



CODY THOMPSON WON the women's giant slalom and classic events to finish first in overall competition at the USTSA national championships on The Big Mountain.

making their mark

■ Big Mountain telemark skiers are earning respect in competition

By JIM MANN
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Every Thursday for several years, skiers have been practicing the stylish, powerful, free-heeled turns. They've been building confidence, skill and credibility, but it's all been in the shadows of night on the slopes of The Big Mountain. That's beginning to change, as the ski area develops a formidable contingent of telemark skiers, and brings the sport to daylight.

The Big Mountain hosted a regional telemark race last year, and earlier this month, it was the site of the U.S. Telemark Skiing Association's national championships.

The event drew 110 competitors, and Big Mountain skiers fared well: Reid Sabin won the giant slalom, placed second in the telemark "classic" competition and finished second overall; and Cody Thompson won the women's giant slalom and classic events to finish first overall.

Others placed highly, including Neil Persons, who has for several years been a ramrod for organizing competitive telemarking on The Big

Mountain.

"He's really been a coach figure," Sabin said of Persons. "He's been the heart and soul behind it all, him and The Big Mountain's race department."

Persons was behind the successful bid that attracted the national championship. Now he's preparing to bid for a World Cup telemarking event to be held on the mountain next year.

"That's the pinnacle of international telemark skiing," said Persons, who competed in World Cup events in Norway in 1995 and Whistler, B.C., in 1996.

Persons is excited for The Big Mountain's racers. Sabin and Glen Gustafson have scored well enough in national events this year to have a shot at qualifying for just eight spots on next year's U.S. men's telemark team. And Thompson is positioned to have a chance at qualifying for the three-member U.S. women's team.

This weekend's World Cup Finals in Salt Lake City will be a major event that could seal their selec-

tions for the national teams.

If they do qualify, Persons said, they have potential to regularly break the top 15 in World Cup events that have long been dominated by skiers from Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Many of the mountain's telemark racers are relatively new to the sport, recent emigrants from the world of alpine skiing. Most of them started because telemarking equipment allows them independent access to back-country "powder stashes."

Thompson is in just her first year of competitive telemark racing.

Chris Nelson, another promising racer who finished second in the national championship slalom event, says he started about three years ago. The 22-year-old said he tried snowboarding, but broke his arm and decided to "look for something different."

It took about a year of concerted effort, plus the organized help of the night racing league, to reach a competitive level, Miller said.

REID SABIN LAUNCHES off a jump at the U.S. Telemark Skiing Association's national championships on The Big Mountain earlier this month. Sabin won the giant slalom, placed second in the "classic" event for an overall second-place finish.

Photos courtesy of Kelly Mull and Mountain Photography



Sabin says the night league has been a huge benefit for local telemark racers. It has been especially helpful in preparing for the sport's premiere event, "the Classic," which showcases the the capabilities and skills required of skiing with detached heels.

In succession, competitors must ski uphill, launch 30-to-60-foot jumps and land with perfect telemark form, navigate through giant slalom gates and other obstacles. The event involves judging where deductions are made for improper form. On a typical telemark turn, for instance, skiers must have at least a boot-length's distance between their forward foot and their back foot. If the spacing isn't right, then judges deduct time from a skier's run.

The Big Mountain and Persons have recruited judges for the Thursday night events, and the benefits have been obvious to the skiers, Sabin says.

"The night events are well organized and we have such good judging that we all ski 'cleaner,' which means we aren't hit with penalties as much," Sabin said.

Persons said four-time national

Telemark skiing gains fans

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telemark champion Chris Rice plans to move to Whitefish next year, which should bolster The Big Mountain's racing corps. Rice won his fourth title at the resort earlier this month.

"There's just so much enthusiasm for telemarking on the mountain right now," Persons said. "Next year, we'll be a pow-

erhouse for telemark racing, nationally."

Persons and other telemark racers are promoting the sport to become an official Olympic event. It is on a short list for qualifying as a demonstration event in the 2002 games in Salt Lake City.

"It's got a lot of culture. It is the origin of skiing," Persons said. "I think it deserves a lot of respect as an Olympic sport."