

Local telemarketers still dominate

'Pinheads' benefit from Big Mountain's terrain and climate

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Pinheads pack the slopes of Big Mountain these days.

You see them soaring down the hill on bended knee. Wide, arcing turns that emit a Zen-like disposition combine with busy footwork that seems rushed, even painful at times.

These pinheads, named for their pinhole bindings, are telemark skiers. Last weekend at the U.S. Telemark Open they showed the nation, once again, that Big Mountain has the terrain and attitude to produce champion telemark racers.

Local racer Glenn Gustafson took first place overall in the men's division, as well as second place in the giant slalom and third in the sprint classic.

Another local racer Reid Sabin, ranked number one in the world for telemarking, took first place in the sprint classic and giant slalom, but a fall during the slalom race knocked him out of contention for an overall first place. "It's tough to race when the conditions are so good," Sabin joked later, wishing he had spent the day making powder turns.

Sabin is the first American ever to win a World Cup title, which he'll have a chance to defend on home turf when Big Mountain hosts this year's World Cup races.

Telemarking, first developed in Telemark, Norway, during the 1800s, is a controlled downhill turn where skiers extend one ski in front of the other using equipment that allows the heel to move.

The sport has long inundated the Whitefish psyche, and the evidence is available just about anywhere.

"Tele 'til your teeth hurt," reads an inscription on a bathroom stall at the Great Northern bar.

"Free Heel Skanky," a tribute tune to telemarking composed by local reggae band Umohjah, contains the telemarker's mantra, "Free your heel and your mind will follow."

Perhaps the biggest indicator of Whitefish's love for the sport is the fact that two-thirds of the U.S. Telemark Team calls Big Mountain their home hill. It is essentially the national headquarters for telemark skiing.

"It's just something that has snowballed over the years," Sabin said. "When I moved here there were a handful of guys competing and other folks started moving here to become part of what was going on."



Chris Tucker / Whitefish Pilot

Glenn Gustafson weaves through a gate during the slalom on Sunday.

The whole thing began six years ago with Neil Persons, a Big Mountain ski patroller, and Jeff Elliott, a groomer on Big Mountain.

"It started as a fun thing at first," said Persons, who finished third in the slalom during the last weekend's race. "We were into powder

skiing, and got into running some races during the Thursday night league. Then we started going to sanctioned races. We were traveling so much that we decided to talk to Big Mountain about hosting some races."

More and more telemarkers started getting involved and the Big Mountain team proved to be successful. As a result bigger events, like the Northwest Championships and World Cup, were directed toward Big Mountain. In February the mountain will host the 2003 World Telemark Championship.

"It's gotten to the point where if you want to make the U.S. telemark team you have to race at Big Mountain," said Persons. Big Mountain's big backcountry terrain is one factor that has put them on the international

map.

"There's just so many open glades and steep pitches," said Persons. "It's nice to have tele skis to traverse and hit other pitches. We also see a variety of weather conditions here at Big Mountain, from the worst to the best, so it gets us ready for locations

across the world."

But, the main factor that makes Big Mountain's racing team a success is the community that has fostered and supported the team.

"The race department up here provides high quality racing. They make racing affordable for us, and sponsor our season passes," said Persons. "We also have one of the best judges in the world, Pete Seigmund. He hasn't missed a race in six years."

A pre-season physical therapy program sponsored by the North Valley Hospital has also bolstered the strength of the team.

Gustafson thinks that the gravity of the Flathead Valley itself has something to do with the success of the team.

Another factor on the hill that

creates top-notch racers is the fog, according to Gustafson. "Maybe the fog is a help, too," said Gustafson. "It gives you a soft touch. Then, when it clears up you can point the skis straight. No fear."

For now Big Mountain racers are preparing for a tour of France and Slovenia. Neither Persons or Sabin will be joining the team, though. Persons will stay behind to help design the World Cup race course. Sabin and his wife, Kirsten, are expecting a child, but he'll be back to race at the World Cup.

Beyond this year's World Cup, the team has its sights on making next year's world championship team. Persons thinks that seven or eight of the male telemarkers have a shot at it, as well as two or three of the women on the team. The results from this year's races will determine who makes the team.

"I've been motivated by watching Reid ascend to the top of the world," said Gustafson.

For those interested in trying their hand at competitive telemarking, look no further than local Thursday night races. It's the roots of the Big Mountain team and begins this year on Jan. 10. For sign-up information call 862-2912.

For more on the telemark races, see Page C-1.