

Making Tracks: the History of the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club

Ski Club Programs, Events, and Operations over the Years

Since its creation in 1980, the WCCSC has experienced significant growth. As it grew, the club undertook numerous changes as it took on new programs, hosted various events, and even altered its governance structure in order to meet the needs of the increasing club membership.

A Growing Club

In the early years of the ski club it was a tiny organization, simply aiming to crack 200 members. Being such a small club and managing such an extensive trail system and large chalet, everyone was required to pitch in. As time progressed the club slowly grew. While founded on the basis of providing programs for competitive skiers, around 1992 the club began to reorient its focus towards recreational skiers. This resulted in an increase in club membership (and, based on the Yukon's race results at the national and international levels, it did nothing to hurt the competitive side of skiing).

By the winter of 2002-2003, the ski club was beginning to flirt with the 1000 member mark as it closed the season with 941 members. The increasing membership contributed to solving the financial difficulties that the club had experienced in the past. These numbers also resulted in the club obtaining a stronger voice in the community. In the April 2003 newsletter it was written: "Our numbers and importance in the community has helped to preserve an optimal amount of space on the 'lower bench'. We are now confident that our ski stadium needs will be met for the Canada Winter Games in 2007 and for club functions such as Jackrabbit lessons, Yukon Ski Team practices and large mass start events such as the Northwestel Loppet." However, the increased numbers also resulted in increased crowds in the wax room.

In the winter of 2007-2008, the WCCSC made a concerted effort to exceed the 1000 member mark. In the fall it was advertised that the 1000th member would receive a free membership for the following 2008-2009 season. On 20 January 2008, this free membership was awarded to Shari MacIntosh as for the first time ever the ski club achieved this goal. Since reaching this milestone, the club's membership has exceeded 1300 members.

Programming

One of the major draws to the club are the programs that it has offered over the years. In fact, this is what drew current club president Tom Ullyett to the club when he first entered his children on the Jackrabbits program. The Jackrabbits program was brought to Whitehorse in 1981 by Peter Saar, who was coaching the Yukon Ski Team at the time. It has since come to be considered the "flagship program for the club." Many notable club members have been involved with coaching this program over the years, including Paul Harris, Mike Gladish, and Ginny MacDonald. A significant element of the program is that it creates the potential for a young skier to become a lifelong skier.

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Over the years the ski club has tried to offer programming to all levels and age groups. Since its formation in 1980, the WCCSC offered a program for Masters skiers and some of its participants attended Masters World Cup races. In 1980, the Masters World Cup was held in Morin Heights, Quebec. This event was attended by a handful of Whitehorse skiers including Henk Waterreus and Peter Steele. According to the Waterreus, in the early days of the ski club the Masters, “Peter Steele, Dirk Templeman-Kluit and myself, irreverently referred to as the three old farts, used to chase each other around the ski trails as fast as we could go and that was the extent of our training.” Waterreus also boasted that by 1994 the club had the largest Masters ski group in Canada. In 1986, the Masters World Championships were held at Lake Placid, New York. Elsie Sumanik, the wife of the late Don Sumanik, had set the goal of competing in the event. She succeeded in achieving this goal and travelled east with fellow WCCSC members Henk Waterreus, Duchane Richards, Peter Steele, Grant Abbott, Gerry Whitley, and Rudy Sudrich. The skiers returned to Whitehorse with eight medals! Four medals were won by Sumanik while another four were won by Richards. In 1992, the Masters program saw more international success as Richards won gold and bronze medals at the Masters World Cup in Anchorage, Alaska. In addition to her great success in competition, Richards was active in coaching the Masters.



Credit: Whitehorse Star Ltd.

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By 1990, the ski club advertised Jackrabbits and Bunny lessons as well as adult lessons. Additionally there were a number of competitive programs for junior and senior athletes. Since this time, the programming has increased. The club's programs are now tied into the school system, involving both elementary and high school. This includes programs such as Ski S'cool and the Whitehorse School Challenge. As these programs have grown and as the WCCSC has become more recreationally oriented, Cross Country Yukon has assumed responsibility for the competitive aspect of the club.

The Loppet

While the Jackrabbits program may have become the signature program of the WCCSC, the Northwestel Loppet (formerly Yukon Gold Loppet) has arguably become its signature ski event. Beginning in 1984, the race was not for the meek as the course involved the long slog over Mount McIntyre. The event was embraced by the City of Whitehorse in 1990 when Mayor Don Branigan declared the week of February 25 to March 2 to be Cross Country Ski Week, which culminated with the Yukon Gold Loppet on March 3.



Credit: Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club.

