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# GET YOUR FREE HAND INTO THE GAME

WHETHER YOU ARE RIDING A SLALOM, A TRICK SKI OR JUST YOUR BARE FEET, YOU USUALLY HAVE BOTH HANDS ON THE HANDLE. HOWEVER, IN EACH OF THESE DISCIPLINES, ONE HAND COMES OFF THE HANDLE FOR A BRIEF MOMENT.

It may not seem that a slalom turn at a buoy and a 180 trick or barefoot back to front are at all similar. Obviously there are differences. Barefoot speeds are faster, slalom skiers change direction and trick skiers turn. But skiers in each discipline can benefit from a simple technique during that brief period when the one hand is free.

Skiers typically focus on the hand and arm still on the handle, since it is momentarily absorbing all the pull. All the concentration is centered on making the slalom turn or the 180 turn. You may even "go blank" for a second, disconnecting from the proper technique needed to complete the turn. But just because the other hand is free of the handle, perhaps stretching out lazily behind the skier, doesn't mean it's free to do its own thing. The first step toward bringing your free hand into the game is to become aware of what it is currently doing. Pay attention to its position when it is off the handle. Having a friend record you on video or

in still photos will help you visualize this more objectively. Is it aimlessly falling away from your body? Are you rushing to regrab the handle?

Now that you are aware of your free hand, it's time to start using it to your advantage. Even though it is off the handle, it has a significant effect on your control of the line.

My many years of competing and coaching have convinced me that this is equally true in all three disciplines.

While it is natural to think of immediately going for the handle again, this can actually lead to problems. Reaching to get the handle before the turn is complete actually forces your hips back and puts you farther from the handle. In slalom, this puts your weight on your heels at the end of the turn, causing the tip to rise, which slows down the turn. Or, if the reach for the handle is significant and early in the turn, it will cause you to complete the turn bent at the waist, putting you in a weak position to go for the next buoy.

The same is true in tricks and barefoot, especially since surface area is reduced. Reaching for the handle at the release takes your shoulders off level and puts your hips back.

So how do you get your free hand into the game? When initiating a slalom turn or a trick or barefoot back to front, simply place your free hand in an open-handed position near the hip. The key is to keep the free hand near the body's core as you complete the turn. This will enhance your balance and provide a more efficient and precise turn. You will find that as you complete the turn, your hand will turn right into the handle. All you need to do is grasp it again. Keeping the free hand near the hip will also keep your head and shoulders better balanced and keep your hips over your feet and ankles during the turn.

This is not technically difficult, but it does take practice to develop the mental discipline not to reach for the handle prematurely, and to stay quiet with your free hand. This can be easier said than done. There is a natural anxiousness to get that hand back on the handle. Patience is required, but will be rewarded with snappy, efficient slalom or back to front 180 turns.

Sometimes, slalom skiers and trickers will work the free hand but do too much. In slalom, they may have the free hand near the body, but high, at chest or shoulder height, with the arm quite tense. Instead, keep the free hand near the hip, quite relaxed, with elbow slightly bent.

The free hand is at the hip waiting for the handle. Think economy of movement to develop great technique.

Trickers sometimes release the handle with their free hand falling away and reaching far around their body. This slows the turn. This expends unnecessary effort. So make it simple. Just release the handle and put the free open hand near the hip as you rotate from back to front. This also keeps your arms from getting stretched out in front of you – a common mistake for novice trickers.

As you work to develop this technique, it may be useful to learn it in one of the disciplines that is not your primary one. If you primarily slalom, for example, try this technique in a trick set, where your less-than-ideal habits may be less ingrained. Barefooters can slow things down and increase understanding by crossing over into tricks. Not only will you gain a greater





awareness of your free hand, you will have the fun of breaking up your training. I know that for me, competing and coaching in slalom, tricks and barefoot has given me a greater appreciation of the sport, and a growing awareness of the similarities in technique between disciplines.

Pretty soon, keeping the handle close to your hip and being patient will become more natural. Your free hand is there to help, not just along for the ride.

Put it to good use; let it make a positive contribution. In short, get your free hand into the game. It will make you a better skier.

BIO: Zenon Bilas is a seven-time US National Barefoot Champion who trains in West Palm Beach, Florida. He has coached champions and conducted slalom, trick and barefoot clinics throughout the US and 16 countries.

For personalized coaching or a clinic, visit [www.zenonbilas.com](http://www.zenonbilas.com) for additional information.

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