

# STOP BEING SO DEFENSIVE!

How do you move from being a competent off-piste skier to an inspirational one?

Mark Jones explains the tactics and mindset required.

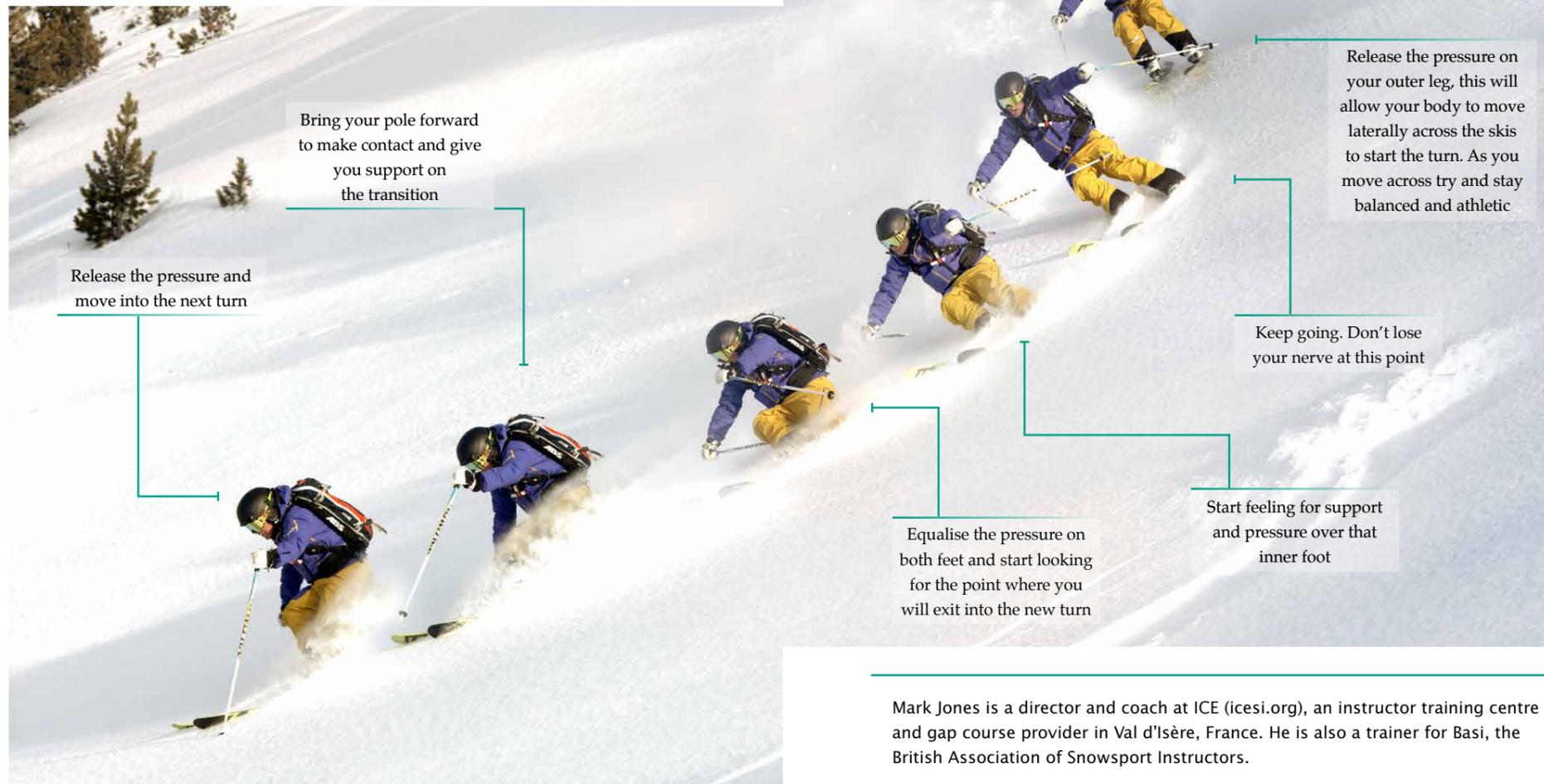
Many skiers who love their off-piste get to the point where they can link short turns at a constant speed down most slopes, then use this technique to bag as many different off-piste routes as possible. However, if you watch high-level skiers this is not how they ski the mountain. They look fast, flowing and playful, working with the terrain and conditions, rather than battling down it, fixated with the shape and number of turns they made. This is the difference between pros and the public.

