



Michigan's Hanson Hills wanted its children's area to cover all learning styles – feeling, watching, thinking, and doing – so they laid out a series of game-oriented stations to help facilitate successful learning outcomes.

# Starting from Scratch

## HOW WE REBUILT THE HANSON HILLS SKI SCHOOL PROGRAM

Text and photos by Bill Bonkowski

One of my proudest professional achievements is helping Michigan's Hanson Hills ski area develop a learning environment that helps instill in children the same love of skiing I've had since *I* was a youngster. They say things happen

for a reason, and I believe that with all my heart... and a kidney. Let me explain.

As a kid, I skied at Hanson Hills and grew to love the sport... joining PSIA in 1979 at the age of 16 so I could teach. Later, kidney issues keep me off the slopes for awhile but after receiving a kidney transplant in 2011, I was determined to get back on skis. I wanted to start out slow, though, so I decided to stay close to home and went back to my old stomping grounds, Hanson Hills.

One thing led to another and soon I was working with General Manager Justin Andre on a new snowsports school at the non-profit ski area. I remembered my experience at Hanson Hills as a kid and felt that, with contemporary PSIA-AASI knowledge – paired with ideas I've been accumulating for decades – we could make a difference in the children's learning environment. With a \$60 equipment budget, we set a plan in motion that's been so successful I'm eager to share it with other snowsports schools.



Bill Bonkowski and Hanson Hills mascot Gunner

### BUILDING A NEW CHILDREN'S AREA

The first step of the plan was to build a large wedge of snow adjacent to the beginner hill so students could move from the learning area to the tow rope easily. To secure the area, we also installed a fence with donated lumber.

We wanted our children's area to cover all learning styles – feeling, watching, thinking,

### IN THE ARTICLE

- ▶ The children's learning environment at Michigan's Hanson Hills puts games and props to great use.
- ▶ The area uses game-oriented teaching stations to cover all the learning styles -- feeling, watching, thinking, and doing.
- ▶ Young skiers start with boot-only exercises, then move on to activities with skis. Snowboard students get to experience customized games and equipment.

and doing – so we laid out a series of game-oriented stations to help facilitate successful learning outcomes. We also made colorful cartoon figures and placed them around the learning area to create a kid-friendly environment. To create some structure, we used food coloring to paint lines in the snow to help kids find their way through



The Walk the Line game promotes balance and correct stance.

our series of activities. We also placed hoops on the snow and arches made of PVC pipe and swimming-pool noodles so students could get accustomed to different sensations and situations on the snow, like bending forward, down, and back or stepping over obstacles.

### BOOTS-ONLY TRAINING

After the foundation was in place, we pieced together our teaching program, in which children start moving around in their boots before putting on skis. We start each lesson by having kids kick a soccer ball around, emphasizing kicking with the toe and the inside of the boot so they learn how to move their ankles within the boots. Then we move on to the following series of stations, working on mastery of movement before moving from one station to the next.

**Walk the Line** – Here, we help kids establish a nice, comfortable stance, applying pressure on the tongues of their boots. They practice “squishing bugs” in the tongue of the boot and shifting their weight forward on the balls of their feet. We show them how to balance on the tip of the boot with the heel off the ground. Once the correct stance is established, the student walks a line painted in the snow, one foot in front of the other – pushing the boot toe down into the snow, bending their knees and ankles forward, and completing the step by crushing the bugs in the tongue and under the toes. Some kids even run, increasing the fun factor.

**Walking on the Snake** – Here, children learn how to turn their legs very gradually while stepping on a “snake” painted in on the snow. We emphasize turning the leg with the big bone at the top (i.e., the femur within the hip socket), not by turning the ankle, while bending the knee and ankle. As the exercise progresses, the kids concentrate on the position in the boot from the “Walk the Line” exercise.



The Block Corners game helps teach students about proper stance.

**Block Corners** – At this station, we start by reviewing the stance learned from the previous exercises. Then, we show the students how to turn the whole leg to the outside and continue to walk forward to the next corner. The student must come to a complete stop at the corner, turn the appropriate boot so as not to cross their legs, and continue moving forward.

**Step Over** – This station is a set of two lines drawn offset of each other. Students walk forward in a functional forward stance, using the sides of the boots to step sideways over and onto the other two lines and continuing forward. By this point, students start to learn to position their leg and boot. Once they can use this edge, they can move laterally and become more self-sufficient when increasing the edge angle, which we call “going from a little edge to a monster edge.”



The Jump Box game let's kids experiment with their balance when landing.

**Jump Box** – One of our favorites (and the kids’ favorite too) this is a colorful box with an outdoor mat on top for traction. It’s sized so a kid can sit down comfortably (we have two different heights). For this exercise, students step up onto the box. We emphasize maintaining a comfortable, centered stance that allows the knees and ankles to absorb the impact. Next, kids jump off the box and experiment with landing straight-legged and by flexing and absorbing the landing after they jump. They quickly figure out that flexion is the best technique.



In the Hula Hoop balance game, students hop on one foot into each hoop as they move forward.

**Hula-Hoop Hop** – After reviewing everything the children have learned so far, we lay different-sized hoops on the ground, each touching the one next to it. Students hop on one foot into each hoop as they move forward, followed by jumping with both boots like a bunny hop. Forward positioning of their hands becomes an important component as intensity increases. Fun crashes and laughter are hallmarks of this station.



The Walking on the Sun game promotes edging skills and well as flexion and extension.

