

Insung, unconventional ski champ
out in cold when it comes to gold



JEFF SCHOLL

Reid Sabin sails over a jump during a competition at Big Mountain in Whitefish, Mont.

For quirky sport's leader, competing is uphill battle

◆ **FOR EVERY OLYMPIC ATHLETE,** there are many others like Reid Sabin who grind away at sports that will never yield gold — or even green. Sabin, however, just happens to be at the top of his sport.

BY CHRIS SOLOMON
Seattle Times staff reporter

WHITEFISH, Mont. — The man who is perhaps the most dominating ski racer in the world today lives in a cinder-block house the color of tired hospital scrubs on the outskirts of town.

He cannot afford a ski coach. Once, he sold his old Subaru to buy a new one.

boots. He has been seen selling raffle tickets to raise travel money — which, roughly translated, is like Tiger Woods holding a bake sale to earn bus fare to Pebble Beach.

Two winters ago, Gig Harbor-raised Reid Sabin became the first American ever to win a World Cup race in telemark ski racing. During the next season and a half, Sabin won 24 more races and titles here and abroad, including five World Cup season titles. His country paid fantastically little notice. No parade. No smile on the Wheaties box.

He ran the torch through a Spokane neighborhood. That's the closest he'll get to the Olympics that begin next week in Utah.



Weather

Decreasing showers
with afternoon sun
breaks. High, 45. Low,
35. C 10

FRIDAY MORNING

FEBRUARY 1, 2002



The Seattle Times

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Unsung skier finds rewards in his sport

SKIER

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When Sabin ended last winter with yet another title, this one at the biennial World Telemark Championships in France, his hometown newspaper, the Kalispell Daily Inter Lake, didn't run a story until his wife marched in and force-fed the results to an editor.

Such are the indignities visited upon the conquistador of a sport few Americans have heard of, and fewer care about: He gets bumped from the local sports pages by high-school girls volleyball.

In recent years, the sport — in which only the toe of the boot is attached to the ski to allow a distinctive, bent-knee turn — has edged away from the margins, thanks to better equipment and more interest in backcountry skiing. The nation's population of frequent telemark skiers surged 300 percent between 1998 and 2000, to nearly a million, according to a 2001 study by the Outdoor Industry Association — but that's still a fraction of the nation's roughly 11.7 million skiers and snowboarders.

If telemarking is still a somewhat underground sport, then tele racing is a journey to the center of the Earth. World Cup tele racing is to World Cup alpine racing what rugby is to pro football.

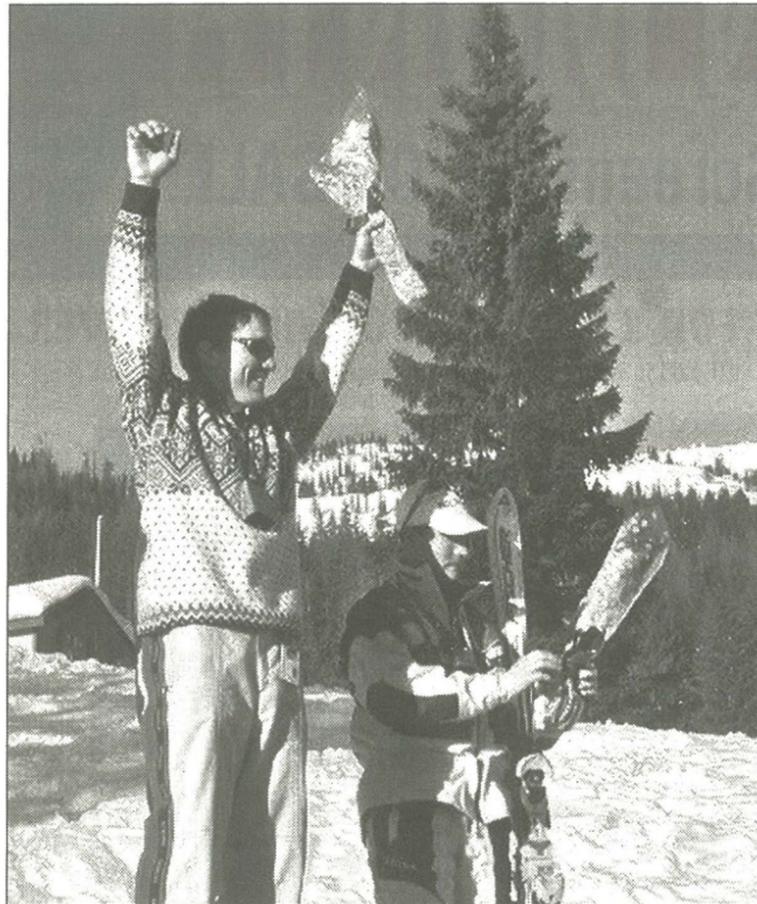
It is, say racers with a pride born of poverty, the last true amateur sport.

