

Free the heel, Free the Mind: The beauty and power of telemark ski racing is gathering speed, with a hopeful landing in the 2010 Winter Olympics in British Columbia

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By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian

WHITEFISH - If Tim Heitz has his way - and you have to suspect he might, given the sharp intensity edging his otherwise quiet voice - then come four years from now reipelykkje will be among America's hottest household words.

"I definitely think it can happen," he said. "It's all about believing."

And, of course, pronouncing.

The reipelykkje (say "rap-uh-loosh-uh") is a grunt of a 360-degree turn, a roundabout sprint on newfangled skis that look like a hybrid between modern racing boards and an old-school cross-country rig.

Heitz himself is pretty good at the "rap," a staple of telemark ski racing, coming out of the gates at 50 mph one heel to the wind, then pumping and skating off a banked turn, back up the mountain, around the horn and right down on course.

"It's beautiful," he said. "Strong and graceful."

His hope is that the elegance and power of telemark ski racing can help launch the centuries-old sport straight into British Columbia's 2010 Winter Olympics.

In the meantime, he and other racers have turned Whitefish into a free-heel hotbed, home to more than half the entire U.S. tele team and, this Friday through Sunday, to the long-awaited U.S. National Telemark Championships.

"It's big," he said, "and it's getting bigger."

Telemark skiing - recently described in the Wall Street Journal as "arguably the purest discipline on snow" - is defined by the heel.

Unlike downhill skiing, where the boots are snapped tight to the ski, telemark leaves the heels free, as in cross-country.

To turn, tele skiers drop the inside knee, allowing the uphill ski to trail behind.

The thin wisp of metal edge slices into ice, carving clean a graceful arc as the body compresses, coils, springs into the next sweeping turn, balance and beauty matched with rhythmic strength and power.

It's an old turn, popularized way back in the mid-19th century by a farmer name of Sondre Norheim, who turned both soil and ski in the Telemark region of Norway.

"It has one of the longest histories of any skiing form," Heitz said.

And if history counts for anything with the Olympic bureaucracy, then you have to reckon he just might get his winter-game wish. After all, the Olympic flame has been sparked no fewer than three times right there at Sondre Norheim's old farmhouse.

"It's complete," Heitz said of the sport. "You have to be good at all the skills on skis."

There's the sweeping downhill gates, the big banked turns, the rollers, the uphill skate sprints, the 75-foot Nordic jumps - "it's like an obstacle course. It combines all the skiing skills."

And these days, Whitefish, for some reason, combines all the best of those who hone the skills.

For decades, tele has been the turn of choice for backcountry sorts, guys and gals in leather boots and alpaca-wool chullos straight from Peru. The gear is lightweight, and the loose heel allows kick-and-glide access into wilderness freshies.

That might explain a bit of how Whitefish became such a hot spot, what with the Big Mountain ski resort and the many acres of backcountry that tower above its groomers.

"That's what we're all about," said U.S. tele team member Glenn Gustafson, "the powder and the hiking. That's absolutely the soul of our skiing, the free-heel in the backcountry."

Free the heel, free the mind, or so the saying goes.

But somewhere amid all those laid back tele-turners in their woolies and hand-me-downs were a few Type-A personalities, alpine racers who just couldn't get over their need for speed.

And so they raced.

In the 1970s, the center of the storm was Crested Butte, Colo., later Utah's Wasatch, still later back on New England's "Ice Coast."

But all the while, "we had our Thursday-night race league," said Neil Persons. "We've been doing it since the '80s."

The weekly race league - all are welcome - "is still our heart and soul," Persons said. "It's our recruiting ground."

Persons, like Gustafson and Heitz, is a member of the U.S. Telemark Ski Team, and lives in Whitefish. Today, a full half of the men's team and two-thirds of the U.S. women's team live and train in Whitefish.

At one point, Gustafson said, seven of eight men's team members lived here.

"It creates a real support group," he said. "It's like a team atmosphere in an individual sport, and that just keeps it rolling."

The roots of Whitefish tele dominance, though, likely track back a bit, beyond those Thursday nights, right into the Big Mountain's alpine race scene and its emergent snowboarder success.

More than a decade back, in Lillehamer 1994, local racer Tommy Moe grabbed Olympic gold, then silver.

It fueled the hopes of his Whitefish schoolmates, Persons said, many of whom already had turned to the latest rush of racing snowboards. Before long, a full half of the U.S. snowboard race team hailed from Whitefish.