For the 1991 event, the ski club sought to increase the number of participants to 250, the number required to qualify for the national loppet series, the Canadian Ski Odyssey. In an effort to make it more appealing to a broader range of skiers, a no tracking rule was adopted for the race. An additional development was the creation of the Father Mouchet Award and the first six recipients of this award were honoured at the banquet following the race. While the event fell short of 250 participants, by 1993 the Yukon Gold Loppet became part of the series. 1996 saw some additional changes to the loppet, this time to the course as the route passing over top of Mount McIntyre was abandoned for two twenty kilometre loops, amounting to a 40 kilometre race.

However, in 2008 for the race's 25th anniversary, the route once again returned to ascending and descending the mountain.

Other Events

Over the years the WCCSC has hosted or been involved with numerous other skiing events. Beginning in the 1980s, the club held an annual pole, pedal, and pound triathlon. This involved roller skiing, cycling, and running. The winner was not the person who posted the fastest time, but the person who posted a time closest to his or her estimated time. The ski club also provided assistance to other cross country skiing organizations. For instance, when the Marsh Lake Loppet was first held in 1996, the WCCSC and Cross Country Yukon provided technical assistance to the organizers. In addition to competitive events, the club has hosted recreational events – sometimes even having little to do with skiing. In March 2005, l'Association Franco-Yukonnaise hosted a maple sugar festival which was held at Harvey Hut. During the event the ski club waived the fees for the day passes.

Operations

As the club grew, it experienced changes in its operations. While the operations were once largely volunteer run, over the years it has hired staff to take on certain functions for the club. Of course, the volunteer effort remains vital to the functioning of the club.

In 1988, the ski club made the decision to hire a manager. Pete Saar, who was coaching the Yukon Ski Team had also been acting as an administrator. However, the work load was becoming too much and a manager needed to be hired. Mike Gladish, who was the club's president at the time, resigned his position and took on the job as manager. Initially the job was only part time, requiring roughly thirty hours of work per month. Karen Thompson also served as club manager for a period from 1992 until 1996, when Gladish once again became club manager. Through the mid-'90s, the position became more and more of a job. At the time, a large part of the position was organizing the trail groomers, who were volunteers until the late 1990s. Between 1998 and 2001, Gladish and Sue Mickle (who had previously been the manager for Cross Country Yukon) worked as co-managers.

As the membership of the club grew, more services were provided. This included the introduction of the Northwestel sponsored Ski Information Line in the fall of 2004 and The Ski Base later that winter. With the establishment of the Ski Base, a small ski shop in the corner of the wax room, skiers were able to rent equipment and purchase wax on site.

The increased services that the club undertook with the establishment of The Ski Base resulted in the need to hire more staff to run the operations. While a day in the life of an employee at The Ski Base varies, the following gives a sense of what a staff member might experience through the course of the day. As staff arrive at 8:30 a.m., they check the building, make daily updates of the

computer, phone line, and wax of the day board and check the phone messages and shovel snow from the deck area. Then the chalet opens at 9. By 10, the place is usually getting busy and staff are dealing with the first ski rentals of the day, booking ski lessons, taking registration for races or other ski programs, and explaining and selling memberships. Rentals require a tremendous amount of work on the part of the staff as they need to assist the renter as he or she is going out and then clean off the skis as they came in. Additionally, the staff are kept busy answering enquiries about the ski trails. During quiet times the staff occupy themselves with ski prep and glide waxing. Meanwhile, they also keep the coffee and hot chocolate supply topped off. There is also a social aspect to the job as staff talk to skiers to learn how the day's ski went and how their wax worked (or didn't, as the case may be).

In 2010, the WCCSC hired Claude Chabot as its first Executive Director. As membership swelled to over 1000 people, it had become too much for Gladish to manage the organization on his own. Consequently, Chabot was hired on a part time basis. While Gladish, as manager, maintained his role in overseeing the day-to-day operations of the club, Chabot was to take charge of financial matters as well as the oversight of projects taken on by the club. In addition to this, Sarah Murray was hired as the Program Manager.

Club Governance

The growth of the ski club did not only change the way it was managed by paid staff. It also resulted in a change in the function of the board of directors. From its inception, the ski club had an operational board which dealt with many of the day-to-day activities of the club. For instance, when Sandy Johnston was the club president during the mid-1980s, he found himself tasked with the day-to-day operations of the chalet such as knowing what kind of burgers the restaurant should serve. By 2010, this was no longer an adequate way to govern the club as it had grown to over 1300 members. As a result, Gladish and Chabot shouldered the brunt of the operational aspects of the club while the board shifted its focus towards policy and strategic concerns.