



Alpine Valley Ski School,
Instructor, Instructor Trainer
Rochester Adams Ski Team
Skiing/Technical Training Coach
Dave Jacobson, PSIA LII Certified
248.210.9103
dave@vmimedia.com

Reflecting on my PSIA Level III Exam Experience

March 5th and 6th, Boyne Mountain Resort, Boyne Falls, MI

Helpful Background Information-

Taking a Level III exam is not something you decide to do overnight, rather, it requires months of studying the technical manuals, teaching manuals, and reading stacks of PSIA standards, protocols, charts, and videos. You can't even register for the on-snow Level III without first taking a Level III Professional Knowledge exam. It has eight sections with ten multiple choice questions per section. You must score 70% on each section to pass, although you are able to do one do-over if you fail a section. If you fail then, or have several failing sections, you can contact the PSIA to ask for another chance but will have to pay the fee a second time.

If you successfully pass the LIII Professional Knowledge exam you can enroll in the MA/Tech online exam that puts you online, in front of two PSIA examiners who test your knowledge of movement analysis of an advanced skier in very difficult terrain. Doing this MA portion of L3 requires a clear understanding of how PSIA describes the movements and the ski reactions that take place at all phases of the turn, at each of the fundamentals. **You definitely need to do online webinars on the subject including *Did You See That* online sessions. Do not think that you are so good at MA that you will dazzle the examiners...you won't, so get the training first, and then do the MA/Tech session. You do not have to do the MA portion to do the on-snow exam, but it will help if you do, and so I recommend it.**

PSIA has made a very strong commitment of ensuring that exams whether online, virtual or on snow for L1-L3 are done the same whether in the mountains of the West and East, or on smaller Midwestern slopes. Level III exams are tough, very tough. About 10% succeed in passing the skiing portion, although my exam had a 15% success rate. **Do not take the test until you have been told by a skilled L3 trainer that you are ready.** I went up with the thought that maybe I'll be good enough to pass, and I was not. I will only do another Level III exam after I have assurances from a respected L3 trainer. (unfortunately this is difficult because they are

reluctant to tell you, feeling that it is not their place. **IT IS!** So, keep asking until you get the answer, and only then sign up for the on-snow L3 Exam.)

In Hindsight, these are the things I would have done before enrolling in the Level III Exam:

1. I would have spent the months of August 2021 to March 2022 **doing as many online webinars, online meetings, and programs like *Did You See That?*** Offered by the PSIA. I will do this before attempting Level III next March.
2. I would have found **the best possible LIII trainer/examiner**, especially those in Northern Michigan, so that **the training is done on the steepest hills possible**. Again, I would never attempt another LIII without training weeks in advance, so that what I learn can be practiced and honed well before the exam. For those who have not taken the Level III exam, **I would highly advise signing up for a Level III Prep Exam!**
3. I would **spend more time studying every possible task that might possibly be my teaching assignment**. I would not try to memorize a progression, but rather go through every task as described in detail on the PSIA-C website, and understand how it is done; what the body does; what the skis do; and the expected outcome if done properly. (see my website in the next few weeks and I will post the tasks as individual files that can be downloaded and printed.)
4. I would **get into better shape, get more flexibility with yoga or stretching**, since the high performance turns require you to **have extreme angulation; counter rotation; leg flexion and extension; and high edge angles**. You will not pass without all of the above.
5. **Practice the things that are not fun! White Pass Turns** (see my website for great video by Makaela Shiffron.) Also **find the steepest slope you can and practice short radius turns down a corridor**. Then do five short radius turns in one corridor, cross a second corridor and do five more, and then repeat this down the steep hill by staying in the corridor.
6. Pivot slips become more difficult on steep runs, so again, **find a steep run and do them over and over so you slide directly down a corridor the width of one snowcat**. Remember the tip “feel the heel”, it will prevent you from going forward during the slip.
7. **Group together with other “serious” Level III exam intenders**, and this will require bringing instructors from many areas together into a single location. And why not, we are all trying to reach the highest level of instruction, and many ski areas do not have the trainers needed. These training sessions may therefore have a guest trainer who will want their expenses covered and more, so be prepared to spend some money to get this very current and specialized training. (I’ll be posting the training sessions and locations on my website early next season.)
8. **Do not take the exam if you are told you are not ready yet**. Keep training until you are! You will have many great instructors cheering you on along your path to LIII starting with me and include Brad, Luke, Peter, Brandon, Bill and countless other PSIA members pulling for you!

