

Peculiarity and specifics of ski-training of 3 to 6-year-old children at Vitosha Nature Park

(translated into English by Galin Gechev)

Dear guests, colleagues, and friends of winter sports,

Vitosha Mountain is a priceless gift for the citizens of Sofia. It is one of the city's symbols and is an important part of the coat of arms of Sofia. Vitosha Nature Park is the first nature park in Bulgaria and on the Balkan Peninsula, which celebrated its 75th Anniversary last year. Vitosha is the only dome-shaped mountain in Bulgaria, fourth in height, one of the most meteorologically unpredictable mountains, but it is the most visited mountain, as well – between 3.5 and 5 billion tourists per year. Vitosha is an emblematic mountain for both Bulgarian tourism and Bulgarian skiing. It is a symbol of organized Bulgarian tourism and skiing.

Skis were purposefully used for the first time by a member of Tourist Association “Aleko” in 1903. In 1918 young tourists from Sofia established the first organized group of skiers that were trained on improvised ski-grounds at Vitosha and Liulin mountains by Krum Naumov – Kumata, who had graduated in Austria. Kumata used Lilien-Velder's system in ski-training – with a long stick in hands.

After World War II skiing in Bulgaria is characterized by its fast popularization. Ski-sport enters the educational system as whole classes and mandatory ski-courses are created for students. In 1965 is established the first ski-school in Bulgaria on tourist and ski-center Aleko at Vitosha Mountain. In 1978 starts the first organized ski-courses in kindergartens. The initiative is warmly accepted. As a result ski-clubs in Sofia and in the country start organizing and carrying out ski-courses for children from kindergartens on regular basis. Children's ski-training is accepted very well in Bulgaria. From 1986 to 1990 a national experiment is conducted by Ministry of Education and Bulgarian Tourist Union (BTU), which includes ski-training and tourism in kindergartens. Due to the positive effect, ski and tourist activities are incorporated in kindergartens' yearly study programs.

Between 1945 and 1990 ski-training is carried out on several places at Vitosha. In the northeastern part of the mountain mainly in the region of tourist and ski-center Aleko, at Sulzitsa hut, in the region of Goli vrah peak, and the area of Bai Krastyo; in the northwestern part ski-training is carried out in the region of Planinets hut, Tintyava hut, ski-center Vetrovala, ski-center Konyarnika, in the region of hotel Elitsa, and the area of Ofelii.

In the period after 1990 ski-training takes place mainly in two zones at Vitosha – in the northeastern part at tourist and ski-center Aleko, where most of the lifts and tracks are concentrated. There is located one of the best-lit tracks in Bulgaria for night-skiing – Vitoshko lale. In the northwestern part at ski-center Vetrovala, ski-center Ofelii, and the ski-track nearby hotel Elitsa.

Since 1992 ski-training has been carried out by private ski-schools. In year 2000 private ski-schools and sport-clubs at Vitosha united in Association of “Vitosha

ski and snowboard schools”. The Association has a main goal of development of social-tourism and winter sports among the youth. Nowadays 10 out of 11 ski and snowboard schools working at Vitosha Nature Park are members of the Association.

Specific peculiarities in ski-training of 3 to 6-year-old children at Vitosha

Vitosha has the great advantage of being right next to Sofia, which allows year-around visiting. In Sofia city there are 198 kindergartens and 180 schools that define the main target-groups of the ski and snowboard schools working at Vitosha – children and pupils. Each year between 8500 and 10 000 children and almost the same number of pupils learn how to ski. Consequently, goals of Association of “Vitosha ski and snowboard schools” and of its members are:

- Popularization and development of winter sports among children from Sofia’s schools and kindergartens
- Continuation and development (enrichment) of educational work with children in the mountain during winter
- Incorporating children of earliest age to systematical and purposeful ski-activities
- Organizing and carrying out a up-to-date and effective process of learning and improving ski-technique

Ski-training of 3 to 6-year-old children is a great responsibility that has been proudly taken by Vitosha ski and snowboard schools. There are some typical peculiarities:

