

Didier Cuche – Didier Defago

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Americans have an expression, “Different strokes for different folks.” I means that the best thing for one person may not be the best thing of another. We use it to explain people’s differing tastes in everything from food they like to the sorts of jokes that make them laugh. The same can be said regarding the techniques that two great skiers might use in the same situation. It’s an important, observable truth that the best skiers in the world do not all ski identically. The question is, why? There are certain fundamental principles that are applied nearly universally, such as pressuring the outside ski on hard snow, and arranging the segments of the body so that the muscles and bones are in the most advantageous alignment for the task at hand. These principles, when pursued by skiers of different physical makeups, are achieved with variations in technique.





These photomontages show two top-level downhillers, Didier Cuche and Didier Defago, in the same turn on Beaver Creek's Birds of Prey downhill course last season. This critical and difficult turn, the "Talon Turn", is made on a steep, fall-away slope leading into a steep section of difficult turns that many consider to be among the most challenging on the World Cup. Cuche has won the World Cup downhill three times, including last season, the GS title once, and has finished third in the overall standings five times. He has won at both Kitzbuehel and Lake Louise, demonstrating his all around abilities as a downhiller. Defago has been on the World Cup podium 13 times, including a victory in Kitzbuehel in 2009, confirming that he certainly knows how to make a good turn on a difficult slope. Add to that his capture of the gold medal in the 2010 Olympic downhill on technically challenging course, and you can see that he must be a great skier.

These two athletes display strong technical similarities in the Talon Turn. They both have the large majority of their weight on the outside ski throughout, and both are balanced somewhat forward on the ski. But there are distinct differences, too. In particular, Cuche's hips and upper body are directed toward the outside of the turn, what in English is called a "countered" stance, and shows considerable hip angulation. Defago's stance is noticeably different. He is only slightly countered - what Americans would call "square" - and uses significantly less hip angulation. Furthermore he angulates more at the toe to control the edge of his outside ski.

The differences in the athletes' stances is due primarily to their physical builds. At 174 cm and 89 kg Cuche is relatively short for his weight. Defago is a full 10 cm taller, but only 1 kg heavier. The purpose of hip angulation is to get the skier's center of mass balanced over the head of the outside femur when the skier has his weight on the outside ski and that ski is sharply edged. The more mass a skier has in his or her mid-body in relation to the upper torso, the more hip angulation a skier will generally need to

accomplish this. The purpose of countering is to optimally align the muscles of the buttocks and thighs with the force the skier and snow exert on each other. Typically, the wider the hips in relation to the skier's height, the more countering is needed to achieve that alignment. Consequently, Cuche's short, stocky, build lends itself to more hip angulation and countering, while Defago's taller, narrower hipped physique dictates his square stance.

Another important factor in an athlete's choice of technique is how that particular person learned to ski in the first place. There is more than one way to make a good turn on skis, and the techniques that individuals develop during their formative years are likely to be the one's that work best for them after they've reached the highest levels. American's have another expression that applies here, "There's more than one way to skin a cat." In the context of skiing, it means that two people can do some things differently, as Cuche and Defago do here, and still be great skiers.