To make the step up requires a new approach, a different mindset and the motivation to try new feelings in familiar surroundings. There are some new sensations that you need to take on board, and before doing that you need to ask yourself a few questions.

**CAN YOU HANDLE SPEED?** This doesn't mean you have to be capable of going hell for leather. But it does mean you can handle the sort of speeds that you would use on a nice, open groomed run — if the conditions allow you to do so safely. This takes practice and merits spending a bit of time building up to bigger speeds and larger turns.

**ARE YOU BALANCED?** This is important. You have to be effectively balanced most of the time before you can go for this type of skiing. This means you normally ski in an athletic stance, with your joints flexed, arms forward and have the ability to constantly vary your stance width. Crucially, your weight also needs to be centred over the middle of your feet.

If you're at a skiing level where you are ready to make changes, the key techniques you need are movement, controlling speed and smearing.



## MOVEMENT

The biggest difference is the basic movement you put your body through. For shorter turns directly down the hill, there will be a lot of rotary movements made with the legs, so you feel you are twisting them from one direction to another.

For these new, faster and more powerful turns the main movement is lateral. This means it feels like your legs and body are toppling sideways, which is incredibly important. Essentially you are trying to make the same sort of moves you make when carving on piste. This means that there is no forceful twisting of the body and legs into the new direction, instead they move sideways and this causes the skis to turn. This should feel like a really easy move to make at the end of the old turn.

The downside is that it takes confidence and the natural tendency is to think that you are going to topple over your skis. Trust me, you will not fall over — it

will immediately take you in a new direction. Once this happens and you move through to the end of the turn you will need to rely on both feet to support you, rather than just the outside foot. Because of the depth of snow there is much less of a stable platform underfoot, so pressure has to be shared between both feet. If all the pressure is on the outside foot it's much harder to balance because the outer ski will sink and be unstable.

## CONTROLLING SPEED

Before the advent of rocker in skis, this could all go horribly wrong when you needed to slow down. The profile of these older skis meant the best way out of trouble was to reduce speed by making a massive turn uphill, which was fine as long as there were no trees, rocks or people about.

Controlling speed by finishing off the end of the turn is still your main method, however with new rockered skis there is another dimension of speed control that can be opened up.

## SMEARING

With rocker you can pivot and twist the ski really easily, even when you're going fast. This is fantastic news for the skier who needs quick deceleration. When you're in trouble, all that is needed is a quick twist of the skis. Once that is done they will instantly brush off speed and allow the skier to regain control, normally with the added bonus of plumes of snow billowing over your head. It's called 'smearing' and, as well as working really effectively, it is brilliant fun and gives your run even more of a wow factor.

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## THE BEST SKIERS ARE ALWAYS TACTICIANS

Changing your mindset and tactics can be seriously underrated, but these two factors will make more of a difference to your performance than focusing purely on technique.

You need to look at the mountain in a different way. What sort of terrain is out there? Are there large banks, roll-overs or drop offs? In fact, is there anything you can use to help ride out the turns, keep your speed up and essentially flow down the mountain and play

with these features? Thinking this way really opens up what freeride skiing is all about and allows you to use these skis to do what they were designed to do. Open up your turn shape, use large arcs, rely on the sidecut of the ski rather than forcing the turn. Once you have got used to the speed, you will find it's far less effort and if anything feels far more natural than banging out a series of short turns.

When skiing off-piste, there are many

times where it's good practice to stick to a set line, minimising the space you use on the mountain and keeping a tight handle on what's going on.

