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Nina's Lessons

by Fred Griffin

At first I didn't understand. Here we were standing on the dewy playing fields of Putney School in the first of six highly-touted "Nina's Clinics" doing the simplest of simple drills. I had been doing them or versions of them for years. I was impatient. I expected more. I wanted more. After all, Nina Gavriluk was a 3-time Olympic gold medalist, one of the most respected figures in the sport for over fifteen years — surely she didn't get where she was doing the same things I did with kids?

Well, yes. And, no.

Yes, Nina did spend time, apparently a great deal of time in training camps doing precisely these drills. But no, she didn't do them the way we did them. We didn't maintain body position on flat or hill, stationary or in movement, the way Nina did. We didn't imitate striding or pole-kicking or skating the way Nina did. We surely didn't balance on rollers the way Nina did, nor did we have her seamless timing in weight shift and application of power.

I thought more about the clinic on my ride home to Fairfax that evening and again when I made my way back across Vermont to Hanover for the next day's event. By Sunday evening, I knew. There would be no bells and whistles. There would be no dog-and-pony show. No magic pills. No epiphanies. This quiet, slender, unassuming woman whose form was so beautifully simple it achieved elegance had not come to entertain. She had come to teach. In our odyssey across New England this is what I learned:

1. **Big things start small.** Do the little things well. Then do them well again. One more time please ...thank you very much. Success in cross-country skiing is found in the mastery of basic motions done from the proper body position. So do fundamental drills. Do them again and again. Don't rush them. Don't rush through them. Get them right. Then get them right again. Tomorrow, start all over.

2. **Practice technique.** Practice technique through dryland repetitions. Practice technique every time you put on rollers. Don't close the bindings and charge off on your workout. Above all else take time each and every workout to ski for a long time at a measured pace without poles. Work on your weaknesses not on your strengths. Balance is a weakness for all of us. Know what you are going to work on before you begin your workout. It's not just a cardio outing. What areas of technique are you concentrating on today? Use your head as well as your body.

3. **Keep things in perspective.** The least imposing, least noisy, least bossy, least needy, most helpful, and most accomplished person at each clinic was Nina Gavriluk. Is there a connection?

4. **Pay attention.** My head went back and forth between Nina and those in attendance countless times during the day. The person most focused on doing the repeats properly was Nina. You could see her going inside, finding the feel, then positioning, applying. It's hard work doing simple things well. You have to concentrate. {Coach Naimie's Note —the last four sentences of this article have been purposefully removed by as they focus on what not to do}.



BIO: Nina Gavriluk (Russian: Нина Васильевна Гаврилюк; born April 13, 1965 in Leningrad) is a former Soviet (until 1991) and Russian cross country skier who competed from 1987 to 2003. She won four medals at the Winter Olympics with three Gold (1988, 1994, 1998) and one Bronze (1994). Nina's biggest success was at the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships, where she earned eleven medals. This included six Gold (1987, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001), three Silver (1995, 1995, 1999), and two Bronze (1997, 2003). She also won the 30 km event at the Holmenkollen ski festival in 1996 and climbed onto the World Cup podium 37 times.