This is my story-

I arrived Boyne much earlier than required the first morning and entered the cafeteria area where a spattering of other early birds were sitting at large round tables. Part of the new exam criteria is called *People Skills* and we all knew that once we stepped into that building we could be judged based on our communication skills and friendly outgoing nature with anyone in sight including, employees, other guests or exam participants.

I can only compare it to going to a high school reunion, where you have not connected with classmates since the last reunion but enter the room as if you had been in contact on a regular basis. I tend to be outgoing and talkative, and so when I just was doing what I normally would, it felt contrived. Worse, yet the smiling faces and outgoing conversations with the other exam participants seemed even more strange...more like a play-acting session than a real-life interaction.

While it is normally a time I would sit, be quiet and reflect on the mission of the day that has taken months of time and loads of money to get to, I was up and down, shaking hands and laying out lots of introductions to complete strangers.

We all knew that we were to meet at 9:00 AM outside the cafeteria near the 6-passenger high speed chairlift. One by one we reached the gathering area where other participants of Level I, Level II, Level III and miscellaneous Educational Events were trying to find their clinicians or examiners.

It was a bit chaotic for a few minutes since there were no defining signs to designate us by group name, but the examiners were able to find their group participants and eventually pull all five members in our group aside to make initial introductions with the group. We went around in a circle introducing ourselves, where we teach, years of teaching and any other information that would help identify our motivations for taking the Level III exam.

I will not mention last names of our examiners but will say that they are well respected and well-liked members of PSIA Central named Ron and Greg. Our group of six began to memorize each other's names knowing that in our teaching sessions we would need to have those names down to perfection, just as we would with any ski lesson students.

I met Peter, a tall good looking 20 something that teaches for a large Michigan ski area and happens to be a competitive bump skier. Then I met Luke, another twenty or thirty something, who is the snow sports director at another large and well-respected Michigan Ski Resort. Bill, a fifty something gentlemen drove up from near Columbus, Ohio. He is a determined seasoned instructor attempting his Level III certification again after three previous failed attempts. Brad is a 55-year old ski instructor from a small but very busy resort near Detroit owned by Vail Resorts, and me, the oldest in the group by 10-15 years, who now teaches and trains instructors at Alpine Valley in metro Detroit on weekends and on weekday afternoons coaches high school racers with their skiing skills. We would bond over the next two days...new best friends!

We all got into the lift line around 9:30 Saturday morning to take on ski instruction greatest challenge, the Level III Certification Exam

The Warm-Up-

Just like in the LI and L2 exams, it all starts with a couple of warm up “laps” on a very steep black run under the chairlift and in full view of the full lift of skiers watching the L3’s ski.

And guys will be guys, meaning that we took off like a bunch of world cup racers, skiing at speeds down the expert hill that were likely way too high for a warm-up, especially when the snow conditions were uncertain due to changing weather patterns that created a dark and gloomy sky, making for flat light conditions that prevented us from easily seeing any surface imperfections that could have taken us out before even starting the exam.

After a second high speed lap we went back to the top and shook hands knowing that the exam was about to begin...

Task one was a drill that was explained by examiner Greg, as though we had all done it before, so would not require much of an explanation. When asked if we understood, we all nodded our heads like we knew exactly what he was saying, although I could tell the others had uncertainty as did I.

Looking back, it was rather easy to understand, and was simply follow the leader, but with a change in the task after a few turns. Greg started out with short radius turns, stopping after four turns and moving to the side of the run. One by one we followed, Greg and lined up under him until all five of us were standing shoulder to shoulder. Next Greg did pivot slips, a task that require turning the skis across the slope and then allowing them to slide down the hill ten to fifteen feet before pivoting the opposite direction. We all did those pretty well and then followed Greg in doing medium radius turns, followed by White Pass Turns, which are done on one ski while the outside ski is lifted off the snow.

When reaching the bottom of the hill we reviewed the tasks that were just done and were told that those would be the tasks assigned for the teaching portion of the exam a bit latter.

