

## The nordic connection

By Vince Shuley



STORY BY VINCE SHULEY

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**T**no longer feel secure.

The stiffness of my alpine ski boots — that rigid plastic that helps keep me upright on skis — is nowhere to be seen, replaced with a flimsy rubber sock lined with neoprene. I've been a lifelong alpine skier and have freed my heel plenty on backcountry skin tracks, but none of that seems to be helping my Bambi-like tendencies as I walk around on toothpick shaped skis for my first Nordic lesson.

John Heilig the manager of Nordic Sport at Whistler Sport Legacies, is my instructor and guide today at Whistler Olympic Park (WOP). His years as an athlete and coach of the Canadian Nordic Combined Ski team means that if I end up on my ass trying this new sport today, I can't blame the quality of the instruction.

Heilig starts with tuning in my equipment; tightening up the boots and showing me the correct way to leash these absurdly long poles to my wrists.

"They should feel like an extension of your arms," he analogizes as he demonstrates the throwing movement of the poles behind him mid-stride. "They're not used for balance, only for propulsion."

Now with these telescopic sticks firmly attached, I realize you can't really do much else with your hands while cross-country skiing. The grip on the pole barely leaves the palm of my hand as I try the propulsion technique just demonstrated to me. Adjusting zippers proves difficult, reaching for a beer would be out of the question. Then John takes my poles away.

"Let's see how you do without those," he muses.

With no metal edge on my skis, the years of skating across ski hill flats firmly affixed to my alpine boards seems to be doing me a disservice. The skis wash out from beneath me, causing me to bobble every few steps until I start to find the balance point. I think back to all the Nordic skate events I watched during the

2010 Olympic Games right here at WOP, and remember seeing the torsos of the racers hunching over like long track speed skaters. With a few tunes of my body position from John, I start to pick up the rhythm and increase my speed.

Corners are already somewhat scary with no ability to edge, but I start to figure out the stepping motion and feel like I'm actually accelerating out of the curve. John returns my poles to me and I take off after him at a good clip for my tour of the facilities at WOP.

## THE ORIGINAL SKIING

Scandinavia is heralded as the birthplace of skiing, where it was invented as a utilitarian means of transportation over snow. It allows humans to achieve terrestrial locomotion during the winter months, far eclipsing the speed of remedial snow shoes. Historically, the increased human energy efficiency on skis allowed for more effective hunting, herding and foraging for arctic dwellers as far back as 2000 BC (according to dated cave paintings found in Norway, though evidence of skiing even earlier in China exists).

The use of ski-equipped troops in warfare dates back as far as 13th-century Denmark, but became more prominent in areas of alpine geography during World War I and II. Most notably was the Winter War of 1939–1940, when Finland defended its borders against Soviet invasion. The most notable victory was the Battle of Suomussalmi in 1939, where ski and sled-equipped Finnish troops were able to outmanoeuvre and ambush the Soviet mechanized brigades, which relied on logging roads for transport. Just 11,000 Finnish soldiers managed a decisive victory over 45,000 Soviet troops and an entire tank division.

The sport of cross-country skiing evolved from competitions carried out by military, which became popular in the Norway during the 1800s and paved the way for the ski touring races that began in the European Alps in the early 20th century.

The "classic" technique is the original style of Nordic, where the skier kicks and glides the skis (known as the "diagonal stride"), usually in a track that has parallel grooves groomed into it, though classic equipment can also be used for breaking trail in virgin snow. Friction is achieved by the skis having scales etched or moulded into their bases under the skiers feet (the "kick zone") or by applying a certain type of wax for increased grip.

Skate skiing is much more contemporary, having appeared in the 1930s when bindings were adaptable to both downhill and cross-country and allowed the skier to cross flat areas like an ice skater. But the more definitive transition came in the early 1980s. Bill Koch was the first American to win a medal at an international cross-country skiing competition at the European junior championships in 1974 and went on to win a silver medal at the 1976 Winter Olympic Games in Innsbruck, Austria. After a poor performance at the 1980 Games due to stress from media as well as being an asthmatic, Koch resurfaced after observing the "skate step" at a Swedish ski marathon and applied the technique to win the 1982 World Cup of Cross-Country Skiing.

Controversy ensued, but within five years the sport of cross country skiing had been completely transformed. The term "freestyle" had been applied to races that allowed skating, but only in certain parts of the course. Officials in the International Ski Federation (FIS) —especially the Norwegians — were concerned traditional cross-country skiing would be corrupted and moved for the skate technique to be banned all together where prepared tracks existed. The ban did not happen, but FIS made sure it would know go unchecked at its 1983 congress. The new rules were:

No skating in the first 100 metres after the start.