- In organizational aspect:
 - Hard work to achieve goals of Association of “Vitosha ski and snowboard schools” and those of its members
 - Establishing a good organization for normal and effective learning process outside kindergartens.
 - Active preliminary work (discussions) with parents and directors of kindergartens
 - Additional preparation of the ski-instructors who are working mainly with children from kindergartens
 - Social engagement of Vitosha ski and snowboard schools by maintaining a relatively low prices
 - Cooperation with municipal and state institutions which are responsible for development and popularization of sports among the youth.
 - Ski-schools themselves play a key-role as a basis for mass ski sport
 - High-level of corporative-social responsibility – children of different social groups are educated for free (around 500 children per season)
- In methodical aspect:
 - Learning-programs are mainly targeted at 3 to 6-year-old children and are consistent with the learning-plan of Association “Bulgarian ski school”, pedagogical requirements and standards of Ministry of Education, as well as educational-plans of kindergartens themselves.

- About 95% of all attending children are in organized groups from Sofia's kindergartens
- Diverse forms of education that has proven throughout practice are used
- Developing a criteria for separation of children to their corresponding group for education – 4 groups, according to age (3.5, 4, 5, and 6-year-old)
- High-level of effectiveness of ski-training
- Tough requirements and responsibilities for the ski-instructors who work at Vitosha

The process of ski-training of children is specific and requires specialized knowledge and skills by the ski-instructor. We are not going to discuss in depth the theme of children's education as you all are familiar with it already. We would like to point out that our programs are developed by mixing the best aspects of world-leading ski-training programs for children. Throughout practice we assured ourselves that the model we have chosen is successful and effective. While developing a methodical program it is important to keep in mind the two different roles that the instructor has. They should inspire respect and in the same time to provoke understanding in the kid. In practice organizing the pedagogical influence is directed to ensure dynamical transitions in communication with children, according to their individual development and turning children's ski-zone in a center for cooperation between ski-instructors, children, parents, and teachers. **The method of demonstration** is the main approach in the process of learning and especially during the basic part of the lesson. At this age children's visual analyzer is much better developed than the hearing one, as a result explanation is at its minimum. Diverse approach is not always appropriate with our way of working because time is not enough, especially for kindergartens that take only one course per season, but parents are still looking for results. Some kindergartens take two or even three courses per season. This gives us the opportunity to redistribute members of different groups, especially after the third day when the so called "Olympic group" has been formed. The "Olympic group" consists of children who have some problems with coordination and it is harder for them to manage with the exercises. Ski-training such children requires lots of patience and specific pedagogical skills. Great percentage of the children redistributed into the "Olympic group" feels fear or just feel suppressed by being behind the others. Most of the difficulties that the youngest skiers face are rather on psychological than on physical basis. In order to overcome these problems and turn skiing into pleasure the ski-instructor has to be creative, patient and experienced. Usually "Olympians" who manage to overcome their restraints turn into real passionate skiers.

Typical peculiarity of carried out organized ski-training for children is the so called "Diaper group". It consists of 3 to 3.5-year-old children. Ski-training such children is extremely specific due to their physical and perceiving abilities being on a different level in comparison with older children. It is appropriate for them to be applied a specific program incorporating mainly game-type of activities without enormous physical tension. The goal of these activities is getting children used to the

unfamiliar ski-equipment, as well as to acclimatize them to the atmosphere conditions in the mountains during winter. In ski-training the “Diaper groups” ski-technique is presented throughout entertaining game-type situations without unnecessary terminology and explanations. Typical for this age group is that education starts in the kindergarten with information about the ski-equipment and specific imitating exercises, which help to overcome the difficulty of getting used to the equipment. Gradual and entertaining adaptation to circumstances in the mountain predisposes the child to seek with curiosity and desire new possibilities for games into the snow. Our most experienced ski-instructors work with the “Diaper groups”. At these groups is set the basis for relations between ski-instructor – child – parents. During the first two days with the “Diaper groups” we actively work to turn the ski-ground into a zone for cooperation between ski-instructors and children. This educational system turns out to be a great basis for the up-coming ski-lessons.