Teaching Day- (2 examiners and 5 candidates)

PSIA III day one is Teaching Day, and no judgement is made on individual skiing, (although you know they are watching), and the emphasis is on how the candidates teach a lesson based on a task given by the examiners. Luke went first and drew pivot slips. The objective is to start with that task and then take it somewhere. The examiner Ron said, “we don’t care where it is taken, but it has to have all the dots connected along the way.”

Luke volunteered to go first and drew pivot slips. He was given the chair lift ride to gather his thoughts and prepare his teaching methodology. He started by going back to hockey stops, the quick rotation motion used by kids and adults as they reach a spot requiring a quick ending to the sliding movement. His idea worked for me since hockey stops are not a scary skiing task.

Unfortunately, we were to be teaching to the other Level III candidates, all expert skiers, and so the attempt to simplify the concept likely did not play well with examiners.

We then did pivot slips and were given advice on how to improve our movements by Luke, and he did it well, even though it is awkward to give corrective advice to peers. We all played along, and said thanks for the advice, and moved on. Be aware that how you react to another instructor's advice is also a scorable act, so be cool, say thanks and go with it.

One by one we taught ski lessons to the four other people in the group. Peter, the bump skier taught White Pass turns and did an excellent job of taking time to give feedback to each of the members of the group. He was poised and confident, showing that he had received excellent training at the large resort he works for as a part time instructor.

I was third to go, and drew railroad track garlands, which pleased me, since I had spent the past two months working with high school racers to help them ski on two carved edges for highest speeds. Unfortunately, I took the tack of setting up a scenario where I was teaching high school racers and not teaching the four others L3 candidates in the group. I have replayed my teaching segment in my head and if given a chance for a redo would have nailed it! Redo's are not part of the exam, so when given your assignment, use the chairlift ride to really think hard about you plan, and **make sure you teach to the other candidates in your group.**

I was enthusiastic, sincere, and communicative, which earned me scores of 5 and over for one section of the test, which is over the standard of 4 required to pass. I received the required 4 average on a second section, still OK. But on the other sections I had scores of 3's and did not meet the minimum average of 4 to pass those sections.

Here is what I will do next time when teaching at my L3:

1. I will create a teaching plan **directed at the other L3 candidates**. It will not include any tasks or exercises that they clearly would know, but would instead provide high level tasks, exercises and unique teaching styles that they can use and improve by doing.
2. I would have them **come down one by one**, and only have the next one do the task after I have totally finished with my observations and suggestions for the current candidate.
3. **I would stand directly in front of the group, speak loudly and clearly**, and do the standard teaching technique of **Static, Simple, Complex and Whole** for every task or exercise I presented.
4. I would **focus on all 5 fundamentals and the core concepts of skiing, and without saying the words, would make sure it is clear to the examiners that I understand how the body movement is impacting the skis at every fundamental and in every phase of the turn.**

Bill taught after me and did short radius leapers. He went about it in a very steady and professional manner. He had been in this position in past Level III exams, and it showed. We were all pulling for Bill, and I for one, felt that it was his shining moment. He explained the task,

the object of doing the task, and the proper execution of the task. He then did great demonstrations while moving the group down the hill in a steady motion.

Last to go was Brad, a great instructor, who I have known to have tremendous passion, skiing skills, and is a total team player willing to share his skills with others, including me. He drew a tough one, Javelin turns, but was able to modify that task to outside ski pressured turns and did a good job of developing the body positions including angulation, inclination and counter rotation required to get the high edge angles needed in order to do high performance turns.

Future Level III exam candidates should remember these things:

1. Teaching at an L3 Exam **does not mean having a pre-planned canned progression pitch memorized.** In fact, sounding planned and scripted is a negative. It's about being creative with where you take the group. Make sure to have fun, play and do things that will stand out as innovative.
2. **Practice in clinics**, since it is really difficult to teach to peers, since they already know how to do most of the things you are teaching, so don't tell them how to hold their arms while traversing, or how to do a railroad track. Instead, you have to step it up and find specific movements that might be of use in a task. For example, how the ski moves during early turn initiation. Focus on doing things that the L3 candidates can take back and use at their home hills. (silly as it sounds, have gum or mints to keep your mouth from drying up from nerves, and outside conditions. Cotton mouth during a teaching session is both nerve racking and costly to the image being projected.)
3. And of MOST Importance, **read the assessment form!** It's new and has nearly 20 varied evaluation criteria with scorable points. Miss them and you'll blow the teaching as I did.

