

Understanding the Dichotomy of Performance and Results



Performance and results are two related but distinctly different things. Many athletes have suffered in their development by thinking performance and results are synonymous. The word performance stems from a verb. Result is a noun. Performance as described in this document is an action. A result is an outcome. Performance is one of the variables that affect an athlete's result. But in skiing and snowboarding in particular, the significance of the performance variable on outcome can be overshadowed by other factors out of the athlete's control. Here is where the danger lies in considering the two as being the same. Of course, results will determine who gets the medals, who gets selected to the championships, and usually who gets the glory and recognition. For this reason, understandably, an enormous amount of attention is paid to results by athletes, their parents, and coaches. The problem is, the athlete doesn't have control over their results.

On the other hand, an athlete has much more control over their performance. U.S. Men's Alpine Head Coach Sasha Rearick defines performance as on-demand execution of what has been learned. Performance can be worked on and evaluated in training, not just in competition, with the support of coaches and parents. Performance can be improved upon. Good performance will lead to good results over time.

Performance is
execution on-
demand of what
you've learned.

This distinction is vitally important because most young athletes, and even many experienced competitors, tie their self-worth to their results. As such, they may be very pleased when their performance was actually subpar, or very disappointed when their performance was actually at its peak, due to outside factors which they may not be aware of. These reactions, and their impact on motivation, confidence, and approach to future training and races, may be exactly opposite of what is desirable from a developmental standpoint.

The athlete who is able to focus entirely on their performance is more likely to follow a consistent progression in their development. This is because day-to-day changes in performance are usually less drastic than those in results, and reacting to things within the athlete's control enables them to make appropriate adjustments based on each performance. Furthermore, as an athlete that is focused on performance sees a discrepancy between their performance and their result (for example, poor result relative to performance), they will be more likely to try to figure out why and learn strategies to help bridge the gap. In the process, they devise methods to better cope with certain factors effecting results that are outside of their control, leading to improved performance and a greater likelihood that performance and results will match up in the future. This is one of the unique qualities of champions, and one that can only be obtained by understanding the results versus performance relationship.

Bode Miller was a classic example at Whistler for the Olympics. You may recall at the end of each run he



took, just after crossing the finish line and before looking to the scoreboard or assessing the reaction of the crowd, he stood up straight, reflected on his performance in his run to himself, and reacted to his own appraisal of how well he executed on his run. It didn't matter what the scoreboard said. After his races he spoke of his satisfaction in how he skied and that he would have been pleased with his performance whether or not he had medaled because he skied how he wanted to ski. One of the factors contributing to his success in Whistler lies in his focus on performance for those days, rather than an obsession with the result.

How can one remain appropriately centered on performance in the face of intense pressure? It is essential to face training and competition with a plan. Note that training with a plan makes competing with a plan more natural and the plan has a greater chance for success. With a plan, the skill of attentional focus keeps the athlete thinking about the right things to lead to peak performance. Hannah Kearney was a prime example of both of these in her Olympic mogul run at Vancouver. As she stood in the start, Canadian Jennifer Heil, the race favorite and Canada's greatest hope for a first ever Olympic gold on home soil, laid down a stellar run to take the lead. Hannah had a couple choices. She could ski aggressively for the win, or play it safer and shoot for a podium spot. At the moment, there was no decision. Hannah had already made her decision, she was prepared ahead of time that her plan was to go for the gold medal and not settle for silver, so Heil's result did not have an impact. She rehearsed ahead how she would react to this scenario. During her run, she said her skiing felt automatic, but in fact she had deliberate focus on a simple technical cue – a focus on her hands. This simple, centering focus helped her keep the distraction around her out, and effectively made her skiing automatic. She performed flawlessly, earning the United States its first gold medal of the games, and kicking off a wave of momentum that led to a record USSA medal haul.

Preparation is the essential ingredient that brings performance and results closer together. Often the mistake made with a results focus is that the athlete, coach, or parent expects that a result is possible that would require a performance the athlete has never achieved before. It is not possible to perform above one's ability. The goal, rather, is to consistently compete at the top of one's ability. In pressure situations, we often see some athletes have a breakthrough performance, such as Andrew Weibrecht's bronze medal run in the Olympic super G, and other athletes fail to meet expectations. Andrew's result was not because he did things in his run he had never done





before. Instead, he likely performed closer to his peak than he ever had before. Ironically, earlier in the season he made the following observation. "The last couple days I've figured out that my skiing is there and I don't need to try to do anything fancy or special. I just have to ski within myself and it will all come together. It's nice to know I don't have to totally shoot the moon to have the results that I need." So on the biggest stage in his life, he had an understanding he had done the preparation and simply needed to perform at the top of his ability. Bill Demong made a similar

comment following his performance that earned the U.S. its first ever gold medal in Nordic combined. He said, "the really great thing about these Olympics is that we knew we only had to execute to medal, we didn't need to do anything special or beyond what we'd already done." When Demong refers to "what we'd already done", he was referring to preparation and performance in training that he knew could be taken into competition. Same reason Weibrecht was able to put things together for the best result he'd ever achieved at the elite level. Both athletes, because of their preparation, had the confidence they would perform well by doing what they knew.

These stories are all examples where performance and results were in line with each other. While we've talked about how results and performance are distinctly different, the goal is to make them match up. The reality is that this takes years of practice, both sport-specific technical and tactics training and focused mental skills training. We cannot expect junior athlete's results to consistently fall in line with their performances. Just as the Alpine Training System emphasizes process over outcome goals through phase four, the young athlete, coach and parent need to emphasize performance over results. Through this period, we should be asking "how well did you perform today" not "how were your results today". Then, as athletes move into phase 5 and 6, we need to spend extra time with performance planning, mental rehearsal routines, and strategies to help bridge the gap between the two. Ultimately, we all set out to improve performance. The fact that every athlete in sport is capable of improving on their performance is one of the things that makes competitive sport so captivating and rewarding.

Article written by Jon Nolting, USSA Sport Education Director. Photos by Getty Images.



Shaun White showed the world it is not just about results on the Olympic half-pipe at Cypress Mountain. He had already sealed victory before he began his second run. He could have simply slid down the center of the pipe to receive his gold. But he came to the Olympics to perform. He went all out in his second run, pulling off his new signature Double McTwist 1260, delighting the crowd and adding to his score. Could he have done it if the pressure was on? We could speculate, but having taken this opportunity he certainly increased the odds that he will successfully pull off the big time air the next time the stakes are high.

