

Snowshoe Racing: The New Winter Adventure Sport

By Dean Woodbeck

If you think of snowshoes as those wooden beasts that Grizzly Adams had hanging up in his cabin, it is time for an upgrade.

Think spring-loaded suspension on a lightweight composite frame. Think injection molded polyurethane bindings. Think people running 15 miles on racing snowshoes that weigh less than three pounds. Elite male racers can cover a 10-km course in less than five minutes per kilometer. For the women, it is under six minutes.

These are not your Grampa Grizzly's snowshoes worn by the hunter-gatherers of long ago.

Like cross-country skiing, snowshoeing has come a long way since the days of wood and leather. Hundreds of years ago, native people in North America used snowshoes—sometimes seven feet long—to go where no one had gone before, in search of game and food. When Europeans arrived on the scene, the explorers, trappers, and hunters used snowshoes, too, particularly the beavertail design, which was very stable and floated on the deep powdery snow.

The length and width have shrunk, with popular wooden recreational snowshoes now sold in lengths ranging from 30-36 inches and generally 10-13 inches wide.

Reduce those dimensions even more, throw in some metal alloy frames, and you have a snowshoe made for speed—just eight inches wide and 25 inches long. Springy frames provide the racer with an extra push and built-in cleats provide traction. Plastics, synthetic straps and buckles have replaced leather for bindings.

“One of our biggest challenges is to get people to understand that snowshoe racing isn't waddling around like a duck,” said Mark Elmore, sports director for the United States Snowshoe Association (USSSA). Since 2001, his organization has organized a national snowshoe racing championship, featuring 5-km and 10-km events.

“The reality is that there are a number of excellent manufacturers who make high-quality fitness snowshoes. They are light, some a little less than one pound per shoe, and small enough for a runner to use a normal gait.”

Elmore says snowshoeing, as a recreational pursuit, attracts four or five million participants each winter. He said the significantly smaller racing aspect has slowly grown and that endurance and adventure athletes are beginning to see its value.

“Running on snowshoes fits their training programs,” he said.

Snowshoe racing tends to attract cross-country skiers and marathon runners, as well as those who just want to get outside in the winter.

Stuart Kramer won the 25-km snowshoe race at the 2005 Noquemanon cross country ski marathon in Marquette, Michigan. As a cross country runner, he was the 2003 Upper

Peninsula high school champion and now runs in college for Michigan Tech. He did his first snowshoe race on a whim.

“I had been running a lot more than skiing that winter (2004), so I decided to do the snowshoe race at the Noquemanon,” he said. He borrowed a pair of snowshoes and tried them out for the first time the day before the race.

Elmore isn’t surprised at the story. “There is absolutely no learning curve. The only thing to learn is how to put them on your feet.”

Participants say it is easy to adapt to this new style of running with eight-inch-wide shoes on your feet.

“You pick it up pretty quickly,” said Anne Siegrist, a marathon runner and skier from Appleton, Wisconsin. “In the beginning, I would hit one ankle with the snowshoe on my other foot, but I soon adjusted. I would say a runner can pick this up in about 15 minutes.”

Siegrist has completed all 15 Fox Cities Marathons and skied the Birkie. She has also skied the Noquemanon, but decided to race the 2005 event on snowshoes instead—and won.

“It is the same scenery,” she said. “But you seem to enjoy it more and you see more. All the snow hanging on the trees—I missed that when I was skiing.”

Larry Linder, who is also a runner and a snowshoe event organizer, said snowshoe running provides an excellent workout. “Snowshoe racing is a lot harder than running,” he said. “There is much more resistance. I usually tell people starting out that, if you can run an eight-minute mile, you should plan on 10-minute miles on snowshoes.”

Linder organizes the New World Championship Snowshoe Race in Luck, Wisconsin (about 70 miles northeast of St. Paul, Minnesota). Sponsored by the In and Out of Luck Running Club, the event now attracts more than 150 participants.

The New World Championship includes races of 5-km, 10-km, and 20-km, and is a regional qualifier for the USSSA’s national championship. The USSSA web site lists 20 sanctioned qualifiers for 2006.

“We are celebrating five years of our national championship,” according to the USSSA’s Elmore. The 2006 version will take place March 24-26 at Vermont’s Bolton Valley Resort. The USSSA rotates the event among its five regions, with the 2007 championships coming to a yet-to-be-determined venue in the Midwest.

“It is still a young event and we encourage people to participate—including at the national championship” Elmore said. “If you are a USSSA member and you finish one of the qualifiers, there is a pretty strong possibility you will qualify for the national.”

Both men and women cover a 10-km course at the national championship, while juniors (age 19 and under) race a 5-km course. The championship race also determines the USSSA’s national team. It includes the top three junior boys and top three junior girls, and the top five men and top five women.

“The national team gets a little extra support, thanks to our sponsors, including clothing, footwear, sunglasses, and the like,” Elmore said. He added that, as an all-volunteer organization, the USSSA is still building its resources and sponsor base.

After all is said and done, most of the competitors agree that the best part of snowshoe running is the camaraderie.

“Anyone can snowshoe and all are welcome at snowshoe events, regardless of speed or ability,” Siegrist said. “And you can pick it up at any age.”

The US Snowshoe Association is on the web at www.snowshoeracing.com.

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JOEL—IF YOU WANT TO INCLUDE A BOX WITH A LIST OF THE MIDWEST QUALIFIERS, THEY ARE:

- New World Championship in Luck, Wisconsin
- Bigfoot Boogie Race in Traverse City, Michigan
- The Grand Marais Moose Stomp Festival in Grand Marais, Minnesota
- The Iowa State Snowshoe Championships in Cedar Falls
- The Twin City Snowshoe Races in Minneapolis