



PARENTING FOR SUCCESS

Winter Sport Parent Information

UNDERSTANDING ALPINE POINTS



Jon Wade photo

About the “dart throwing” approach to lowering points:

With the two lowest race results making up the skier's points, many athletes, parents and even coaches make the mistake of thinking “the more races my child goes to, the better chance they have to earn a good point result.” However, from a skill development standpoint, racers who do so spend less time skiing and more time waiting or sitting in the lodge on race day. They are getting much less practice! The racer that “chases races” is essentially throwing lots of darts, trying to hit the bullseye twice. The racer that focuses on more training volume essentially is moving themselves closer to the dartboard every race. Would you rather have 20 chances at the bullseye from 20 feet away, or have 10 chances, but you get to stand 10 feet closer to the dartboard? Which will be better on your pocketbook? Which will be better for your child's psyche? Which will better prepare them for long-term success?

How many darts does it take to find the bullseye? In the case of Mikaela Shiffrin, at age 14, it was eleven. Just eleven race starts, with a train to race ratio of 12 to 1! It was impressive that even at this young age she understood the benefit of practicing more, and was supported by her coaches and parents. Now when she throws a dart, it's like she's standing only one foot away!

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This article is to help parents of alpine ski racers better understand the USSA and FIS points system used to seed and rank racers. Racers become eligible to earn USSA points at select races starting at U14 in the Rocky Mountain Division. USSA points are the primary method for seeding at U16 races. U19 and older racers can earn FIS (international) points at certain events.

A USSA race result is made up of two numbers: the penalty and race points. The race penalty is based on the points of the best five skiers in the race averaged with the five skiers finishing in the top ten who have the lowest points, and adjusted based on how far they are behind the winner. The race points are a calculation based on the skier's time, how far they are behind the winner, and how long the course is. In simple terms, if you race with good racers and finish close to the winner, you should get a good result.

The racer's USSA points at any given time are an average of their best two point results per discipline, earned within the past year. They are not updated after every race. New points lists are generated every three weeks during the season. A new racer starts with 999.99 points and the best racer has zero points. Racers try to lower their points through the years.

When looking for the best races to get a good result, many focus too much on the penalty. In reality, the race points are usually the more important factor. It makes athletic sense, too. To make gains, choose races where your ability matches more closely with the leaders. Some racers and parents arrive at a race and are disappointed because of the high penalty, not realizing that if they ski their fastest they will have very low race points and may earn an excellent point result.

While it's helpful to understand the point system, parents, and their children, must not focus on points as their point result is not something they have full control over. Some races are easier to score points in than others. The kids can ski great and not get a point result, or they might ski poorly and get a good point result. Recognizing this, USSA tends to use methods other than USSA points for selections. For qualification to events like Junior Championships, only results from certain events are counted. This makes it easier for coaches to plan a schedule with quality training blocks before important races. When families add races with the goal of lowering points, these good training blocks can be compromised and the racer is less prepared for the races that count toward qualification.

Since only two races make up the skier's point profile, racers can quickly improve their points, even with few race starts. Except for in the most difficult snow conditions, extra training time aimed at making a skier stronger will more than compensate for a poorer short-term start position because others raced more often. The best racers do not worry about their points. USSA undertook a massive study of points and found that in the junior years, USSA and FIS point rankings do not correlate very closely with future performance. Points alone are not good predictors of potential until the college years. Top ranked skiers do not always stay that way, and racers often come from the middle of the pack to become top performers.

After arming you with some good knowledge about points, we leave you with an important ski race parenting tip: do not talk numbers with your ski racer. Their rank should not matter in your eyes. Recognize their effort, their preparation, their attitude and the things they have control over that will lead them to those good numbers in due time.