Less than a decade ago, the U.S. telemark team seemed to be skiing against natural selection. Americans had revived the Norway-born turn in the 1970s and dominated the early years of competition. By the late 1980s, however, the professionally coached team from Norway filled every podium with blondes. The squiggled track of the tele turn suspiciously resembled the Norse DNA — or so went the beery conjecture.

The U.S. team needed a savior. Then Sabin appeared. He squashed talk of Nordic superiority during his second and third full seasons on telemark's brief international circuit. He won 11 of 21 World Cup races during the 1999-2000 and 2000-01 seasons, twice claiming the season's "Classic" title and the overall title, and once grabbing the season crown for the Sprint Classic.

An agonizing steeplechase

That dark Scandinavian impulse



BRIAN SCHOTT / BIG MOUNTAIN RESORT

Reid Sabin celebrates on the winners podium after a World Cup win.

Success was 'eye-opener'

The Machine is 30 years old and lives in his small green house with wife Kirsten, a dirty dog ("Schaef-er — like the beer") and a cat with no tail and four extra toes. He is 5 feet 9 inches in his Scarpa boots, with cannon thighs and a pipe fitter's forearms that are offset by a kind face and library voice.

In a world where velocity is a virtue, he wears a certain drowsiness about him. "He just does a lot of things at such high speed that he seems to do some things slow on purpose," said teammate and friend Jef Elliott.

As a teen in Gig Harbor, Sabin

was a promising Junior Olympian in alpine racing. A lack of money and distance from the slopes forced him to abandon his alpine-racing dreams — something he still regrets.

While in college in Montana, Sabin bought a pair of \$12 leather telemark boots in 1993. Racing followed. Soon he had sold his beater Subaru for a pair of plastic racing boots, and within a few years moved to Whitefish, the epicenter of U.S. telemark racing.

A top-15 finish in a 1998 World Cup race was a turning point. "I always had self-confidence problems," Sabin said. "I think I was able to discard that in telemarking

with some small successes, and the support of Kirsten."

He began to sacrifice days skiing powder to run gates. On summer days he dug up lawns for his sprinkler business, then spent evenings training and watching films of top alpine racers to pick up subtle techniques.

"Reid," said Kirsten, "is the most self-motivated person I've ever seen."

For the rest of the U.S. team, "Reid's success was just kind of an eye-opener, and it's contagious," Elliott said. The U.S. men's and women's squads now rank a combined third in the world.

Sabin is not one to plumb what motivates him, but his ferocious drive seems partly rooted in that lack of self-confidence and the need to outdo himself — which usually means outdoing everyone else, too. His mother, DiAnne, recalled the day she found her son sulking in his room after he had won a neighborhood footrace.

"Do you think I've peaked?" he asked her. He was 9 years old.

Despite his dominance, Sabin wears his success like a boy in church clothes.

When Sabin competes in Europe, the couple will talk on the telephone, his wife said. "I'll say, 'How was it? How was the race?' And he'll say, 'Fine. Good.' And I'll have to drag it out of him: 'Did you win?' 'Yeah, I won.'"

"Racing," Sabin said — its ruthlessness, the testosterone-rinsed braggadocio of world-class competition — "is so not my nature."

In Sabin's unfinished basement, an unpainted Ikea shelf sags with two dozen awards.

His reign, muted by humility, is also tinged with self-reproach, the guilt of racing for little fame and no purse while Kirsten stays home with the mortgage. His sponsors still pay him in skiing equipment, which he has been known to hawk — slightly used — on the Internet to raise money. Friends have told

him to get an agent. He demurs. "It's just not my style at all."

A three-peat this winter looks difficult, but not because of the competition. Sabin missed the season's first two World Cup events while readying the house for the couple's first child. A sweep of the remaining tour stops, including this week's races at the Big Mountain in Whitefish, could keep his reign alive. Yesterday, Sabin won the first race, a Sprint Classic.

But the baby will come any day now, and the world champion says there is life to experience beyond ski racing — especially racing that pays no money.

He considered this, then amended the thought. "If I could afford to do it, I'd do it forever. And I'll probably find a way."

Chris Solomon can be reached at 206-515-5646 or csolomon@seattletimes.com.