

Making its mark



JANUARY 13, 1999 12:00 AM • BY MICHAEL JAMISON OF THE MISSOULIAN

World's best free-heeling skiers compete

THE BIG MOUNTAIN - Most winter weeks, America's best telemark ski racers go to the World Cup. This week, the world came to them.

Three of the eight-man U.S. tele team live in Whitefish, where the Big Mountain played host to World Cup racers from around the globe. Beginning Sunday, racers from Switzerland, Finland, Norway, Germany, France, Japan, Canada and other countries joined the best of Whitefish for three days of free-heeling fun.

The race was one of only two World Cup telemark events in the United States this year, with the second ending last week in Snowbird, Utah.

Telemark is a hybrid of downhill and cross-country skiing, and is named for a region in

southern Norway.

"It's good to travel and race," said Whitefish tele racer Reid Sabin. "But it's nice to be home, too, racing in your own back yard."

How is it that Whitefish became the back yard of so many of America's finest telemark racers?

"Mostly, it just kind of snowballed," says Dow Powell, the grandfather of the current racing generation.

According to Powell, who pioneered telemark racing at the Big Mountain 20 years ago, the mountain itself tends to breed fast, strong skiers. The Big Mountain is steeper and faster than most, he said, with more than 2,000 feet of speed-friendly vertical.

In addition, he said, young racers weaned on the mountain have a surprising number of role models at hand, all with their share of success. Alpine racers have Olympian Tommy Moe; snowboarders have Steve Persons and the rest of the four local members of the U.S. snowboard team; up-and-coming telemark racers have the current crop of World Cup team members, who in turn had people like Neil Persons, Whitefish's original World Cup

free-heeler.

"Neil was the first," Powell said. "He didn't win every race or anything, but he brought Whitefish to the world. And all of us here had someone we could look to and say, 'hey, I could do that.' "

And the growing number of young racers with steep deeps, good teachers and encouraging role models have helped fuel the resort's commitment to bringing major race events to town, he said.

Those high-profile events inspire even more racers, who in turn inspire even more events.

Mountain managers have taken a huge step toward future racing this year, separating the ski school and the events' departments so more focus can be placed on drawing world-class races.

"As long as we continue to win and continue to bring events to the mountain, the Whitefish breeding ground for world class skiers will continue to snowball," Powell said. "Whitefish is the place, bar none."

Most of the racers who cut their turns atop the Big Mountain grew up on the week-night race league, which offers a starting gate for tomorrow's World Cup winners. That league is known for its remarkable number of volunteer judges, considered the toughest anywhere.

That's where Cody Thompson, Whitefish's lone female World Cup tele team member, carved her first turns around the gates. Thompson, a former alpine racer, cut her heels loose in 1995, experimenting with the oldest of ski turns.

The local race league, she said, was one way to hone her fledgling skills.

"I just wanted to keep up with my friends and not flail away," she said.

Last year, in her first telemark race, she came from nowhere to win the nationals in both giant slalom and the classic, speeding to a second place in the slalom.

Now she is traveling the world, racing against the best women telemarkers in places like Norway and Sweden.

"It's a serious thing," she said of her racing, "but I'm pretty much just looking to travel and have some fun and see the world through telemarking. Tele racing is different; the racers are friendly. It's not as much of an ego trip as alpine racing. Everything is about fun."

Reid Sabin is also looking for a bit of fun, with a few fast finishes along the way. Sabin carved his first tele turns atop Missoula's Snowbowl, preparing for the powdery depths of back-country skiing.

"It's a great challenge," he said of free heeling. "It's easier to fall on your face, which is a good reason to learn how to do it right."

After moving to Whitefish, his commitment to "doing it right" - and to racing - grew, and last

year he toured the North American stops of the World Cup. This year, his bags are packed for races in Norway and Sweden, and he has already nailed top-10 finishes..

It was Sabin, in fact, who brought the world to Whitefish. Last year, Sabin was chosen to submit the Big Mountain's bid for a World Cup race, and he hopes to deliver a similar bid for next season.

On the mountain, event organizers are already drafting a bid for 2003, when they hope to bring the World Cup championships to town.

"Now that," said local racer Glenn Gustafson, "that would be so cool."

But not as cool, he said, as seeing telemark racing at the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City.

Gustafson has been skiing the Big Mountain since childhood, turning to telemark after years of alpine skiing.

"I was up there in those coffins they call boots," he said, "just looking off the lifts and seeing these guys making those turns and thinking, 'What was that? That looks beautiful.' I had to learn."

And so after long summers of building ski lifts, Gustafson devotes all his wintertime energy to tele racing.

Taug Boschen, newly of Whitefish, also spends nearly every day on the slopes. The ski patrol veteran and World Cup team member moved to Whitefish this fall specifically to be close to good racing and good racers.

"This is the place," he said, "if you want to race in America. Whitefish is it."

The three men and Thompson all have their own reasons for turning to telemark, but all agree on some basics.

"The equipment is more comfortable," Sabin said.

"The gear is lighter," Gustafson added.

"It's more challenging," Boschen said.

"It's just free," said Thompson. "You're not on the snow, you're in it."

And their advice for alpine skiers is unanimous: "Set your heels free."

Race results

Results from the World Cup Telemark Classic races, which ended Tuesday at The Big Mountain in Whitefish.

MEN

1. Patrick Leopold, SUI, 3:23.40
2. Remo Rickenbach, SUI, 3:23.48
3. Toni Burn, SUI, 3:23.78
4. Fritjof Loen, NOR, 3:29.70
5. Stein Kjartan Vik, NOR, 3:29.78
6. Reid Sabin, Whitefish, 3:30.89
7. Bjarne Rickardsson, SWE, 3:32.98
8. Florian Diepolder, GER, 3:37.10
9. Anti-Pekka, FIN, 3:37.88
10. Glenn Gustafson, Whitefish, 3:37.90
11. Chris Rice, USA, 3:38.55
12. Marcel Waser, SUI, 3:39.47
13. Taug Boschen, Whitefish, 3:48.87

WOMEN

1. Hege Johanson, NOR, 3:41.51
2. Mirjam Rubin, SUI, 3:48.14
3. Andrea Walker, SUI, 3:50.79
4. Pia Raita, FIN, 3:56.39
5. Cody Thompson, Whitefish, 3:59.67
6. Fia Kongsholm, SWE, 4:09.70
7. Petra Utschneider, GER, 4:20.24
8. Jessica Silvan, SWE, 4:26.29
9. Dana Breslau, USA, 4:31.43
10. Cheryl Vanderhorn, USA, 4:39.14
11. Kimberly Grant, USA, 4:47.16
12. Micki Walgren, USA, 5:27.71

Wednesday - 1/13/99