

# Supersonic Ski Lessons

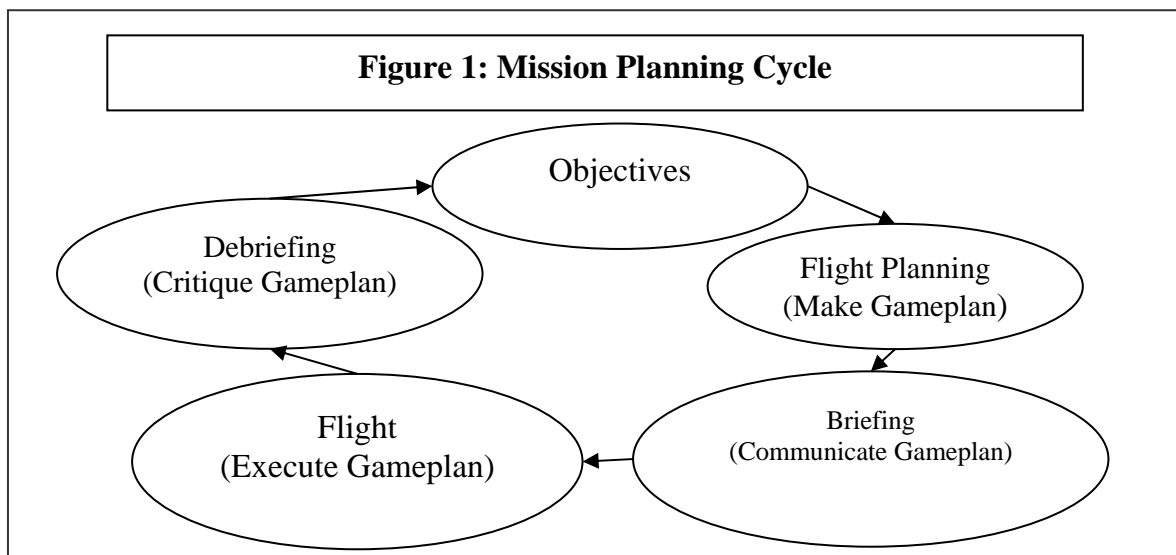
By Eric Chandler

There you are, skimming the treetops at 500 miles per hour. You sense the enemy surface-to-air missiles trying to find you and shoot you down. Only a few more miles until the target area. Uh-oh. Looks like some enemy fighter planes on the radar. This is going to be a rough day. Are you reading the wrong page? Nope. Training to fly behind enemy lines and training for the American Birkebeiner have more in common than you might think.

Training for aerial combat is a complex task that takes long-term commitment and discipline. Years of training manifest themselves in split-second decisions. Training for a marathon ski race is very similar. Long range plans show themselves on race day when a myriad of decisions are made in a short time. Olympic athletes dedicate decades to a single competition for a gold medal. A race is a blink of an eye compared to the training that leads up to it.

Fighter pilots train using a process that works for any kind of training. The heart of this process is the *Debriefing* after a flight. Often, the *Debriefing* lasts longer than the flight itself. During the *Debriefing* you get *Lessons Learned* and assess your *Gameplan*. Without *Lessons Learned*, an F-16 sortie is just a lot of heat and noise. Insisting upon learning something each day is how you ratchet yourself up to being a better pilot. And a better skier.

As an instructor pilot, I use an iterative process to build mission success. I've used this process thousands of times, on thousands of flights. This circular process never ends. Figure 1 describes what I call the *Mission Planning Cycle*. Replace "Flight" with "Race" and you'll start to see the parallels.



First, you **Determine your Objectives**. These must be clearly defined and measurable. “Do your best!” is a good philosophy, but it’s not a good objective. “Defend the airport from attack for one hour” or “Ski the Birnie in less than 3 hours” are good examples. Every single time I fly, I stand in front of the room and write my objectives on a dry-erase board. You must write down your skiing objectives.

Next, **Build a Gameplan** to meet your objectives. This could be the long-term training plan for the year prior to your race, and short-term stuff like the clothes you’ll lay out on race morning, or when to start driving to get to the start. Please note that I haven’t even started discussing your race tactics. This plan has a lot of moving parts. Write out your plan.

Third, you need to **Brief your Gameplan**. Before a flight, I stand and deliver an hour-long briefing to the pilots I’m leading. If you value your performance, make sure those around you know the importance of their roles. Your skiing team might be your family, and they can’t read minds. Everyone around you has a role in your success. Make sure everybody (including you) understands the plan.

