



## Developing for the Future

Alpine ski racing has a long history of success in America. But how is it positioned for the future?

### Introduction

In the spring of 2016, U.S. Ski & Snowboard board leadership undertook a comprehensive, in-depth analysis to better understand and learn from both its own alpine development systems and those of other nations. The premise was that if U.S. Ski & Snowboard could analyze existing and previous athlete development systems worldwide, and objectively evaluate their successes and failures, then it would be better positioned to organize and focus for the future.

The Project 26 research was undertaken specifically with an eye on results in the 2026 Olympics and beyond. The project followed an earlier effort by U.S. Ski & Snowboard board member Dan Leever to collect and analyze data including interviews with elite athletes from across the globe and international event results and rankings. What could be learned from our own, and the world's, successes and failures?

The result of these studies will be a new foundation of criteria for naming annual A-B-C Teams, as well as an innovative new methodology for inviting and managing athletes into the alpine development program. Key changes will include:

- Refine U.S. Ski Team programming to focus on winning medals with selection criteria specifically focused on athletes who are on track to win medals.
- Shift from a national-managed D team to a shared elite development model between U.S. Ski & Snowboard and clubs.
- Work with the regions and clubs to create a deeper pool of elite-developing athletes from 12-20 years-old.
- Direct resources towards high-level coaching expertise as well as club and coach education.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

A small working group of Project 26 collected data through interviews with experts for more than 18 months, then analysed the data. The alpine development staff spent eight months processing, debating and organizing the information. Dozens of coaches, world leaders, current and former world class achievers – Americans, Europeans and others – were interviewed, surveyed and consulted. Factual results and rankings data spanning the past 20 years were collected and analyzed with countless theories tested, regressions determined, and statistical understandings achieved.

This objective data analysis has been invaluable for shaping future policies regarding athlete selection and support. Disciples of Michael Lewis and his 2003 book, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, will attest to the power of statistics and objective markers, where available, over the subjectivity of scouting, for predicting future success based upon past performance. Rigorous analysis of past results and performance data trumps memory and subjective opinion every time. There will always be a need for subjective decision-making based upon opinion and experience, but statistical evidence provides the most valid basis for allocating resources for athlete development.

Along with this informative body of research, an introspective review of the U.S. Ski Team goals and objectives was needed.

## ***Objective of the U.S. Ski & Snowboard National Teams***

The objective of national teams is simple: world level podiums. This goal aligns with U.S. Ski & Snowboard's overall organizational vision of being best in the world. In keeping with that objective, national teams should be comprised of athletes headed toward podiums.

However, at the same time, there is also room for and a need for those who are helping others who are more likely to become contenders. Progression is clearly the key. An athlete gets to the top of the world through steady progress up the pipeline.

It is often heard that Americans are outliers or late bloomers. But analysis shows that over the past 20 years this simply has not been the case. All of the recent American medal contenders and podium level athletes have hit objective benchmarks consistently from the age of 19 for men and 16 for women. (The research shows that women typically develop one to three years earlier than men.) This means that athletes must be ranked well within the performance band, but also hitting tell-tale markers by a certain age. These markers include winning a NorAm title, medaling at World Juniors, scoring World Cup points, landing on the podium or establishing a top-15 world rank. All of the recent U.S. podium potential athletes have hit the majority of these markers, if not all of them, by a consistent age. It's possible to remain open to outliers and late bloomers by creating a more flexible system, but the primary focus needs to be getting more athletes to achieve these milestones.

Only a rare few make huge, rapid leaps. They exist, and their names are well known, but the proven, successful path is steady progression. So, what should be done with those who stall along the way? Most national teams have many of them. If they are becoming statistical dark horses, are they kept on teams? It depends upon where they stall, and their achievements prior to the plateau. This is where subjective judgments from coaches, who can evaluate whether they are helping others on the progression track, will matter. Helping others means providing pace, mentoring others, providing social and moral support, and enabling high performance within the team. If team size and available resources allow, it may make sense to keep some of these individuals on the team. Sometimes they do beat the diminishing odds, progress and achieve podiums.

Again, the purpose of the national teams is to win podiums. U.S. Ski & Snowboard is part of a professional sports league aiming to be the best in the world. The organization supports all who try to achieve that dream by carrying the athletes who are most likely to succeed and by encouraging all others within all leagues, from NorAm on down - including their clubs, academies, parents and coaches. The United States has a winning tradition and is absolutely committed to growing that tradition!

Currently, U.S. Ski & Snowboard has few athletes who would be a medal threat in 2026. The organization must improve its development ranks with more podium-potential athletes to achieve its vision and goals. The current report card, by any measure, is not as promising as it must be to be best in the world. U.S. Ski & Snowboard needs to improve its prospects with more top-level contenders. How does it get there?