Typical forms of education set throughout our practice

1. Ski-training in the kindergarten

- in the study-room – lecture with imitating exercises: 1 hour per day for period of 3 days
- in the kindergarten’s yard and study-room: 2 hours per day for period of 5 days
 - a. **In the study-room** – twice per week with duration of 15 minutes for 3 to 3.5-year-old children, 20 minutes for 4-year-old children, and up to half an hour for 5 and 6-year-old children. The goal of these preparatory lessons is to get the children used to the ski-equipment, as well as basic info for the mountain during winter, for the climate and for the dangers in the mountain is presented. The advantage of this is the smooth transition from kindergarten to ski-track and easier overcoming of the problem with getting used to the unusual equipment and environment.
 - b. **In the kindergarten’s yard and study-room** – possible when certain conditions are present (snow and enough space). The advantage is that children take their first steps with the skis in the familiar environment of the kindergarten’s yard, where they feel safe and protected. The process is completely supervised by the ski-instructors. Introduction to ski-equipment, first tries to walk with skis on, turning around and etc. are much easier due to the calmness and comfort of the children being in a familiar environment. This has great influence upon their further understanding and attitude towards skiing.
 - i. 2 hours per day for period of 3 days – ski
 - ii. 2 hours per day for period of 5 days – ski + imitating exercises to develop their physical abilities
 - c. **In the mountain** – activities are carried out at Vitosha Nature Park – ski-center “Aleko” or at ski-center “Vetrovala”, and ski-center “Ofelii”. Possibilities are:
 - i. **Half a day** – three times per week for two hours per day

- ii. **Half a day** – five days in a row for two hours per day – this form is with tendency to drop out due to enormous loss of time in Sofia's heavy traffic.
- iii. **All day** – 4 hours per day for period of 5 days. This is the most successful and preferred form of education. It is carried out on the ski-track and is divided into two equal parts of two hours each. Between the parts there is a 45-60 minutes lunch break. This type of ski-training has set through practice and time to be with duration of 5 days. This form of ski-training predisposes children for considerable progress. Most of the children are able to get to snow plough turn, but some even manage to get to traversing. This educational form has been set as a model for kindergartens and schools in the capital. Percent of study-programs incorporate this model of ski-school. Regular courses throughout the season allow for many children to be set a concrete basis for up-coming systematical activities with ski-sport. This is the relative schedule for all day activities: 8:30-8:45 leaving from the kindergarten. Traveling to the mountain takes about an hour. Ski-training from 10:15 to 12:15h and from 13:00 to 15:00h. Lunch-break is from 12:15 to 13:00h. Getting back to Sofia is up to 17:00h
- iv. **Sport improvement** –
 - 1. once per week for 4 hours per day
 - 2. twice per week for 4 hours per day
 This form of ski-training is only for children with outstanding interest and abilities in skiing. In this case trainings have a goal of achieving high-level of ski-technique and theoretical preparation.
- v. **Sport camps** – this form of ski-training is for children with qualities and parents, who would like their children to be actively developing in ski-sport. Carrying out such an event requires sport preparation in depth for the different disciplines. Programs are preliminary developed in accordance with the goals that the young skiers have to achieve. The purposefulness of the trainings predisposes improving certain elements and developing qualities. Intensity of the activities is definitely higher. Focus is on elements with synchronized skiing in group (formation). Trainers who are responsible for fulfilling the methods while ski-training is carried out in kindergartens make selection of promising young skiers.

The effect of ski-training is much higher when purposeful exercises are applied at suitable terrain in order to achieve a certain goal. Different terrain forms are constant natural assistant for the ski-instructor. Use of various terrain shapes in the process of active learning and mastering different methodical parts is obligatory for ski-

instructors. They are constant condition for successful course of ski-training and criteria for ski-instructor's attitude and professionalism. Moreover, this is compensation for lack of constantly localized and developed ski-kindergartens on Vitosha.

In conclusion

1. Specific peculiarities of Vitosha Mountain as climatic conditions, being very close to Sofia present a great opportunity the methods for ski-training of children to be verified and developed.
2. Requirements for ski-schools and ski-instructors are constantly growing due to the great responsibility, which ski-training of children is.
3. Despite some difficulties, the successful work of ski-schools at Vitosha Nature Park is due to good cooperation of state and municipal institutions, BFSki.

Dear colleagues, I can assure you that we do not claim comprehensiveness upon the subject, but this is our experience. Throughout these years we have persistently and selflessly worked in order for Sofia's children to feel the magic of winter sports. Their happy voices assure us that we are on the right track and that we have to keep on going and develop for the sake of our children and winter sports.

Authors:

Asparuh Matchirski

Dimana Veltcheva

Contacts:

Sofia 1301

9 Pirotska Street, 5th floor

Bulgaria

All rights reserved