**Walking on the Sun** – Here, children improve edge angles as they set the edge of their boot and step sideways onto the rays of sun painted on the snow, pushing off the edge and flexing their knee and ankle as they extend their leg to step onto the next sunbeam. We don’t increase the speed here, since the goal is to create a clean, solid edge set without slip. (In the phase of the program

### PSIA-AASI NOW OFFERS CHILDREN’S PROGRESS CARDS

Newly launched *Children’s Progress Cards* from PSIA-AASI give ski and ride schools a customizable resource to help children develop lifelong skills in skiing and snowboarding. Available for different disciplines and age levels, the cards can be ordered through the PSIA-AASI Member School Toolkit at [ChildrensProgressCards.com](http://ChildrensProgressCards.com). Visit: [tiny.cc/ChildrensProgressCards](http://tiny.cc/ChildrensProgressCards)



## OFFICIAL SUPPLIER WORLD CUP SUPPLY

Looking for props to aid teaching in learning environments geared to children and beginners? Check out products from new PSIA-AASI Official Supplier World Cup Supply at [tiny.cc/ProOffers](http://tiny.cc/ProOffers). The company offers an array of children-specific games and activities to animate the learning area.

where kids have their skis on, we position the tips of the children's skis on the round sun and have them keep them there as they side step. This keeps the ski from sliding backward or forward as the sidestep happens.)

Once children move through the boot-work stations, we move onto that little hill we constructed. Some resorts have suitable terrain for this section without having to make one. By making a snow wedge, I control the height, pitch, and grade to assure the speed is comfortable to all, which allows for successful outcomes.

After some time on the slope, we move to a little slalom course of five or six offset, padded gates. Sometimes a hill is intimidating, so we have students first walk, then run, through the course using everything they have learned to this point. Next, we encourage them to plant the outside foot as they pass by the gate, thus putting them on that outside foot before they even have skis on. This has the feel of a race course with start and finish lines to add a bit of authenticity. The kids love running through the gates, and by this point their ski brains have kicked in and everything is starting to mesh. Add in duration, intensity, rate, and timing, as with the previous exercises, and we're racing! After all of the boots-only exercises, kids typically cannot wait to get the skis on and apply what they've learned.

### HERE COME THE SKIS

In this phase of the program, we head back to the first station and – with just one ski on – have children repeat the line exercises, reviewing positioning as in the first phase, adding fore and aft pressure experiences. Then we try a short straight run on the little hill with one ski, using all the skills and information learned to this point. After going downhill, the students sidestep up, using the inside edge on the ski (as in Walking On the Sun).

After setting the students up and reviewing balance and positioning over the ski we slowly release them in their straight run. A favorite game with a group or semi-private

## LITTLE SHREDDERS GET IN ON THE ACTION TOO!



Hanson Hill's learning environment for snowboard students includes Burton LTR Handle Bars.

Within its children's learning environment, Hanson Hills also makes sure young snowboarders get to develop *their* foundational skillsets, with customized games and equipment.

In the snowboard section, we use the Burton Snowboard LTR Handle Bar on two different-size boards to begin our balance and position exercises. We also use their Jump Box to teach little shredders how to loosen their legs and practice flexion and extension. Instructors then introduce teaching progressions for working on balance and positioning over the board. After that, the student moves over to a slack line to learn where their balance point is located.

Next up is a station with two 30-foot "lanes" drawn in a gentle pitch in the snow. One lane is wide, the other is narrow. Length is a consideration as the longer the lanes the more room students have to develop a flow and rhythm, as first they push along with just one foot in the binding through the narrow lane. Next, the kids strap on their boards and head to the wide lane. The wide lane allows for side-to-side drifting as they slide, learning to steer the board within the wide lane.

Going back to the narrow lane, the student learns to refine their front-foot steering by keeping the board in a straighter line. We also have large rubber balls for balance exercises and use our SkiRings to improve balance and position over the board. A favorite is our ground-level mattress pad made just for a great first experience on a box.

– Bill Bonkowski

lesson is to see who can glide the farthest without setting the free foot down. By observing the strong sides of the students, we set them up for success by putting the ski on their strong side first. Next, we take the strong-side ski off and put the ski on the other foot. Explaining that it's normal to have a stronger side, we have kids repeat the exercises. Finally, we help the kids put on both skis. At this point, they're really "getting it" and the excitement is palpable.

Once children can complete the straight runs with two skis, we move onto wedge movements on the flats. After that, we have the student sidestep up the center of the small hill, using props such as SkiRings to assist students if needed. Once each student can perform a wedge on the little hill, we move to the other side of our hill by sidesteping up a painted track. Students move up a little higher every time until they reach the top of our learning area. The children are also taught to herring-bone up the painted lines to learn a different way of climbing. Once their wedges and wedge change-ups are successful, we guide the students to the

rope tow, more confident in their ability to handle the next phase of their learning – heading out of the beginner learning area and putting all their newfound skills to the test on more challenging terrain.

Hanson Hills and countless youngsters have benefitted from our new program, with the results speaking for themselves. We've found that children's skills develop quickly when you know and understand your student profile and develop a learning environment that facilitates solid learning outcomes. We've learned that use of our program is not confined to children only. Working together with a limited budget and passion for our industry has led to success for the school, community. And, most importantly, our industry's future participants. ☑

A 42-year member of PSIA-AASI, **Bill Bonkowski** is the snowsports school director at Michigan's Hanson Hills ([hansonhills.org](http://hansonhills.org)). Level II-certified alpine instructor with a Children's Specialist 1 credential, he also teaches at Antrim Ski Academy at ShantyCreek/Schuss Mountain in Bellaire, Michigan.