### **Retrospective Review, Learnings and Moving Forward**

A close look at the development system's success over the last 10 years reveals that the U.S. Ski Team failed to advance athletes from the D-Team to the A-Team at a significant and desirable rate. The team focused too heavily on early-age talent identification and recruitment into a restricted development pool. The problem is that some champions, and especially women, are easily identified early, while others, especially men, are not as easily identified at a young age. The development system must allow the very best to advance quickly to the national team while encouraging the continuation of talent development among all other athletes. A successful system will promote potential champions to the U.S. Ski Team once they have achieved domestic and international milestones, and otherwise maintain a deep pool of elite-developing athletes from 12-20 years old. Development programming will be embedded within the clubs, ("clubs" includes all clubs, academies, universities and colleges), making access to pace and talent more readily available in multiple home programs. Dispersed, but well-informed and directed, high-quality programming is central to collective success.

#### **Primary Goals**

1. Train and advance future Olympic and World Cup champions
2. Build and maintain a deeper pool of elite-level developing athletes
3. Educate clubs, coaches, parents, and athletes about athletic development

## Key Principles

1. Porosity: regardless of team status, athletes will move up or down freely from their “home” series, but only as performance indicates
2. The American way: European exposure must be used strategically for access to pace; NorAm circuit must be strong, and used strategically to improve points and start order
3. Keeping athletes closer to home, for longer, will help to mitigate travel cost
4. Tenure: outstanding performance relative to key markers will be rewarded with a multi-year commitment from the team, which will allow for better long-term athlete management
5. Winning at every level: athletes will focus on a “home” series where they are targeting podiums and titles
6. Coaching excellence at all levels: a commitment will be made to staffing and funding World Cup level coaches at all levels of the elite pipeline
7. Technical proficiency: a minimum level of achievement in SL or GS is essential for long term success in any event. Athletes qualifying on speed ranks must also meet specified tech markers.
8. Communication between U.S. Ski Team staff and partner clubs will be improved and increased to enhance a distributed development model
9. The most promising athletes will receive a higher percentage of funding support
10. Programmatic resources will be reallocated to develop athletes at a more effective rate
11. Objective criteria will guide the vision of the National Team
12. Discretion will be used judiciously for flexibility to fill in gaps and optimize specific athletic situations
13. The U.S. Ski Team will coordinate with athletes and their clubs, academies, colleges or universities
14. U.S. Ski & Snowboard recognizes that attending and skiing for a college or university, before and even during membership on the U.S. Ski Team is a viable pathway to success, as Americans, Canadians and Norwegians have shown

In order to optimize resource allocation and commit to developing future champions, levels of U.S. Ski Team programming must be tightened and more clearly defined. Under the new refined structure, three levels will be defined by the target series of competition where the athletes are aiming to achieve podiums, win titles and advance to the next higher level:

- A Team: World Cup athletes ranked in the Top-15, focused on WC podiums, OWG & WSC medals
- B Team: Athletes focused on scoring WC points, with Europa Cup podiums and NorAm wins to lower FIS point profile
- C Team: NorAm Cup Athletes focused on NorAm podiums and titles

### **New Development Structure Below National Team**

Beneath the three national team levels, a new D Team structure will be created. The goal at this level is to move athletes to the upper levels of the USST with greater frequency. To accomplish this, more attention will be paid to the full scope of a young person's needs: athletic, academic and social. For that reason, moving forward, athletes at the D Team level will remain under the full-time management of their club, academy, college or university program until they have emerged as legitimate NorAm level competitors who are ready to compete for podiums and titles at that level. Both the clubs and the U.S. Ski Team will share responsibility for advancing athletes to the next level in an embedded model.

A suite of elite-level national project opportunities will be offered to aggregate the highest performers (D-Team named and invited), stimulate competition, and increase exposure to exceptional environments. These projects will have clear development content with deliberate progressions and step-by-step goals. They will also incorporate close communication and collaboration with the athlete's home coach and a coordinated approach to athlete management.

The goal of the D Team program will be top-15 NorAm results, increased exposure to Europe, and advancement to the C Team

### **Deeper Pool of Emerging Elite Athletes**

A secondary goal of the new development structure will be building and maintaining a deeper pool of emerging elite level athletes. Athletes below the D Team will be part of named regional teams. They will receive more limited national and regional project exposure in a fluid system that will promote vertical crossover between club, regional, and national programming, depending on the athlete's achievements and needs. The athletes in this pool will fall under a normal distribution of ages ranging from U14 to U21, with peak focus on the U16 and U19 age groups. The primary goals in this space will be to expose top athletes to one another regionally and nationally, increase the quality and intensity of their training environments, reinforce fundamental skill development, and promote advancement to the D-Team.

### **Sport Education**

A third goal of the new structure will be for U.S. Ski & Snowboard to reinvest in sport education. With a tighter and more-advanced National Team, clubs will be asked to prepare athletes for a higher level than has been expected in recent years. As such, it will be vitally important for clubs to develop their athletes under a similar set of guiding principles at each age level to ensure long-term success on the national team and at elite levels of competition. To that end, the U.S. Ski Team must help infuse clubs, coaches, parents, and athletes with current and consistent education on general athletic development and Alpine-specific requirements.

Additionally, the U.S. Ski & Snowboard High Performance department will provide clubs with physical conditioning standards and best practices education to ensure project invitees are prepared to meet age- appropriate benchmarks on and off snow. In turn, the overwhelming benefit will be that athletes can remain close to home and still receive steady exposure to high-quality long-term athletic development programming in line with the best in the world.