



Student Athletes: A Guide to Balancing Post-Secondary Studies and Skiing



This guide has been prepared by student-athletes **for** student-athletes. It is a toolbox for those considering combining skiing and post-secondary education. The pursuit of athletics and academics together is not only possible but can also have significant benefits: each one complements and helps to balance and structure the other. Nonetheless, being a student-athlete is not an easy task. This guide provides information and helpful tips to ensure that the experience of a student-athlete is realistic, rewarding, and manageable.

Student-athletes broadly fit into two categories:

- **student-athletes** → primary focus is on academics (e.g. large portion of the OUA circuit)
- **athlete-students** → primary focus is on athletics (e.g. national team/training centre members who also take a few academic courses)

1. Choosing the “Right” School for You

- Pick your school for the educational program that best fits your needs and aspirations, and the athletics will follow. If you’re not happy in your program, you will be miserable at school.
- Know whether you want to prioritize school or skiing; ideally, you can choose somewhere with a good program for you and an active, supportive ski team.
- If you want to prioritize skiing, you should try to select a location where there is consistent snow and a strong resource base established for skiing. At this time, there are locations in several provinces that provide these opportunities and/or are developing programs for cross country skiing. Information about the Canadian programs offered at universities, colleges, and training centres can be found at on the Cross Country Ski Canada website [here](#).
- While schools in southern Ontario (e.g. Guelph, Waterloo, Toronto, Queen’s) experience less and often intermittent snow, there are active varsity ski teams who make great efforts to get on snow (i.e. training camps and weekend trips to Duntroon).
- Get in contact with the coach(es) of your schools of choice; this is usually done through a school athletics website. Most coaches will be happy to get a call or email from a prospective athlete.
- Talk to student-athletes currently enrolled and racing for schools that you are considering. Ask them about their experience and what they’ve learned.
- Investigate whether studying by correspondence is an option for the academic program you are considering. Most student-athletes who prioritize athletics choose to do a significant portion of their education through correspondence courses. However, each academic program (major) will dictate the degree to which correspondence courses can be used to complete your studies. Athletes need to make choices accordingly. It will not be possible (or very challenging) to do this if you are in medical or engineering school but other programs and undergraduate courses can be completed through a combination of correspondence and classroom courses. It may also be possible to organize your sessions accordingly and take courses you can do by correspondence in the winter and the in classroom courses in the spring/summer/fall.

Set your priorities – Which program? Which school? How much athletics? And allow the rest of your decisions to flow from these.

2. Living Arrangements: How to Find Accommodation

- A stable, clean, and healthy living situation makes a big difference in how well you are able to train and study.

- University residences offer accommodation for students that often include meals and all utilities (internet, private washrooms, laundry, etc.), and do not require the housing maintenance (snow removal, bill payments, etc.) of an off-campus unit.
- Living in residence, however, can make it difficult to accomplish your goals for several reasons:
 - o lack of sleep due to social environment, new surroundings, etc;
 - o school cafeterias may limit your ability to eat healthy meals nor do they usually cater to specific dietary needs;
 - o time restrictions on cafeteria usage (required by meal plans in some schools) can be difficult to adjust to;
 - o Opportunities and excuses to skip training or study less in order to party/go out with friends.
- Check whether your school caters to athletes and has a good meal plan set up where you can request bag lunches or food trays for times that suit you due to training.
- Off campus housing, or renting a house or apartment in your university town/city can offer the freedom to cook your own meals and plan your meal times, live away from active social/party environments, and organize your life outside of the bubble of residence. However, it also requires maturity, independence, the willingness and ability to self-motivate, and excellent communication skills. Some students have a harder time meal planning and eating properly living on their own then on campus.
- If you choose to rent a unit with roommates, remember that deciding whom you live with is a decision that can affect many aspects of your life. Roommates should be those who:
 - o understand your lifestyle as an athlete;
 - o you can communicate with easily; and
 - o you feel comfortable around in a variety of situations, both negative and positive.
- Luckily for student-athletes, teammates often meet all the above conditions. Teammates are more likely to:
 - o Have a similar sleep schedule to you;
 - o Help motivate you to get out of bed and go to practices;
 - o Give you someone to talk to about skiing, training and racing;
 - o Support you if you're sick or injured; and
 - o Inspire you with new training and study ideas.