"That was a big, big deal," said Persons, whose step-brother is none other than Moe and whose brother, Steve, now coaches the U.S. women's snowboard team.

"Watching our buddies take off was a huge boost," Heitz agreed. "You saw what was possible. So much of success is about seeing what's possible."

In 1995, international skiing's governing body - FIS - gave telemarkers the nod, and a World Cup circuit was formalized, centered in Europe. Just months later, in January 1995, Gustafson became the first U.S. racer to compete in a telemark World Cup race, claiming a respectable 19th overall at LaPlagne, France.

"I was pretty happy," he said of that finish.

But not as happy as Reid Sabin would come to be. In 2000, the Whitefish telemark racer shocked the world by winning the World Cup title, the first ever by an American. A year later, Sabin did it again, powered by his dominance in the skating portion of the race.

About the same time, Whitefish tele skier Cody Thompson-McCarthy was winning World Cup races for the women, "and it all just took off," Heitz said.

Whitefish is a small pond, and these folk were mighty big fish.

"It just created a kind of a frenzy," Persons said. "A tele-frenzy."

As ripples from the small pond spread out across the world tele scene, Big Mountain found itself host to racers from all over the world. The first FIS-sanctioned race arrived in 1996, then the Northwest Championships in 1997, the Nationals in '98, World Cup races from '99 to 2002, and finally the World Championships in 2003.

This year, Nationals are returning, "because we have to keep the big races coming," Persons said. "We have a new batch of young kids to take care of now."

The up-and-comers combine the strength of youth - some are still in Whitefish high school, some are sons of former U.S. team members - with the inertia of tradition. Ski racers in general and tele racers in particular enjoy something of celebrity status in Whitefish, with the next generation standing on the shoulders of folk such as Persons and Gustafson and Sabin.

"But I'm not ready to hand it over yet," Gustafson said. "They'll have to take it from me."

This year, he was among three men and one woman with top-10 World Cup finishes for the United States. But he has a bit of gray edging in, and this time he'll be watching his hometown nationals from

course-side, hobbled by a bad knee and crutches.

"It's not easy to keep going," admitted Gustafson, who actually moved to Norway for the 2004 season.

"But it's like a disease," Persons adds. "Tele in the head. There's no cure."

Actually, it might be more an addiction than a disease. Persons has been known to take out "athletic loans" from his local banker just to keep his European season alive.

Borrowed cash for one World Cup season took him three years to pay off, "but it was worth it," he said. "Totally worth it."

When not dropping a knee on the course, Persons is a train conductor. Heitz swings a hammer. Gustafson works seasonally in Glacier National Park, and sometimes works installing ski lifts.

Unlike countries such as Norway, the U.S. hasn't committed to the sport. There's no money. No support. No real organization.

The racer is the coach is the organizer is the course builder is the gate judge.

Everyone has a day job or two, working and training and racing as the seasons allow, then traveling Europe all winter on the circuit, scoring points to make the eight-member team.

"You do it because you love it," Gustafson said. "Take out that loan, run up that Visa, head for Europe because it's the trip of a lifetime. Every time, no matter how many times you go, it's always the trip of a lifetime."

He races the French, the Swiss, the Japanese and Canadians and the Slovenians and the Finns. But mostly, everyone races the Norwegians, direct descendants of none other than Sondre Norheim himself.

"They're where it's at," Gustafson said. "They're the top."

Gustafson has friends all around the world - he calls it a "tele-nation" of free-heeling addicts who want nothing more than to keep the turns coming. "That's what it's about for me," Gustafson said. "Having fun skiing with friends all around the world. It's still such a homegrown sport."

But then there's that focused intensity of Heitz and the rising stars, all with an eye on the 2010 Olympics. Can they really take tele out of the backcountry and place it squarely and legitimately upon the world stage? Is the IOC ready for the reipelykkje?

"The sales pitch is going strong now," Heitz said. "I totally think it can happen."

And if it does, he said, "one way or another, I'm going to be there, absolutely. I wouldn't miss that for the world."

Talking telemark

For information about the upcoming U.S. National Telemark Championships in Whitefish, log on to <http://www.bigmtn.com>. For information about U.S. team members and World Cup standings, check

http://www.missoulian.com/articles/2006/03/16/outdoors/out_56.prt

3/19/2006