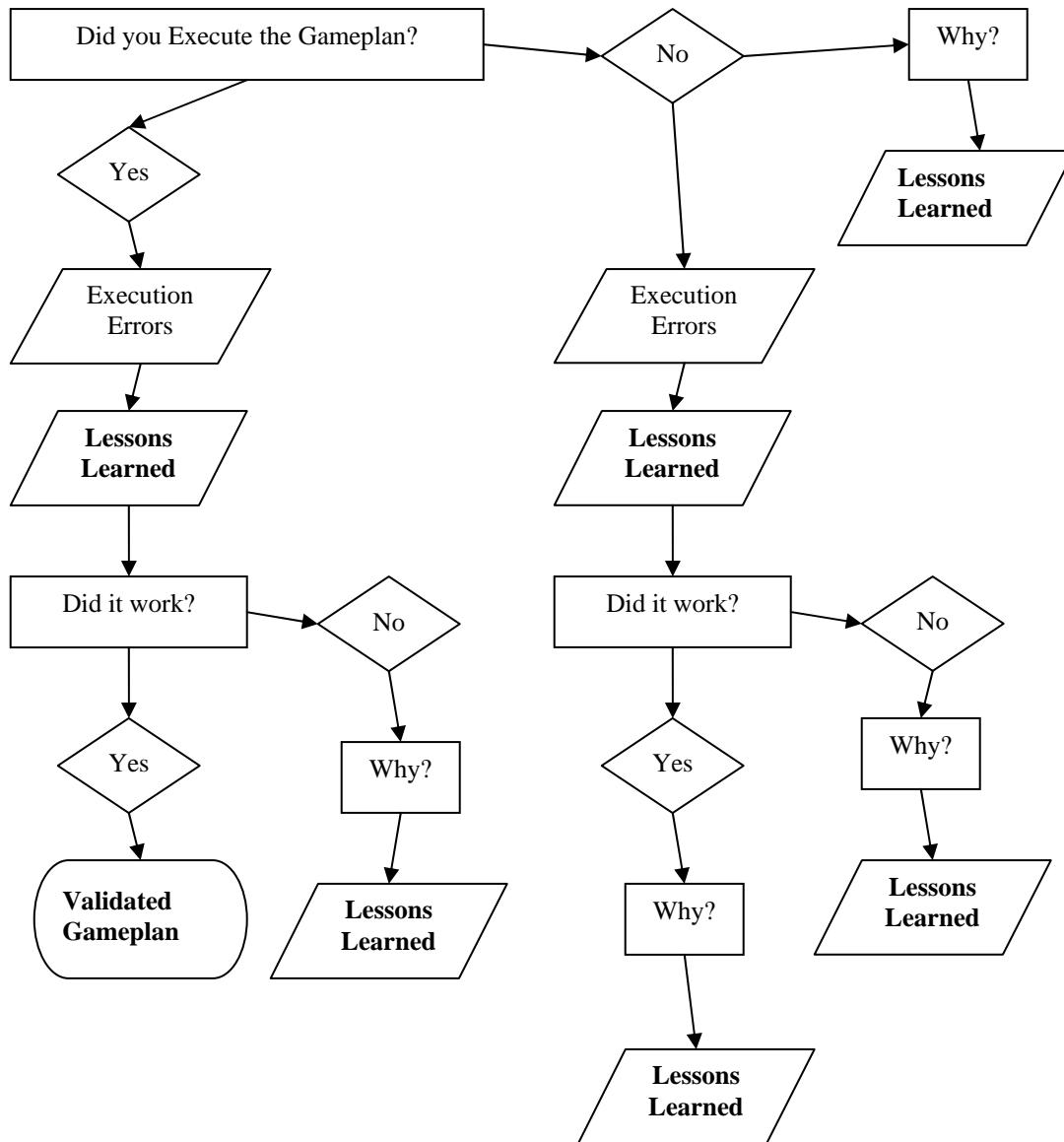
Fourth, **Execute the Gameplan**. You’ve been rollerskiing all summer. Thousands of sit-ups. Miles of pole-hiking. By gosh, on race morning, when the cannon goes off, put your race day plan into action. If you come up with the plan “on the ground at zero miles per hour” and then blow it off during the heat of battle, you’ve wasted your time.

So you race. You fight with Bitch Hill. Your muscles are tired after the finish line. You’ve got your soup and you want to rest. You’re at a crucial point. Your most important task is to determine **Lessons Learned**. This is hard because, whether you just pulled 9 G’s in a dogfight or just finished a ski race, you’re pooped. Buck up, little camper. Start the **Debriefing**.

Use the **Debriefing Process** (Figure 2) to remind everyone of the **Objectives**, **Reconstruct** events, figure out **Execution Errors**, derive **Lessons Learned** and end by assessing how well you met your **Objectives**. Pull out your list of **Objectives** and remind yourself what it was you set out to do. Without being judgmental, simply reconstruct what actually happened. How many hours did you train this year? When did your alarm go off? What did you eat and when? What pace and heart rate did you start with? What did you take at the feeds? Once you’ve figured out what you actually did, you can see whether or not you actually executed your game plan. Leave your ego at the door and be brutally honest. Debrief yourself using perfect execution of the gameplan as your standard. The **Debriefing Process** (Figure 2) helps you wring **Lessons Learned** out of every

single *Execution Error* you can find. You get two major outputs using this debriefing process: a list of *Lessons Learned* and an assessment of the quality of your *Gameplan*.