Once the teaching was over we all took a big sigh of relief and headed to the outdoor bar for beer and some comradery before heading back to our hotel rooms for some rest and relaxation, knowing that the worst part of the Level III exam was yet to come on Sunday.

Sunday March 6th, 2022- Ski Day at the Level III exam.

We met at 9:00 AM on Sunday, and a light rain fell down on us as we gathered near the high-speed lift at the bottom of Boyne Mountain.

One by one the five exam candidates from Saturday made their way to the small group huddled around Greg our examiner from Saturday, and a new examiner named Paul, who was a Central Division Education Staff member, who had recently moved to Aspen where he worked with the ski school as well as handling other business functions for the resort.

We were joined on Sunday by a new group member named Brandon, bringing our group up to six members for the Ski Day of the L3. He was middle aged, outgoing, full of life, and in general one of those guys you wish you had as your best friend. He had driven in from New York State the day before, and so confided to us that he had stalked our group throughout the Teach Day.

Ron, the other examiner on Saturday was not there, and we were told that Paul would be stepping in to take over Ron's place. Paul was outgoing, fun, and very approachable, and so I think all members of the group knew that Paul and Greg would combine to make the Ski Day of the Level III exam memorable.

Once again, we reached the top and were told to take a couple of warm up laps. And once again, knowing this was the ski day, we took off in pursuit of the perfect "head turning skiing" expected of L3 instructors. My advice to future candidates would be to use this time to show how you can shape turns, rather than showing how fast you can get from top to bottom. Also, remember it's a warm-up so make some different turns...stop a couple of times to check your gear, or to just refocus on helping your body and skis prepare for the day. Breathe, try to relax, and don't risk an early fall on unknown snow conditions.

Once we had the two warm up runs in, we went to the top of the double black diamond run, to begin showing our skiing skills. It was stressful, exciting, and in a way somewhat relieving since sometimes to buildup to the actual event is more stressful than actually being there.

The rain had now turned to an aggravating drizzle that covered goggles and glasses with a layer of tiny droplets of moisture that cut down the visibility even more when accompanied by the flat light conditions of the gloomy March morning.

Paul, the new examiner, started out doing beautifully shaped short radius turn without much skidding to slow his speed, even on the steep run. We did get clarity from examiner Greg that skidding was ok because of the steepness of the run below our starting point, and out of view of Paul who may have also checked his speed as he hit the headwall of the run beyond the crest and so beyond our view.

We all made it through the short radius turns and then went back to the top to ramp it up a bit by doing medium radius turns. Again, Paul did the demo, and it was done with ease as he had very little skidding while managing his speed on the steep slope. It was a hard act to follow, but all of us managed to do the task, albeit at variable levels of expertise.

For anyone thinking that L3 tasks will be done on typical appropriate runs that would normally be used when teaching your own advanced skiing, remove that possibility from your mind. Clearly, leveling the playing field among all divisions requires central division to require skiing every task on advanced runs. Practice the L3 tasks on the steepest hills you can find, since you won't be doing any tasks on intermediate terrain.

Our third task was pivot slips, and although we had all done them thousands of times, it's a task that can take you down fast if an edge is caught in the process of simultaneously rotating both legs in the hip sockets and at a controlled rate of rotation, all while keeping both skis in a parallel position throughout the task.

I think most of us have trained for this day by doing pivot slips on moderately steep hills but likely not on a steep run like we were on. We all were tending to do them with a bit too much

forward pressure, making it hard to slide sideways down an imaginary cat-track-width corridor required for satisfactory completion.

I think both Paul and Greg saw the struggle we were having and so allowed a do over, with a bit more instruction to help get us to a more successful outcome. Paul said briefly “feel the heel”, meaning we needed to get back on our skis to a more balanced center point to make pivoting on a flattened ski easier.

That opportunity for a do over, along with the tip to “feel the heel” had us all feeling that we nailed what is a very tough task.

The pivot slips were a nice lead into short radius turns that require similar faster leg rotation. Once back on top we were told the task would be short radius turns, done in a corridor and then crossing to a new corridor without going outside of a three-corridor width. We were to do four or five short radius turns, then cross an imaginary cat track width corridor to a third corridor where we would make four of five short radius turns before once again crossing to the initial corridor. This was to continue the length of the run.