However, it's very easy to be sucked into skiing like this all the time, even when the conditions don't warrant it. Ski safe, but ride hard. Push it when you can, hold back when you have to. And above all treat each new pitch as a clean slate and work out a beautiful way to use it.

# BEWARE WHAT LURKS BENEATH

In the first of a new series, **HENRY SCHNIEWIND** reveals how to spot the dangers that lie hidden even just a few metres from the piste.



snow from above often reveals itself to be a sea of snow-capped rocks or stumps from below.

**Tree roots** hold an added danger for the unsuspecting skier. If your tip passes under one, your bindings are unlikely to release so, while you won't be thrown head first, the risk of a joint injury is that much greater. As with rocks and stumps, the danger is higher early in the season, when it is worth avoiding forests.

**Fencing wire** is what you fail to see in those beautiful photos of wooden posts dotting snow covered pastures — but the wire is there! I am constantly on the look out for the posts that tell me there may be tripwire in between.

**Streams** and other unexpected drop-offs can be dangerous. Yellow or orange goggles can help in flat light, but you need to keep them scratch-free. As soon as they get scuffed they lose much of their efficiency.

In general, if you suspect the cover is thin, imagine that each irregular bump you see in the snow could be an obstacle. And try to keep your weight distributed on both skis. Perhaps most importantly reduce your speed to about 30 per cent of your pace on piste. This gives you more time to see obstacles and any trip-up will be much less violent.

Off-piste accidents attract a lot of attention, and when Michael Schumacher was gravely injured in Méribel last season, media coverage reached a crescendo. Initially we heard he was off-piste without a guide, conjuring images of recklessness in remote locations, but then television images revealed he was metres from the piste, and had probably hit a hidden rock at speed.

Avalanches do claim lives off-piste, but a large percentage of off-piste accidents happen within view of a lift or piste, when people hit rocks or tree trunks under the snow. Even when you are just a few centimetres off the marked runs, you are in an unsecured area, where there is no requirement to mark obstacles, warn you of dangers, or protect you from avalanches.

Avoiding hazards in these areas can be simple, yet every year, I hear of skiers who twist knees, tear ligaments and rupture Achilles tendons due to obstacles lurking under thin snow cover. Schumacher's accident in December emphasises how important it is to be conscious of obstacles under the snow, especially at the beginning of the season or whenever the cover is thin. Here are some common obstacles and how to avoid them.

**Rocks** are the worst offenders. Because they are so hard, they are most likely to force your skis to release, sending you flying head first towards a head injury. Remember, rocks are social beings — where you see one, there are often many more lurking close by, so give the whole area a wide berth. Sometimes your skis don't release when you hit a rock and this is when you risk injury to ligaments and tendons.

**Tree stumps** can, like rocks, grab your ski and send you flying or divert your ski from the tip very quickly — twisting your leg and knee in the process. As with rocks, they tend to be clustered in one place. A good tip is to check an area of off-piste from a run below it or from a chairlift before you attempt it. What may appear to be a pristine patch of white

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## AVALANCHE AWARENESS TALKS

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 The Ski Club, in association with Ortovox, Henry's Avalanche Talk, Ellis Brigham and Val d'Isère, is running avalanche awareness talks on the following dates:

### OCTOBER

29 — Essentials Talk, Ellis Brigham, Manchester

30 — Advanced Talk, Ellis Brigham, Manchester

### NOVEMBER

4 — Essentials Talk, Ellis Brigham, Covent Garden

5 — Advanced Talk, Ellis Brigham, Covent Garden

6 — Essentials Talk, King's Arms, next to Ellis Brigham, Bristol

10 — Advanced Talk, King's Arms, next to Ellis Brigham, Bristol

12 — Essentials Talk, Ellis Brigham, London St Paul's

19 — Essentials Talk, Ellis Brigham, Cambridge

20 — Advanced Talk, Ellis Brigham, Cambridge

The cost is £12 per ticket, but Ski Club members can get a discount of £2. To find out more visit [henrysavalanchetalk.com](http://henrysavalanchetalk.com) or [HenryOffPiste.com](http://HenryOffPiste.com)