**Figure 2: Debriefing Process**

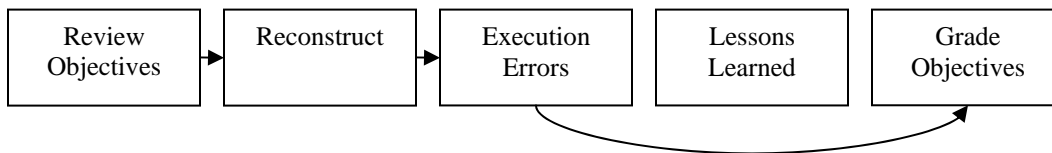


So what exactly is a *Lesson Learned*? A *Lesson Learned* is a declarative statement that tells you specifically how to correct an *Execution Error*. The problem with most people is that they think *Execution Errors* and *Lessons Learned* are the same thing. Wrong. Any chimpanzee

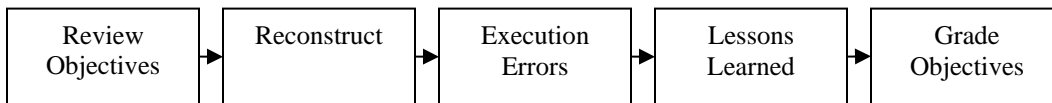
can figure out what they screwed up. You make your money as a coach or instructor when you find the root cause of an *Execution Error* and make a *Lesson Learned* that fixes it.

For example, let's say you reconstruct your Birkie and you blew off taking any food at the feed stations. Let's say you bonked at Bitch Hill and barely made it to Main Street. Your *Execution Error* is: Didn't take on enough calories during the race. Most people stop here, review their *Objectives*, and call it a day. "I didn't eat and I didn't meet my time goal. See you next year!" Good job, chimp. (See Figure 3)

**Figure 3: Debriefing for Chimps**



**Figure 4: Debriefing for Skiers**



You're not an animal. You're a skier. The hard work comes in finding root causes and fixing them. (Figure 4) In this bonk example, the root cause is fairly easy to identify. A good *Lesson Learned* would be: "Take a gel pack of food at each food station." Another way to make sure you're creating *Lessons Learned* is to say to yourself, "Next time I will... (Fill in the blank)." The part where you filled in the blank should go down on paper as one of your *Lessons Learned*. When you review your notes to prep for another race, you will read helpful things like "Drink at least 20 ounces of water per hour during the race" or "Avoid drinking 12 beers the night before the race." You are NOT tracking *Lessons Learned* when your notes say things like "feed station" or "water" or "hangover." You want your notes to be your coach-mind telling your athlete-mind how to improve

You're nearly done with your **Debriefing**. The next step is to see whether the **Gameplan** was valid. There's only one path in the **Debriefing Process** (Figure 2) that proves a **Gameplan** is successful—the one where you **Execute the Gameplan** and it works. Even in that path, you'll find **Lessons Learned** that can make a successful plan even better. Races and missions are rarely flawless. I joke that other pilots should write me a postcard describing their perfect sortie. I'll be in a cross-country skier retirement home before that happens. All the other paths in Figure 2 help you find **Lessons Learned**, but they won't allow you to say, "That was a good overall tactic."

My favorite example of successful gameplan execution was in a Lance Armstrong interview I read on Cyclingnews.com. He'd won the Tour de France for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time in a row. Here's an excerpt:

**Cyclingnews:** *First of all, we wanted to talk to you about the challenges facing you and USPS in going for your fourth consecutive Tour De France win. You've been quoted as saying that you, Johan (Bruyneel) and the team have created a "template"; that you have put in place a winning program. Can you tell us more about this and how you see the challenge this year of going for your fourth consecutive Tour De France win?*

**Lance Armstrong:** *Well, I mean the answer is pretty boring because, like you say, we have the program, we have this template and we just haven't changed it. We just keep basically hitting rewind and play, rewind and play in terms of the preparation.*

His choice of the word "template" just sang to me. It was easy for me to imagine his cycling team using the mission planning cycle I described above. They obviously used a process the previous 3 years to build plans, execute them, make **Lessons Learned**, and tweak their plan into a **Validated Gameplan** or "template" for success. Hallelujah. People who learn win the Tour de France 7 times in a row.

More than anything, go out and ski. Just do it, as they say. But if you have specific performance goals, be disciplined in your self-critique. If you remember nothing else, build **Lessons Learned** like I described. The ultimate goal is to build a **Gameplan** that delivers success. You can become a fighter pilot of the trails. That was 15 years of F-16 instructor experience distilled into one paper for a better Birkie. That's something for your tax dollar.