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Steamboat's Zoe Taylor, 16, wins World Cup telemark race

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STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — Telemark racing is the oldest of “old-school” ski sports, a defiant counterpoint to everything the “action sports” community tells us is cool, but 16-year-old Zoe Taylor gave it a fresh face and a dazzling smile last week.

Taylor, a member of the 98-year-old Steamboat Springs Winter Sports Club, won an FIS Telemark World Cup race Friday night under the lights at historic Howelsen Hill, becoming the first U.S. woman on a tour podium since 2000.

“I was kind of hoping for a podium, but that was kind of far-fetched, so my goal was not (finishing) last,” said Taylor, stunned to edge Laura Genier-Soliget of France for the win.

It was a beautiful evening in Ski Town USA with intermittent snowfall sparkling in the light flooding the race course. The racing was competitive and highly entertaining.

Steamboat hosted four days of racing that concluded Saturday, but the Friday night event was conducted in a dual knock-out format. The course included a tight, banked 360-degree turn near the bottom, and Friday night that meant side-by-side racing in close quarters. One guy flew over the bank and into the finish area, shortcutting the last 15 seconds of the course.

Remember: This is *telemark* racing, a sport with roots in the 19th century, now given modern touches. Not that many 16-year-olds know its history.

“I know some,” Taylor said. “Last year I went to Norway, where I kind of learned a little more of it, in the Telemark region. That was really cool. My dad still tells stories about back in the days of leather boots and skinny skis.”

The FIS Telemark World Cup tour this year will make seven stops in five countries, with Steamboat the only U.S. venue.

“I love the sportsmanship,” Taylor said. “Everyone from all the different teams is so nice and friendly. It’s a great environment in an amazing sport with so much history.”

Charlie Dresen of Steamboat, 48, is a coach for the Winter Sports Club who raced telemark until he got married and started a family. He jumped into the races here and finished ninth in Thursday’s Sprint Classic event.

Dresen loves how the FIS tour is helping keep “the original sport of skiing alive” in an era when the action-sports community wants us to believe traditional alpine and nordic skiing are dying.

“I’ve been associated with telemark racing for quite a while, racing and coaching,” Dresen said. “We’re constantly battling, trying to make this an Olympic sport. Every time we tell people telemark racing is not an Olympic sport, they’re shocked because that’s how skiing originated.”

As Dresen spoke, an 11-year-old ski jumper went by on the Poma en route to the jump hill, calling out to Dresen to ask how his race went. There is no place like Steamboat.

“Once it becomes an Olympic sport, there’s no question a lot of young alpine athletes are going to funnel into telemark racing, because it (would be) another way of making the Olympics,” Dresen continued. “I think the sport will flourish once it becomes an Olympic event.”

Dresen has seen popularity for telemark racing wax and wane.

“I think it’s a passion for everyone competing here,” Dresen said. “I think the torch will always be passed, because telemark is such a great sport. The fluidity of the turn is so genuine that doing it in a racing situation, it’s just amplified. It’s such an appealing sport to watch and do and compete in.”

A well-executed telemark turn is one of the most graceful things in sports, but the World Cup telemark tour is trying to freshen its image with events like the duals race. The format was created this season to give the sport more modern appeal.

The Steamboat course had a jump near the start — all the more exciting with two racers on course at the same time — and there was a skating section of about 15 seconds coming out of the 360-degree loop near the bottom.

“It’s certainly not as conservative as old-school racing, and that makes a few people who have been around the sport for a long time nervous,” said Chad Bowdre, who runs the telemark program for the Winter Sports Club. “But they also understand if the sport is going to continue and grow, and actually make it into the Olympics, this is what will actually make it into the Olympics.”

Steamboat will host another telemark World Cup in 2014, and the 2015 telemark world championships will be held here right after Beaver Creek hosts the alpine worlds.

Last week’s event brought about 40 athletes from nine countries to Howelsen Hill, but Taylor was right at home.

“I’ve been ‘tele-ing’ since I was 6 years old, so well over half my life,” Taylor said. “I love it. It’s fun. It’s definitely not easy. It’s a challenge, and I really like that.”

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The Post’s ski and Olympics writer, Meyer covered his 12th games this summer in Rio de Janeiro. He has covered five World Alpine Ski Championships and more than 100 World Cup ski events and is a member of the Colorado Ski & Snowboard Hall of Fame. He also regularly covers the Colorado Rapids.

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