

PLANNING YOUR EXCUSE

By Nat Brown

Most coaches and athletes are thoroughly familiar with long-term plans for training and understand all the exhaustive methods for testing wax and selecting the right skis for a given skier and for the snow and track conditions. These things are the foundations of success in our sport. But only one person is going to win the race. How much more important then, is the selection and planning of just the right reason for not winning! Hastily improvised excuses, so often heard, are painfully transparent, and expose the careless user to well-deserved ridicule.

On the other hand, a well-chosen, thoroughly planned and rehearsed reason for not winning, carefully matched to the skier's ability and the prevailing conditions can often snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Probably the most important factor to consider is that the best excuses are the simplest ones. They are easy to rehearse, difficult to forget under pressure, awkward if not impossible to refute, and effective because, like Mt. Everest they are, quite simply, just *there*.

Probably the best work in this area was done in the old USSR. One has only to look at Nicolai Zimiatov's monumental explanation for his complete disappearance after his medals at Lake Placid in 1980. After re-emerging for more medals in the 1984 Olympics, Zimiatov set a standard which has yet to be improved upon: when asked where he had been for four years, he replied: "I was sick."



The broken ski
excuse: works
every time.

A proper excuse must closely match snow and track conditions. For example, claiming that the wax was off, an okay excuse when the thermometer is at 0°C, seems limp and feeble under colder or warmer conditions where waxing is easy (although useful work is being done on having *dramatically* the wrong wax, as for example, a full-length layer of skare klister in -15°C powder.)

The advent of skating has of course rendered this time-honored excuse less useful. Work is still being done on good skating excuses, but note that ski condition are useful centers of attention, as an excuse based on edges (too sharp, too dull, bevel not carried far enough back, etc.) or sidecut (too much, too little, wrong place in the ski) will sound sensible.

It should be noted here that the best excuses *will also undermine the opponent's peace of mind.*

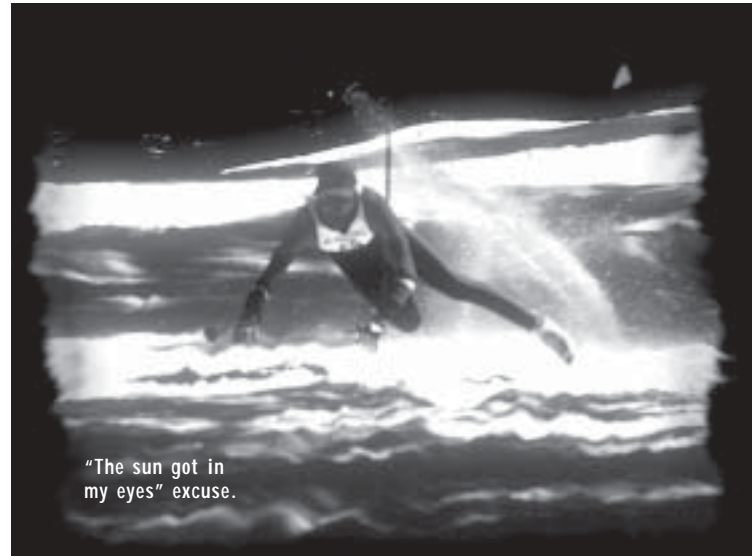
The use of improper equipment is both subtle, and if done properly, effective. Discretion however, is the watchword: an athlete who weighs 120 pounds, for example, will only appear foolish if he bases his excuse on the fact that his skis were truck-spring monsters designed for Smirnov to use in hard blue-kliester conditions. Only slightly better is the line that, "Justin suggested that I move the binding closer to the apex of the camber zone," or some such rigmarole to explain equipment failure.

Breaking a ski is simple and incontrovertible, though expensive, and so should only be resorted to in really important races. Note, however, that this ploy can be defeated if some interfering well-wisher offers you a spare ski. The Broken Ski Excuse is therefore best used only in conjunction with some obscure boot-binding combination which cannot possibly be matched. Most experienced excusers consider breaking *both* skis to be excessive, but this can be a valuable fall-back position to keep in reserve. "My kliester/hard-pack/soft powder skis haven't arrived yet from the factory" can also be a good way to go, but note that this is an *early season excuse only*. (*Editors note: a new excuse could be "My grind is all wrong! What was I thinking of, going with the LJo3 when I should have been using an R2.3 grind from Nordic Ultra-tune?"*)

The use of exotic test skis is a fertile, if short-lived ploy: "The factory sent them, so I thought I'd give them a try." Sadly, this excuse can only be used once, or at the most twice, but note that this kind of ski also lends itself well to the Broken Ski Excuse, as it *cannot be replaced* during the race.

Summary: The best excuse is the simplest. Excuses should be selected *well in advance* with regard to the physical characteristics of the athlete, snow conditions, etc. Although dramatic changes in the weather are useful, they cannot be relied upon and are a two-edged sword that can be counter-deployed by the competition. Far better to be well prepared!

Finally, a cheerful "saving it for Nationals" attitude (or "Worlds" for the advanced excuser), carefully established well ahead of time, not only irritates the competition, but creates an ambiance in which a well-planned excuse will flourish when brought into play later.



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