



Guiding Visually Impaired Nordic Skiers

As a Nordic ski guide, your primary role is to provide the visually impaired (VI) athlete with support to safely partake in the sport, whether for recreation or for competition. Guides use verbal and/or visual cues to help guide the athlete on the trail. The guide's role will vary, depending on the athlete's level of vision and ski experience.

Getting to know the athlete

There is a wide range of visual impairments, and an athlete's needs will vary accordingly, so learn as much as you can before you ski.

Here are some helpful questions to ask when getting to know the athlete:

- Do you have any vision? If so, can you describe what you can see? Is it peripheral or tunnel vision?
- Is your vision affected by sun/shade/time of day?
- When did you lose your vision (you may need to describe things differently to someone who has been blind from birth versus someone who has lost vision recently).
- What is your ski/athletic experience? Have you worked with a guide before?
- Do you rely on verbal cues, or will you also use visual cues while skiing?
- Do you need any support off the trails? Examples: Getting from the car to the lodge, finding the restroom.

Establishing a communication system

The guide and athlete are a TEAM. Let the athlete know that you are there to support him/her; the more the athlete communicates his/her needs to you, the more helpful you can be. It is important to establish a communication system *before* getting on the trails (this includes whether you will be using a speaker/amplifier system).

Here are some things to consider:

- Does the athlete prefer verbal/word cues or just a repeated sound, such as "hup" as you ski?
- Do you need a "bail" or "emergency stop" word, and if so, what is that?
- How should you communicate directional changes?
- How does the skier want to communicate pace changes? Remember, the athlete is in charge!

Knowing the terrain

- The better you know the terrain, the more you can help guide your skier. This might mean showing up early to ski the course/trails ahead of time.
- Talk through the general course/trail profile beforehand, and make sure you both know the plan.
- Is there anything unique on that day that you would want the athlete to note? Examples: Icy conditions, fresh snow, flat light, crowded /busy trails.

On the trails

- The guide generally skis in front of the athlete, as close as possible without getting in the way.
- It will take time for you and your athlete to become comfortable with your communication system. Make sure to STOP if you or the athletes are uncomfortable.
- Communication is a constant process, so check in frequently with the athlete. What is working? What is not working? Do you need to communicate more? Less?
- Select appropriate terrain. Skiing shorter loops will help the athlete learn the terrain.
- Giving the athlete key words for distinctive parts of the course/trail will help the athlete learn the terrain. This might include major intersections, technical section, big hill, bridge, or the stadium.
- For downhills, the athlete may hold on to your pole for guidance. This is legal in racing, as long as the guide and skier are not propelling themselves forward while "holding."
- Practice trickier sections at low speeds (getting in and out of the tracks, holding, corners).