Choose your living arrangements carefully as they will shape your training and study habits.

3. Transportation

- Difficulties in getting to and from workouts, which often take place off-campus, can pose a threat to training and to team-building. Ensure that all team members have a way to get to workouts:
 - Arrange group workouts in the most easily accessible locations;
 - Organize a carpool with friends/teammates who have vehicles with them while at school;
 - Plan your workouts around public transit schedules; and
 - Use a bike, rollerblades, or run, when feasible to enhance your training efforts.

4. Goal Setting

- It's important to set goals to feel a sense of personal accomplishment.
- Feeling accomplished can give you a boost of confidence, which can motivate you to stick to your plan and continue goal setting.
- Setting a goal, whether for academics or for athletics, helps identify and address something specific that you need to work on.
- Ensure goals are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-based).
- Establish and discuss goals with your coach, even if they don't ask you about them

Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible.
Tony Robbins

5. Prioritizing Tasks and Time Management

- Talk to older athletes (more than one) to get a sense of how others manage their time so that both training and school are possible. You can pick up little tricks from everyone you talk to and eventually find something tailored to you.
- Make a weekly schedule that includes blocks of time for your classes, training and studying. Follow it!
- Make commitments with other students for training and studying. Working in a group and with other people keeps you motivated.
- Determine if you want to focus more on academics or athletics – this will frame how you make decisions.
- If you want to focus on **academics**, determine when your academic “crunch times” will be (e.g. midterms, exams, papers) and use those as “blackout days” for training and racing. While exercising is a great study tool, you may not be able to commit to a rigid training plan during those times.

- If you want to focus on **athletics**, determine what your priorities are for training and racing. Try to build your academic schedule around this. You will probably have to ask professors to reschedule exams and/or get extensions on papers. Most professors are accommodating if you are polite, get a note from your coach and speak with them early.

6. Financing: How to Pay for School and Skiing

Skiing equipment, race fees, travelling and other unexpected costs can be a significant burden to a student who already pays for housing, school supplies, food and tuition, at minimum. Use budgeting tools in advance of and during your academic years in order to make sure money isn't a limiting factor.

- Pick a school that has academic and/or athletic scholarships;
- Maintain your grades so you can keep your scholarship;
- Work a summer job;
- Take less than the maximum course load so you have time to work a part-time job during the school year;
- Apply to jobs that are minimally stressful, physically and mentally -- they may not pay as much as other positions, but you'll be able to train and study more effectively because of it;
- Work as a team to secure funding or in-kind sponsorship for your varsity team;
- Contact supporters and engage in your community to find personal sponsors.

7. Athletics vs. Academics

- It can be difficult during race season to focus on school because it seems like skiing should be the focus, as you've spent so much time and effort training all year.
- The same goes for exams (esp. Christmas) when it feels like school should be the focus but you still need to train.
- Know that what you are doing is not easy. Don't get down on yourself if you aren't doing as well in school as you'd like or if your race results aren't where you wanted them to be.
- You are becoming a well-rounded person and enjoying the best of both athletics and academics. Be proud of your accomplishments in all aspects of your life!

8. Exams

- Exams are much less stressful if you are prepared for them (i.e. not learning 6 chapters in 6 hours before the exam).
- Every class that you attend will make preparing for your exams a lot easier.

- If you are well prepared for certain classes, concentrate your time on others that you know will be more difficult for you.
- There is often help available at universities specifically to help students prepare for exams – take advantage of it.