No skating within 200 metres of the finish.

No skating in the relay race 200 metres before and after the racer exchange.

Not coincidentally, the starting and finishing areas are where TV cameras and photographers are primarily located, so that the ban on skating ensured that the "corrupting" new technique would be less visible to the public.

In 1986, after a series of failed attempts by FIS at testing how to ban skating at certain areas of race courses, together with pressure from a ski industry that wanted to start manufacturing specialized skate skiing equipment, change came. After 63 traditional years of overseeing international cross country ski

competitions, the FIS council ultimately decided to split the sport into classic and freestyle disciplines. Nordic Combined and biathlon soon adopted skating, and recreationalists were not far behind in taking up the new faster, more exciting method of cross-country skiing. Fashion also followed, with apparel switching to sleek, tight fitting pants and jackets that suited the faster speed and dynamic athleticism of skating.

"The fastest speed I ever clocked with my Strava was 74km/h, going downhill from the Callaghan Lodge," said Whistler local Munro "Munny" Duncan, a Nordic racer and coach for 15 years.

"You do get going really, really fast. But I like it because it's all about balance, it's a graceful sport. It's so much fun."

Skate skiing evolved from racers looking for greater speeds, so it's not surprising to see Whistler's alpine skiing and mountain bike enthusiasts take up skate over classic. The moderate temperatures on the West Coast also means Classic skiers will sometimes opt to use Klister, a specialized Nordic ski wax that applies much like an epoxy.

"People steer away from that," said Duncan.

"They don't have the time, they want to put on their skis and go skating. Having said that, a good classic skier can keep up with the best skate skiers if you have good technique. Classic is also easier on the cardiovascular system and doesn't require as much coordination as skate, so it's easier for people just to get out there and enjoy the environment. In cycling terms, skate skiing is like mountain biking, classic is like road riding."

## CROSSING WHISTLER'S COUNTRY

Here in Whistler, the Olympic Legacy has left us with a world-class recreation and training facility in the Callaghan Valley, which is complemented by the Lost Lake Trails right next to Whistler Village and the backcountry experience of Callaghan Country.

"Nordic skiing remains a niche experience, relative to the overall Whistler experience, but it is an important winter activity with room to grow interest and Tourism Whistler has led targeted Nordic marketing campaigns in partnership with the local Nordic facilities, in order to promote that experience," said Patricia Westerholm, manager of communications at Tourism Whistler in an email to Pique.

"The development of Whistler Olympic Park through the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games not only expanded our world-class facilities and the product offering, but the increase in awareness from hosting the Nordic events in 2010 has also helped to raise the profile of Whistler's Nordic activities."

Ian Goldstone, owner of Cross Country Connection at Lost Lake, sees a pent up demand for Nordic skiing at the start of every winter, regardless of how early or late the season starts..

"You open the door, put the equipment out in front of the shop and people show up," said Goldstone of the growing interest in the sport.

"Once we get the snow, people are ready to ski and we're busy. The grooming staff do an amazing job, they work so hard moving and farming snow to get the snow to where it needs to be. But if we had snowmaking, we could open firm in early December every year which would drive both season pass and regular ticket sales."

Goldstone said that the Lost Lake trails can run on base as little as eight centimetres, much less than an alpine ski hill because skiers are not pushing snow downhill all day. The ski outs on Whistler and Blackcomb remain after weeks of rain because of the snowmaking, which Goldstone sees as a potential necessity for Lost Lake in the future.

The RMOW has looked into snowmaking at Lost Lake Park, hiring a contractor in 2014 to perform a feasibility study for snowmaking along a 4.5-km trail loop.

"The study was undertaken in recognition of the need to replace existing ageing lighting infrastructure in the next few years to determine what the incremental costs would be to install water and upgraded power infrastructure should the municipality wish to pursue snowmaking in Lost Lake Park for cross country

operations," read a statement from Michele Comeau, the RMOW's communications manager.

"The resulting report indicated a rough cost estimated of approximately one million dollars for a phased installation of snowmaking infrastructure and equipment for approximately 4.5 km of trails."

The statement went on to say that further analysis of the micro-hydro portion of the project is required, as well as a business case analysis to determine if this type of infrastructure investment would be worthwhile for the municipality.

