

Technical Opinions Can Be Confusing

By Susan Ellis

Putting your hand on the ice slows you down because of friction. Putting your hand on the ice can add speed because of the lean.

You can never sit too low. There is a point where you can be too low.

Pennington blades are better than Maple because they flex less. Maple blades are better than Pennington because they have more flex.

Sharpening with a diamond stone is better than a stone because it cuts better.

Sharpening with a stone is better than using a diamond stone because a diamond cuts too much.

Always deburr your blades after using the coarse side. You don't need to deburr until after using the fine side.

ARE YOU CONFUSED YET?

It's no wonder skaters sometimes get confused about what to do. Especially if there is more than one opinion involved.

Skating has changed drastically in the last 25 years and, as with all new things, so must the way we do it. One of the biggest changes has been in boot technology, followed by blade technology, as well as training methodology. So today's skaters are going a whole lot faster than yesterday's. And it's up to coaches and athletes to find a way to keep up with changing times by finding new ways to do things.

As I travel to different camps around North America and introduce the Ellis Method, one of the first statements I hear is "Oh god, I've been doing it wrong all these years." This is usually one response to bringing the pressure to the ball of the foot to push rather than pushing from the heel. No, you haven't been doing it wrong all these years! You have been doing what skaters for decades were taught to do, myself included. The stiffer boot changed that technique though, and maybe you're just now hearing of it. It wasn't wrong, it was a technique we had to use with the old leather boots, that's all.

Part of the great thing about doing so many camps in various places is that I am always given an opportunity to learn something new from the skaters I am teaching. Ya, I know, you guys pay me to teach you when really you are teaching me.

One of the best courses I ever took was from Istvan Balyi. He started the course by asking us all to have an open mind and be prepared to break down many of the paradigms we have had in regards to training methodology. Skating training at the time followed a rather traditional method of periodization and application. Istvan blew the socks off of me. I incorporated much of what I had learned into a new training program and it worked. Whew! Charles Poliquin's course on strength training totally changed my thinking on weight training, and his methods worked too, despite his doubters.

There are always different opinions, evolving information, old ideas reworked a different way. And it's up to us as coaches to be open and questioning why it works, how it works, whom will it work for and then pass that information on to our athletes.

By the same token an athlete may have heard another opinion from a different coach, and they tried it, and it worked, and now they have to find a way to tell the coach about it, without being afraid the coach will be angry or think them defiant. Our job as coaches is to ask the athlete what they have learned from others, why it works for them, how it works, and observe them to either learn from it yourself and/or help the athlete understand it better.

One of the first things we have athletes experience at our camps is the concept of forward momentum and bringing the weight forward to the ball of the foot. It is much easier to feel this in a higher than normal position. One of the biggest dilemmas though is breaking down the 'get low' paradigm. Many athletes immediately try to do the drills in too low a position and have trouble experiencing the full sensation of forward momentum until they finally rise up a bit. Later in the camp we will take them down to their ideal skating position, which may be somewhat different from what they have learned in the past. For some it is a higher position, for some it is lower, some have learned to better use their ankles which makes them feel lower, and for some a simple chest adjustment or a butt tuck can make all the difference in the world to the feelings of power the athlete has skating. We always send the athlete away with instructions on how to explain changes to their coaches or have the coaches contact us if they have any questions. Some do, some don't. A very few discount what we, or any other coach for that matter, might tell an athlete. How unfortunate for both the coach and the athlete. The majority, though, are very receptive and eager to share ideas. These are the people I learn from as well. If we never question why, we will never know why not.

One coach told me that a few athletes came away from a camp confused. I asked what the athletes were confused about and the coach wouldn't tell me. I asked who the athletes were and again the coach wouldn't tell me. This same coach was overheard telling someone they didn't agree with some things in the Ellis Method but wouldn't be specific. No wonder the poor athletes were confused!

Thank goodness there are those out there who are willing to help all of us grow and learn, discuss, debate, question, and experiment. Differences of opinion are good. Otherwise we too would be stuck back in our own little paradigm and sitting back on our heels just as we were 40 years ago.

It's up to coaches to get as much different information as possible, pass it on to the athletes and help the athletes to feel comfortable with different opinions. In the end, it's up to the athlete to go with what works best for them.