

Sideslipping for Dynamic Balancing

One of the best ways of improving your ability to balance as well as your agility is to sideslip. Spending time practicing the following drills will help you become more comfortable on your skis as well as improve your confidence in handling more terrain.

We are always aligning our bodies, bones and muscles, to stay in dynamic balance as we move down the hill. Our brains have become quite good at balancing us from when we were babies. On skis, they will still do that if we allow them to. Focussing on feeling your foot soles is the key to allowing your body to maintain dynamic balance.

If you look at a skeleton, you will see that the heel bone sticks out quite far behind the shin bone. Our weight is transferred down through our shin bones to our feet. The point where that weight comes into our feet is the forward part of the heel/the back part of the arch. The weight is then transferred to the rest of the foot. In skiing, we do not stand on the balls of our feet, but on the whole foot with the 'sweet' spot being the back part of the arch. While skiing, learn to feel your arches and that will help with your balancing.

The next concept to understand about balancing on skis involves movements that will keep us aligned to the forces and hence balancing at all times. First is the bending, unbending movement pattern. Stand tall with no shoes on. Now play with bending the ankles and knees and see what takes the least amount of muscle to stay in balance. You will notice that if you only bend your knees, but not your ankles, you will have to use your thigh muscles and stress your knee joints to stay in balance. Always bending the ankle joint whenever you bend your knee joint is critical to staying in balance on skis.

At home, without shoes on, stand sideways to a mirror. Bend and unbend your ankles and knees. You will notice that it is easiest when your hips stay lined up over your feet. Depending on how much you bend, you will also see that you will tip your spine forward to stay in balance. All these bodily dynamics are the same when on skis. Staying loose, aligning your bones, using as little muscular effort as possible will help you maintain balance while skiing.

The next concept to understand involves the direction that you are moving on skis. As your skis slide, you need to always keep up with them, always going with them. Not doing so will result in your getting off balance, stressing your joints and your muscles and even falling.

When we are afraid of going down some hill, our brain tells us to lean back up the hill and cling to it, not go down it. If we listen to our wonderful brain, we will end up getting behind our feet, in the back seat, stressing our thighs and knees, increasing our speed, not being about to turn and possibly even falling. In order to maintain control and stay in balance, we need to move down the hill, staying balanced over our feet and with our skis. This is counter intuitive until you learn to do it and trust it. In the sideslipping drills, simply go with your feet as they slide.

The orientation of your upper body is important all the time. Your upper body is from your waist up. It is easy to think of aiming the zipperline of your jacket for guiding and directing your upper body. It is natural to aim your body where you are going and in skiing that is exactly what we do. So, in the sideslipping drills, aim your zipperline where you are going.

In summary, stay loose and allow your skeleton system to balance itself over you foot soles. Bend and unbend, staying supple and mobile and centered over your foot soles. Aim your zipperline where you are going.

Drills

Practice the following drills on all terrain, groomed and ungroomed, bumps, steeps... all of it!

1. Straight down the hill sideslip - stand on the hill with your skis across the hill so that you are not moving. Roll both your ankles down the hill and slide. Roll your ankles back up the hill to edge and stop. Make sure you keep your skis across the hill, not pointing down the hill at all. Sideslip straight down the hill. Practice this first with short little slides, then increase them to longer slides. See how fast you can sideslip.

Variations: Sideslip only on the downhill foot. Sideslip only on the uphill foot. Sideslip with both feet equally weighted.

2. Foragonal sideslip - stand on hill with your skis across the hill so that you are not moving. Sideslip forward and diagonally down the hill. Think of it as if you are grooming and smoothing out the hill. Again practice this on both feet, downhill foot, uphill foot and in all terrain.

3. Backward sideslip - stand on hill with your skis across the hill so that you are not moving. Sideslip down the hill backwards. Again groom the hill smooth, and play with both feet, one foot, the other foot in all terrain.

4. Falling leaf sideslip - Sideslip first forward foragonally and then backward, then forward, then backward. This is what the snowboards do so often when they are learning to snowboard.

5. Spinning - Okay, this is not a sideslip, but you need to flatten your skis to do it. Practice spinning both ways. The key is in the weight transfer. Your outside foot starts by being dominant and weighted the most. When you are facing up the hill, transfer the weight to the other foot (i.e. new outside foot) and then allow it to be dominant.

6. Commitment sideslip - Start sideslipping forward on your uphill foot while staying flexed (ankles, knees bent). Extend (unbend) moving your hips forward and down the hill across your skis. Your ski will start to turn. Commit and go with it and it will come around to complete the turn. Now try it going the other way - sideslip forward on your uphill foot, etc. This is one of the best ways to get comfortable committing to moving down the hill into the turn. Trusting this direction of moving is critical in skiing steeper terrain and bumps. Practice this commitment, moving down the hill. You will stay balanced over your skis. If you do not move in this direction, you will find yourself in the back seat at the end of the turn. (This drill also teaches you to be earlier in your timing of getting onto your new outside ski at the very top of the turn.)

7. Step-step - This is not a sideslip drill, but it is also a great technique to have in your quiver and useful on gnarly terrain. This is similar in to the focus of the commitment drill in moving forward and down the hill. From a standing position, with your feet across the hill, step your uphill ski out into a wedge or stem position where it is pointing more across the hill, and somewhat down, the other way. As you step it out there, put your weight onto it and commit to going with it, staying forward and going with it. As soon as you step onto it and start to move, pick up your other ski and bring it around and step back onto it so that you are now weighting both skis. This is similar to the old down stem step turn and great to use when you want to change directions and you are not too sure if you could turn in your normal manner. It's what I like to call a great 'rescue' technique.