



ARMY WINTER SPORTS CORE NARRATIVE

1. The Army Winter Sports Association (AWSA)¹, underpinned by secondary duty volunteers, manages the winter sports enterprise, and facilitates participation in exercises from unit level to tri-service. It draws on public and non-public funds, appropriate to the discipline.² Since forming in 1947, at the behest of Field Marshal Montgomery, the vanguard of the AWSA has been Service and international competition, with 108 soldiers competing over the years at the Olympics. Today, that number is dwarfed by the 3,000³ who participate across the 8 disciplines each year, 80% of whom take part for the first time. The main driver of the AWSA is to make better soldiers by developing their mental and physical resilience.
2. Winter disciplines stretch participants far beyond a normal sport. Why? For most participants both the environment and activity are alien and unfamiliar. If the Army wants robust soldiers, it must do robust things, and if it wants soldiers to know how to deal with fear then winter sports put soldiers in a position to experience it – the process makes us tougher, it builds spirit, it bonds teams; in short it makes us more operationally ready.
3. Taken well out of their comfort zone, the soldier faces genuine fear when: in Skeleton they hurtle down an icy track at 90 mph; in Alpine they fly off a downhill jump at 70 mph; or during Biathlon they try to hit a small target at 50m with their heart thumping 180 beats-a-minute. Most fail the second time, many the third. The intensity of the activity allows the soldier to fail, to learn and, through competition, to succeed. Winter sports significantly enhance the moral and physical components of fighting power.
4. Operating across Europe in small teams, focused on their discipline, winter sport activities test teamwork, management, and leadership. Placing junior officers and soldiers in unique positions of responsibility, winter sports exercises breed confidence and empower authority and responsibility at much lower levels than is the norm and well away from the usual comfort blanket of a higher headquarters. Organising a winter sports overseas exercise is as complex as they come. Young officers must navigate the deployment planning process, encountering parts of the military otherwise unseen by their peers.
5. Winter sports forms a unique part of ‘the offer’ providing an intense challenge, away from what is routine or well understood. It is tangible, exciting, and takes soldiers overseas to do things, that for most, are only accessible because they serve in uniform. It is for these reasons, and many others, it is considered by most to be, ‘hugely important to the retention of our officers and soldiers’.⁴ Soldiers seek out the experience and challenge that winter sports offer and the AWSA optimises its delivery each year to maximise these opportunities.
6. Military prowess lies at the core of Army winter sports. They inspire, challenge, and place a demand on the full range of the soldier’s toolkit. Those that participate return with deeper reserves of mental and physical resilience and a newfound appreciation for what they can push themselves to achieve when the pressure is really on.

¹ Supports eight disciplines: Alpine, Bobsleigh, Cresta, Luge, Nordic (Biathlon & Cross Country), Snowboard, Skeleton and Telemark.

² Policy detail covered in Ref A.

³ 25% of participants are female.

⁴ General Sir Patrick Sanders KCB, CBE, DSO ADC Gen, AWSA President’s Report, 2019.