Duncan, despite the countless hours of training at Lost Lake over the years, is wary of such an investment.

"Snowmaking is very expensive, even just for the installation," he said.

"(Lost Lake) is at a lower elevation to where the Callaghan sits, where we can get away with snowmaking. I'd rather see more lights put in at Lost Lake and extend the night loop, that would be much more cost effective. We can't have these astronomical costs associated with the sport for little return."

WOP has limited snowmaking around the Olympic ski jump, but was able to open 1,000 metres of trail as early as the second week of November before a single snowflake had fallen. By stockpiling snow in a massive trench 50 metres long, 25 metres wide and four metres deep, and covering the surface with a 30-cm-thick layer of sawdust, WOP was able to utilize snow from the previous season and have veritable track available for high performance athletes to train on. Plans are to increase the amount of stockpiled snow over the summer of 2015, depending on how much snow falls between now and April.

While cross-country skiing is regarded as a day activity, combining a backcountry wilderness experience is also a popular attraction for Nordic skiers. Callaghan Country Wilderness Adventures operates the Journeyman's Lodge, a rustic yet luxurious full-service backcountry chalet a little over 13 kilometres from the nearest road.

"We're building on our success of wilderness skiing, which includes cross country, skate skiing and ski touring," said Brad Sills, owner of Callaghan Country.

"That's our specialty and what our backcountry lodge caters to. It's certainly the most comprehensive Nordic ski facility in North America; we offer this huge menu of wilderness skiing. For groups of people, be they multi-generational or couples with kids, everyone can come and share a lovely adventure together, and yet they might do two or three different day activities while they're here."

With the three Nordic facilities offering unique products: Lost Lake the convenience of being Village-side, WOP for the biggest and comprehensive trail system suitable for hosting any size of event and Callaghan Country for the luxurious wilderness getaway, there is plenty of room for growth, locally, for the oldest form of skiing.

## THE WINTER TOONIE

Nordic skiing in Whistler has experienced two significant spikes in popularity, both before the 2010 Winter Games and shortly after, but a soft start to the 2013/14 season and a rain-filled valley this year has made it challenging to get people out on skinny skis.

"It's the same usual suspects as most Toonie races go," said Brent Murdoch, the president of Whistler Nordics, of the regular attendees.

"What's nice is that the sponsors are very enthusiastic once again. I think what's great is that we're really focusing less on the racing and more on the socializing after the race. We're trying to build (numbers) back up again like we had in years past."

While the 30-to 40-strong turnout for Nordic Toonies is nowhere near that of the WORCA mountain bike Toonies in the summer, participants remain fiercely loyal and continue to come out to weekly Toonies and regional races such as the TECK Coast Cup Series.

"We're five years past the Olympics now and we're actually starting to see a lot more participants in programs up and down the Sea to Sky corridor in Hollyburn, Squamish and Pemberton and ourselves," said Murdoch.

"We don't have a ton of people, but we're definitely noticing a lot more participation at the younger level."

Reaching out to schools has been integral to engaging youth in the sport, both for the Whistler Nordics and WOP. Evening programs have run in Lost Lake for Whistler Secondary School kids and WOP invites elementary schools from all over the Sea to Sky and Lower Mainland to come up to the Callaghan Valley and try the sport for an affordable rate.

WOP has also taken a low-cost, high-volume approach with its Wednesday night program, where people can rent classic or skate gear and use the lit trail system for just five dollars each.

"To still have a line-up of people looking for food at our cafeteria at 8:45 p.m., when we close at nine o'clock, that's something we've dreamed about," said Lindsay Durno, Director at WOP.

"Although we've reduced our price to five dollars (for everything), businesswise our numbers have gone up and our dollar value has gone up."

Whether the those patrons are converting to season pass holders and buying equipment remains to be seen, but offering an affordable, group-friendly product is giving exposure to the sport through word of mouth. The hope is to eventually make evening Nordic skiing a stop-in activity at WOP for regional skiers heading up to visit Whistler for the weekend.

It's been a tough year for Nordic skiing, not just for all three Whistler operators, but for all the recreation-based families and individuals who love to blend snow sliding with aerobic exercise. Little snow has fallen at lower elevations and several Pineapple Express rainstorms have engulfed the south coast of B.C., making grooming and even shovelling a delicate art to keep trails open. The remainder of races this year hang in the balance on whether winter will return, but the persistent locals are not ready to hang up their skis quite yet. A dedicated niche of the skiing community will see the season through and return next year, hopefully to an early start.

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