothly toward the right side of the course. When the ski rotates through the turn, stay low with your knees and let your arms out.

The next stage is identical to the lean you use out of the No. 2 and No. 4 buoys. The gate lean should be progressive and strong through the wakes, as shown in Diagram A. Concentrate on holding your direction across the course and pushing your legs to create leverage against the boat. This part of the gates is the most critical. Too often I see skiers make a hard, fast turn and try to establish their maximum angle as quickly as possible. They get pulled up by the boat at the second wake and ski straight and flat into No. 1 with a ton of speed. They end up down-course after only No. 1, playing catch-up the rest of the pass. Hard, fast turns do help you establish maximum angle, but too soon; no one can hold that much angle to the second wake.

When first learning the gates, don't worry about going through them. In fact, I recommend missing them by 10 feet on the outside of the right gate buoy, as shown in Diagram B. First, this makes it much easier to run the pass, and at this stage you're still trying to work on mechanics, so you need to run as many successful passes as possible. Second, it will help you with a correct turn and lean. By concentrating on making the proper turn and lean, and not worrying about going through the gate buoys, you will practice the good habits of leaning through the wakes rather than creating bad habits - such as letting up in your lean to go between the gate buoys.

Step 2: Full Course

Here's the culmination of your training - the full course, gates included. To make it through the gates this time, your gate shot needs to be perfect: maximum angle and lean at the second wake and later, the right-hand-gate buoy.

Begin from the left side of the wake and think of three things: a smooth controlled lean to the left, getting wide (up to at least the rear of the boat) and sinking into your ski by bending your knees and ankles as you begin to glide before you turn. During this glide, as you settle into your ski, make a smooth rotation of your knees, hips and shoulders toward the right side of course, just as you worked on in Step 6. When the ski rotates through the turn, remember to stay low with your knees and let your arms out.

The next stage is identical to running the course as you did in Step 4. The lean should be progressive and strong through the wakes. Concentrate on holding your direction across the course and pushing with your legs to create leverage against the boat.

Your goal should be to reach maximum angle at the right-hand-gate buoy. You want your ski to be just inside of that buoy. To achieve it, focus your eyes like a laser beam on the right-hand buoy once you get into your glide.

If getting the angle is hard, maintaining it is harder. Try to aim for the right-hand-gate buoy or 2 feet to the left of it. By doing this, you'll never let up to make it inside the gates. You will always be driving down to get closer to the right buoy. You are better off going through the middle of the gates with angle than going by the right-hand buoy on a flat ski.

Once you've made it to No. 1, you're in familiar territory. Now work on your timing and look forward to shortening the line and bumping up the speed when you can add the gates and run the full course.

Absorb v Push

You've heard it a hundred times: You can't win a power struggle with the boat. Forget fighting. This is one example where the best philosophy is to hide from the foe. There are certain points in the course where slalom skiers should simply stay invisible to the boat.

The most common battle area is at the finish of the turn. Here, most skiers fall into one of two groups: those who push, and those who absorb. When you push through the turn, your legs and back go stiff. To compensate, you straighten your arms to keep your body from falling away from the boat. When you push, you load the ski and become visible to the boat at a very vulnerable moment.

To become invisible out of the turn you must make a progressive lean away from the boat as you approach the wakes. The problem with managing this load is that you already pushed your legs straight in the turn. The only tools you have left are your hands, arms and upper torso. Basically, you're in trouble.

We all know the lower body has more power and balance than a top-heavy upper body, but few of us use this knowledge to our advantage. To bring the lower body into play, try to absorb the force of the turn with your legs rather than stiffening and pushing through the finish. When you absorb, your ski will come farther around and will point more in the direction of travel prior to the lean away from the boat.

Since you haven't pushed with your legs, your arms don't need to straighten for support. You aren't leaning away from the boat, and you have established a body position that's ready to generate angle from the boat's power.

As the pull comes from the boat, there's not much left to do. Your upper body is poised and ready, the ski is pointed in the right direction, and you're compressed and capable of increasing angle with no loss of balance or vision. The boat won't see you until it's too late.

P.S. Practicing what you're already good at provides little challenge and a slim chance for improvement. Take a risk and try something new. How hard can it be?

Gaining Control & Consistency

For many skiers, gaining control and consistency on a slalom ski is unimaginable. To make turns with complete symmetry, without slack in the line, and with complete control, would be a dream come true. Guess what? Dreams can come true. Simply keeping two basic concepts in mind while skiing allows almost anyone to gain control and consistency in a matter of weeks, not years.

Visualize and execute the following two concepts the next time you are on the water:

1. Set your pulls by dropping your elbows to your hips and keeping them there until the edge change. This stance is easier to achieve if you keep your shoulder blades tight and pulled together.
2. Rely primarily on back arm pressure. Keep the handle on a more horizontal rather than vertical plane, and keep the elbow of the back arm fixed to the hip.

After developing this stance, you will find that achieving consistent width, edge change and control of the rope are much simpler tasks. Master this technique, and slalom skiing will become less of a series of tug-of-wars against the boat and more of a sensation of "driving" the ski down the lake or through the slalom course.

The Slalom Fin Forecast

By Todd Ristorcelli and HO Sports (more by this author)



Tip for your success

1. Remember to make one adjustment at a time.
2. A small adjustment to your fin can greatly affect the performance of your ski.
3. Always mark or measure your fin before making any adjustment.
4. Remember to adjust the wing to its original angle after you adjust your fin.
5. Once you find a fin position that you like mark or measure your fin setting, and for cryin' out loud, don't change it.
6. Adjusting your slalom fin is not the complete solution to all of your slalom problems, but with today's fin technology it certainly helps.

Terminology

- 7 Tip- front of the fin
- 7 Tail- deepest part of the fin
- 7 Fore and Aft adjustment- moving fin horizontally only (do not tilt)
- 7 Add tip- lowering only the front of the fin
- 7 Take away tip- raising only the front of the fin
- 7 Add tail- lowering only the back of the fin
- 7 Take away tail- raising only the back of the fin
- 7 Off side- turning to the left for right foot forward skiers and to the right for left foot forward skiers
- 7 On side- turning to the right for left foot forward skiers and to the left for right foot forward skiers

Common Problems Easily Corrected with Tip Adjustment:

Problem

1. Ski stops in turn and causes you to break at the waist on off - side
2. Tip too high on off-side
3. Too much angle through the wakes (off-side)
4. Not enough angle through the wakes (off-side)

Solution

1. Take away tip
2. Add tip
3. Take away tip
4. Add tip

Common Problems Easily Corrected with Tail Adjustment:

Problem

1. Ski is hard to turn
2. Ski slides at finish of turn
3. Back of ski lifts at the finish of turn
4. Ski turns too quick

Solution

1. Take away tail
2. Add tail
3. Take away tail
4. Add tail

Common Problems Easily Corrected with Fore and Aft Adjustments:

Problem

1. Ski hops or skips in turn on either side
2. Slack line on 'good side' turn

Solution

1. Move fin back horizontally
2. Move fin forward horizontally