My advice is to slow your speed down by turning your skis across the hill before beginning the new turn. You don’t want a stop, but you can do very aggressive turns with a powerful down motion to check your speed. You must do this however with no up motion, meaning the legs must rotate while in a retracted position. (Retraction turn). Practice this over and over before deciding to take the L3 exam. While the nice flowing short turns you make on your home hill are fun to do and look great, don’t spend time doing short turns unless you have a steep run to practice on in the process.

Looking for the dreaded ungroomed terrain-

We had now done the tasks that are familiar to most high level L2 instructors, but even the best of the best can dread the ungroomed terrain selection made by the examiners, since ungroomed can mean skiing through the trees, or on those gnarly little trails that adventurous skiers, especially kids, like to blaze along the tree line or under the lift. But as both of our examiners spotted the bump field in their vision, we knew that it was going to be our time to show our skills on the moguls at Boyne.

I had been at Boyne a week before the exam to attend the State Championship Ski Race, but also to get some practice on the bumps at Boyne. Unfortunately, cold temperatures that weekend had kept the bumps covered in boiler plate ice, making them unsafe and virtually impossible to ski. Notwithstanding those two facts that should have deterred my efforts, I spent several hours getting a feel for the location, shape, and size of the bumps, which I believe helped me in each of the five bump runs we made during the exam.

The tasks were different for each run through the bumps and included doing short turns; medium turns; large turns; a combination of all three, and finally a free run any way we chose. With Peter being a competitive bump skier, we had a “ringer” in the group. And speaking for

me, I enjoyed watching the examiners ski easily through the bumps in PSIA style but watching a real competitive bump skier do it was a treat, and a highlight of the day for me personally.

Following the bumps, we moved to an adjacent run that was not as steep as the other advanced runs skied previously. Fortunately, so since White Pass Turns were the next skiing task. They are considered a one ski activity requiring turning on the downhill edge of the downhill ski while lifting the outside ski during the initiation of the turn and then setting it back down on the snow at the apex of the turn. It's an awkward movement requiring the body to balance over the downhill edge, which is completely opposite the skiing fundamental of directing pressure to the outside ski. Doing a White Pass Turn eliminates the outside ski while being lifted but does allow reconnection with the snow during at the apex of the turn to have both skis usable for the finish of the turn.

None of us in the group did the skill as easily as the examiners, but Luke, a full-time ski area employee acknowledged that he did spend a lot of training time perfecting or should I say attempting to perfect the awkward skiing task, and it showed, since he did the task far better than the other five members of the group.

We were done after the White Pass Turns, or thought we were until Brandon, our New York friend asked if he could do one more free run. You see, Brad had been coaching Brandon throughout the day, and you could see Brandon getting better as the day went on. He simply wanted to show the group and the examiners his newfound skills without any thought that it would help his chances of passing. We all proudly watched our new friend Brandon "show off" for us, and then followed behind him in a sort of "victory line". And to me this action from Brandon put an exclamation point on the event and why we had all come here...to get better! Brandon did, we did, and although none of us passed the skiing exam, we will be back but only after successfully honing our skills to know that we can meet the standards set by the PSIA.

We thanked the examiners who were huddling hillside to compare notes, and one by one skied to the bottom of the lift we had gotten on four hours earlier, where we popped out of our skis, and headed inside to get out of wet clothes before heading to a close by pub for lunch and a couple of beers and some friend to friend banter.

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Left to right: Peter, Dave, Brandon, Brad, Luke and Bill

The final results-

Six men came to Boyne, six went home without a PSIA Level III Gold Pin. We tried our best, but we were not good enough, not this time. We will get better...we will be back.

Dave Jacobson

248.210.9103 dave@vmimedia.com www.skiinstructordave.com

Dave Jacobson is an instructor and instructor trainer at Alpine Valley Ski Area in White Lake, Michigan. He has instructed off and on for decades, giving his first lesson in 1969 and still continuing to instruct and coach racers near his home in Rochester, Michigan.

Dave is running for the Central Division Board seat in Section 5, covering the eight ski areas in Southern, Michigan.

If you have questions, comments, corrections, suggestions, agreements, disagreements or simply want more clarification on any part of the essay, please send an email or text me and I will get back to you.