

ForbesLife

Revisionist Skiing

Helen Coster 12.08.08, 12:00 AM ET



The world's first downhill ski race took place--where? Not New England. Not Europe. It was in the High Sierra, raced by drunken miners with boards the size of telephone poles strapped to their feet.

Sixty years before Dartmouth undergrads schussed Mount Moosilauke in what is popularly regarded as the first downhill ski competition in the U.S., and 40 years before the first downhill race in Europe, miners--bored and snowbound in California's High Sierra--had already raced. They did it on skis ridiculously long--14 to 16 feet--made of Douglas fir and bound to their feet with leather straps. The year was 1867.

That tradition is kept alive today by the Plumas Ski Club near Johnsville, Calif., an hour and a half by car northwest of Lake Tahoe. Here "longboard" racers dressed in period garb compete annually in three events, snow permitting, one during each of the first three months of the year. True to their originals, skiers race straight downhill without turning, reaching speeds of 45 miles an hour. Helmets and goggles--which the ancients did not use--are disallowed. Flasks of whiskey are not.

At last year's World Championship sportsmen competed to the strains of live music (two accordions and a fiddle). County Supervisor Robert Meacher, who owns a restaurant, provided a chicken barbecue.

The Johnsville area was the Silicon Valley of the 19th century, full of dreamers looking for riches. Here and there, amid mountains dubbed by *National Geographic* The Lost Sierra, you still can find old cables that hauled mining buckets up the mountain and that today's longboarders believe doubled as the world's first ski lift.

January's race attracted some 30 competitors and 270 spectators. Racer Scott Lawson, striving for authenticity, wore a red flannel shirt emblazoned with a white star on the chest--a replica of shirts worn by the Alturas Snowshoe Club, one of the earliest sponsors of the race.

Women compete wearing pantaloons and long dresses, which they carefully pin down, hoping to prevent a wardrobe malfunction. Sometimes despite their efforts, "The skirts blow up in their faces," says Lawson. "They end up showing everyone their bloomers." Worse, they can't see where they're going.

Racers wax their boards with an old-fashioned preparation called "dope," whose original recipe called for spermaceti--a fatty substance produced by sperm whales. Since spermaceti is hard to come by now, Lawson--the race's official "dope man"--uses paraffin. On race day, between runs, he rubs cold dope onto competitors' skis.

The race takes all of 30 seconds. Skiers, one pair at a time, climb to the top of the slope and await the starter's gong (an 18-inch saw blade suspended from a wooden tripod). They're off!

"I think the secret is getting a really good start," says Allison Youngs, a 60-year-old retired horticulturist who won the January and March 2008 races. "The only way to win is to not check your speed at all." After a hard push, racers assume an aerodynamic position: legs hip-width apart, a low, tight crouch, rear end on their heels, arms forward. A wooden pole, tucked underneath one arm, is used for braking.

"You have 6 feet of ski wiggling like spaghetti out in front of you," says Lawson. "You're trying to keep the tips from crossing." Because the skis have no edges they tend to slide sideways. As racers cross the finish, they crouch and plant the stopping pole between their legs, pulling on it like a sea-anchor.

The science of the sport is inexact. "Crashes can be pretty exciting," says Robert Russell, winner of seven longboard championships. "You have 14 feet of board swinging around, and sometimes, in the snow dust, it's hard to see what's going on." Past champion Kenneth (Buster) Hyman, a general contractor, saw a pipperoo of an accident in January: "Some guy crashed about 10 feet out of the gate. He got up, and the guy he was racing against crashed 10 feet later. The crowd went wild." In March James Nemeth from Truckee won the award for best crash. A spectator guessed that either the weight of Nemeth's flask or the effect of its contents threw him off balance.

The scene après-ski is very unlike St. Moritz. There's no Cristal, no deposed nobility frolicking on white bearskin rugs. Instead survivors head for the Mohawk Tavern, which looks like it's about to fall over and is heated by a pellet stove. Some play the jukebox, others Liar's Dice. Later they might head over to Pete's cabin. That would be a cabin owned by Pete, the guy who makes the longboards.

In a remote section of the High Sierra near Johnsville, Calif., local skiers compete in an annual race on skis up to 16 feet long. The "longboarders" honor the tradition of 19th-century miners who, bored and snowbound, constructed skis from Douglas fir lumber and began racing one another.



Authentic Experience

True to their originals, skiers use leather straps as bindings and dress in period-style clothing. Goggles and helmets, which the original racers didn't use, are disallowed. Flasks of whiskey are not.



Hands On

The skis are 14 to 16 feet long and have no edges. Racers cut the longboards to size, then shape them by hand with planers and bend the tips. A nearby community college teaches a continuing education class in longboard construction.



Early Technology

The Johnsville area was the Silicon Valley of the 19th century, full of dreamers looking for riches. Here and there, you can still find old cables that hauled mining buckets up the mountainside; today's longboarders believe the system doubled as the world's first ski lift.



Gentle Course

The race course is no steeper than a bunny hill. Since the area's ski lifts don't work, participants must climb up to the starting line. National Geographic magazine once called the Johnsville area "the Lost Sierra."



Recreation

In the 19th century, miners in the Johnsville area used skis to travel among remote camps. Mining activity slowed during the winter months and, to entertain themselves, the men started racing.



Oversight

The event is officiated by members of E Clampus Vitus, also called "the Clampers," a fraternal organization founded by California miners. An officiant signals the start of the race by hitting a saw blade with a hammer.



Waxing

Between races, participants flip their skis onto a sawhorse and rub them with wax. The original longboard racers slicked their skis with a concoction known as "dope," which sometimes included spermaceti, a fatty substance produced by sperm whales. Today spermaceti is harder to come by, so most racers settle for paraffin instead.



The Finish

The race takes all of 30 seconds. To stop, racers stick a wooden pole between their legs and pull it like an anchor. Some racers have to fall down to stop. The upside: Whomever has the best crash wins an award.



Victory

Speed, not style, wins the race. The strongest start and the straightest line--not to mention the best "dope" and the best balance--usually determines the winner. "The only way to win is to not check your speed at all," says racer Allison Youngs.



'Appropriate' Dress

Women compete wearing pantaloons and long dresses, which they carefully pin down, hoping to prevent a wardrobe malfunction. "The skirts blow up in their faces," says racer Scott Lawson. "They end up showing everyone their bloomers." Worse, they can't see where they're going.