9. Mental Health

- Student athletes are often driven, motivated people who put a lot of pressure on themselves, take on a lot of tasks and lead busy lives. If the lifestyle of a student-athlete is not managed well, this can lead to problems.
- Mental health problems, like physical injuries, aren't something you can "tough out." Ignoring a problem will likely make it worse, not better.
- Anxiety, panic attacks, depression and eating disorders, among other problems, are all experienced by athletes; we aren't immune to them.
- Don't think you're alone or can't talk to anyone. Other people have probably gone through very similar issues or know someone who has. Talk to your coach, your parents, a doctor or teammates that you trust. The sooner the better.
- Universities often have designated mental health specialists, talk to them if possible

10. Relationships with Teammates

Living, training and studying with your teammates can pressure relationships if communication lines are not open and conflict resolution skills do not exist. The same can be said for coaches, athletic staff, etc.

- It is important to acknowledge any issues as soon as possible when they arise, as small problems can quickly evolve into bigger ones. Everyone has bad days and can be stressed out by school or athletics, but learning how to express yourself in a clear and non-judgemental way can help to avoid conflict.
- If there is *any* issue that arises or you feel uncomfortable with someone on your team, make sure you are able to speak to someone about it. This could include:
 - o Speaking with the person or group directly;
 - o Speaking with your coach or coaches;
 - o Speaking with your team captain or captains;
 - o Speaking with your University athletic department; or
 - o Speaking with a counselor or varsity counselor.

These contacts can help mediate arguments, ensure that communication is clear and effective, and ultimately resolve problems.

11. Planning for the Future

- It is important (and exciting!) to have an idea of what you want to do after school.
- For example, if you want to attend professional school or continue in a graduate program, making sure that you have sufficient grades for entry and preparing yourself for these programs with academics may be your priority.
- If you already know that you *don't* want to continue with graduate education, it may be ok to put a little more focus on athletics.
- Either way, having an idea of what you want to do after graduation is ideal. This way, when it comes to prioritizing your time, you know what your priorities are.

12. Comments from University Skiers

- *Take advantage of what the university has to offer. No, it's not exactly like your home club, but you can be a better, more responsible athlete if you take advantage of the things you do like (gym, physio etc) and work around the things you find strange and maybe intimidating (like finding your own rides to practice, doing long slow skis by yourself, taking skis on public transit)*
- *Be organized! (This is kind of like a sum up... but still) Find out where and when races are and when major school dates are ASAP. Try to plan your days and even weeks in advance so you're not scrambling around the day before a big race weekend that also happens to coincide with a big project. Rest is so key at this level of athletics and academics that saving time becomes a must.*
- *Learn to prioritize and be flexible! Having an overall plan is fantastic, but always be willing to modify things or accommodate for unexpected problems (an assignment that is taking up more of your time than expected, a race schedule change, etc). Be adaptable, and don't be afraid to move around or modify workouts/study sessions to meet your goals. Sometimes an extra day off can mean less stress further down the road, or, vice versa, a short run can provide a great study break for a full day of school work. If something isn't going according to plan, take action and find a solution!*
- *Getting involved with the varsity council or athletics program at your university will make a big difference in your perspective of and ability to influence skiing at a post-secondary level. If you have ideas, complaints, suggestions, or questions about the way things are run at your institution, seek out information. Get to know the people behind the desks, ask about programming, and if you don't agree with something or have a different idea, speak up!*

- *An adjustment for me personally, and I'm sure for others, was having to follow a meal plan in residence while training. I lost a lot of weight and first year in the bad way. I wish I had a heads up on how limiting times I could eat would affect my training later.*
- *Take study breaks! Even if you can't fit all your training hours in because you need to focus a little more on school, going for a short workout helps clear your head.*
- *If you start to feel overwhelmed and stressed, take a step back from everything and re-evaluate your goals. Make sure that your goals are still important to you and that you are pursuing them for the right reasons. If the answers yes, make an action plan and then do it. If the answers no, set new goals.*
- *Athletics are a great networking opportunity – take advantage of that.*